**Daniel S. Graham – *Opus Zero***

**JW:** Can you begin by talking about how your idea for *Opus Zero*began and then developed?

**DSG:** The first inkling of an idea I had was upon listening to the completed version of Mahler's 10th symphony as constructed by the great British musicologist Deryck Cooke in the mid 1960s. Despite being a remarkably uncanny invocation of the inimitable Mahler style, there was something fundamentally missing from it as a listening experience. It certainly sounded convincing but it just wasn't Mahler. What was missing was the sense of imminent mortality that Mahler was experiencing at the time of its composition, having recently been diagnosed with a fatal heart disease that would kill him two years later. This is something that no musicologist or subsequent composer, no matter how brilliant or intuitive, could ever convincingly capture. However to be fair to Deryck Cooke, who was an utterly brilliant and innovative musical thinker (author of *The Language of Music*), he never claimed it was a definitive work but was academic in nature and should be taken as such.

Nonetheless, it got me thinking as to why it was an unsatisfactory listening experience despite the obvious appetite amongst Mahler fans to believe it was just like the real thing. This lead me to concoct the first half of the script in which an American composer arrives at a small, remote and foreign village where his father had recently died in order to settle his affairs. Whilst sifting through random objects and memories without context, he is somehow drawn back into the completion of an unfinished symphony written by a fictional, early 20th century composer (a hybrid Mahler/Sibelius type figure). That seemed a good start but it was clear that I needed a second act and indeed a third.

After watching an Italian documentary one evening the idea came to me that this American composer should come into contact with a gormless documentary crew wandering around aimlessly looking for inspiration amidst precisely nothing, not realising that you don't find inspiration, it finds you, something the American composer attempts to tell the documentary film crew in an extended interview, using coded language to test their skills of detection and interpretation. A master and apprentice type scenario, albeit implicitly so.

There followed a very long period of development whereby the script was eventually transformed from something overly conceptual and intellectually impenetrable to something that I hoped would be more concise and precise, yet dense with meaning and connections. I might even be as pretentious as to suggest it was very much how I imagine sculpting to be. You start with a slab of marble and an ‘idea’ as to what the final shape will be like but it is only when the 'concept' becomes the 'doing' that the real shape begins to reveal itself to you. This was very much the case with the script of *Opus Zero*. I might also add that at a late stage of the writing process I read the works of the Italian modernist composer Luciano Berio, specifically a series of lectures he gave on music called *Remembering the Future*. His thoughts on the nature of art and authorship became immensely influential upon my thinking and I hope that some of it made its way into *Opus Zero*. 

**JW:** How was the film funded and how did you come to shoot in Mexico?

**DSG:** Originally the script was set in Ariège, a department in the far south of France that I had become quite familiar with. Despite having Willem Dafoe and Michael Nyman (who later left the project abruptly) attached from an early stage, I failed to engage any real interest from over sixty different producers in France I had made contact with over a two year period. It seemed an impenetrable industry to make your way into as a foreigner. Finally, it was Carlos Reygadas who suggested I try some producers he knew of in Mexico, one of whom eventually boarded the project. This was Julio Chavezmontes. I then had to consider how I would adapt the very French nature of the script into a Mexican landscape and culture, one that I had very little exposure of. Would we shoot interiors in studios and find exteriors that resembled France? This seemed highly improbable so I instead looked on a map at dozens of small villages in Mexico for a substitute to the very special nature of Ariege until I came across the pueblos magicos of Real de Catorce.

What at first seemed a bumpy transition from France to Mexico actually turned out to be a blessing for the film as the strange and beautiful nature of Mexico illuminated the script in a way that shooting in France probably would have rendered it an intellectual dead end.

**JW:** What support did you receive from Mexico?

**DSG:** IMCINE financed about 75% of the film so they were absolutely instrumental in getting it made although the individual most responsible for this was the producer Julio Chavezmontes. Before Julio however, there was Carlos Reygadas who inspired me in more ways than you can imagine. Not only did he introduce me to Willem Dafoe, he helped me in many other ways.

Carlos is a genuinely unique man, not only in the world of filmmaking but as a human being. He is an extremely rare example of a true artist working in cinema. I say an artist as opposed to a craftsman or an exponent meaning his fail rate might be higher than someone who plays it safe, someone content to make the most beautiful and comfortable chair imaginable as opposed to questioning why we'd want to sit down when could instead stand up.

**JW:** Where did you shoot and how did you find the experience of working in Mexico as a non-Mexican? It has proved a source of inspiration for directors such Buñuel, Welles, Peckinpah and Eisenstein.

**DSG:** Dafoe and I were the only foreigners on set so yes, there was a feeling of being on someone else's home turf. Having said that, the crew could hardly have been more welcoming and friendly. I said many times during the shoot that I wish I'd gone to Mexico right from the beginning rather than spending two years looking for producers in France. Mexico is a truly exceptional country, which I think is reflected most immediately in its people. I made some good friends on the film and found the atmosphere on set, especially for a director who was making his first film, to be one of utter professionalism and optimism. That's not to say it was an entirely smooth ride however. Things became heated at more than one point but anyone who's worked on a film will know what kind of pressure you're under. It's very much a matter of money squeezing art and vice versa - a rocky marriage can still produce a beautiful child.

We shot in the village of Real de Catorce which has a long history of film production. It’s a ‘one off’ sort of place. Anyone who visits it cannot fail to be affected by its strangeness and other worldly feeling. It’s the kind of village which seems to be brimming with the dust of lives past. We were spoiled for choice on locations and the script was certainly influenced by that. For maybe 12 months after I left Real de Catorce, I carried around the feeling of the place within me, unable to shake off its residue.

**JW:** Can you say more about how you came to cast Dafoe…

**DSG:** After working for Reygadas on *Post Tenebras Lux*in Sheffield in November 2011, I was wrote the first draft of *Opus Zero*. I sent it to Carlos who responded enthusiastically. As I recall, I talked with him about who could play the lead role, mentioning two possible names. One of them, Willem Dafoe, Carlos happened to be friendly with so Carlos offered to email him about the script. Willem took Carlos' suggestion and called me. We spoke over the telephone and he certainly seemed interested. There followed a very long period of time during which I struggled to find a producer. Willem remain interested during this entire time as the project went through many different incarnations. Finally, when financing was secured, we were off to the races. It was Willem's participation in the film that finally got it made and that lifted the entire thing to a level of almost effortless artistry that I could never have achieved without him. Our first one-on-one read through took place during a brutally hot Rome bank holiday weekend. On the first day of reading, Willem started immediately to rewrite his part with the memorable declaration of "If you want your dialogue performed word for word then you're going to need a better actor.”

I was rather taken aback by this but quickly realised what he was doing. He was tailoring the suit that I had created for him, making it fit more comfortably, and thank God he did because had he performed the role word for word it would have resulted in perhaps the most tedious character in cinema history. What Willem did was to vivify what I had written which was too intellectual in nature and too academic in execution. He could see what it was I was trying to capture so by editing the dialogue he was effectively doing two jobs at once, that of co-writer and lead actor. This carried on over two blistering days in Rome, punctuated by glorious meals and rather a lot of wine (drunk mostly by me). We also got to know each other a little better which became, I suppose, something of a friendship over the coming months. To say I learned a great deal from Willem would be an understatement. I could write a book about the experience but one of many memorable experiences was the day we went into a sound studio to record his voice over for the film, which was extracts from Lucretius' *On The Nature Of Things[[1]](#footnote-1)*. Being the professional he was, we nailed his voice over in about 45 minutes flat out of a two-hour booked session.

Wanting to make the most of the time we had him for I quickly scrambled through the rest of Lucretius's book and highlighted some additional passages for Willem to cold read, effectively. I was worried this was asking too much of him but yet again he nailed it in one or two takes with no direction. That was a real eye opener, that an actor could do a cold read on a rather tricky text and deliver something of utterly compelling gravity.

The collaboration with Dafoe wasn't always a smooth one but then what artistic collaboration ever is? Without struggle and conflict you'd probably have a very dull end result. Much like *Avengers Assemble*for example.

**JW:** And what about other key casting?And also the rest of the technical crew?

**DSG:** The two most important actors in the film after Willem were Andrés Almeida and Cassandra Ciangherotti who play Daniel and Fernanda. Originally the character of Daniel was accompanied by a cameraman and soundman, no producer, but after discussions with Julio and rehearsals with the actors it became apparent that the character of Daniel would work best if there was an opposing force in his scenes. This became the role of Fernanda, his producer. The really marvellous thing about working with actors as talented as Andrés and Cassandra is that they help you understand the characters you're written in the physical world. The world of physical behaviour and, yes, motivation.

As the writer I may know why they do the things they do but as actors they need to understand it in their own way so they can believe in what they're doing, to understand how and why they got there. There was also the character of the cameraman, Gilles, who was in fact named after my friend Gilles Laurent (sound man on *Post Tenebras Lux*) who was going to do the sound on *Opus Zero*. Very tragically, Gilles was killed in the Brussels Metro terror attack of 2016, only a few months before we started pre-production. In the end we were very fortunate to have Raul Locatelli do sound who is an artist in his own right, a terrifically debonair and charming man and a quite brilliant technician.

I was very fortunate to have an exceptionally gifted DP on *Opus Zero*, Matias Penachino, who understood very early on what kind of look I wanted for the film and how to achieve it. The first conversation we had after he'd read the script was about films like *Nostalghia* (Tarlovsky, 1983) and *Ulysses Gaze* (Angelopoulos, 1986) so it was apparent we were on the same wavelength. What I said to Matias was that I didn't want the film to look like a sunny desert movie, something of a challenge given we were shooting in the middle of Mexico. I wanted the camera to be nearly constantly, yet imperceptibly, moving by using sequence shots rather than the more conventional, and safer, approach of coverage.

For the exteriors I wanted morning or later afternoon light and for the interiors I wanted a chiaroscuro look whereby the characters would be moving in and out of large swathes of darkness. One could draw all sorts of intellectual parallels here but I just like how it looks and thought it appropriate for the script. If I was shooting a musical then I suppose it would've been lit up like a Christmas tree. Matias was also instrumental in evolving my own visual language as a director. Being my first feature film I was still thinking in terms of what could be done on a short film scale, meaning you shoot and run, shoot and run. Here, we had more time and more resources to really find the best possible solution to the problem. I would rate Mati as probably one of the most gifted young cinematographers in the world today.

The other person I learnt most from was the editor, Yibran Asuad. Yibran taught me the importance of continuing to find ways to better assemble the film, to really understand what it is you're saying and how best to present it. As we shot mainly sequence shots, apart from the Amphitheatre scene, it was a question of chronology rather than building the inner tension of scenes through cutting. Yibran is also an accomplished scriptwriter so he brought an advanced narrative sensibility to the job which was essential. He really drummed into me the importance of exposition.

**JW:** And what were the key visual ideas that you wanted to communicate? I wondered also if you drew on any specific influences, other than those you have already mentioned.

**DSG:** My script was very dialogue heavy but not necessarily in the matter of exposition, rather of ideas, which provided ample material for artistic headache. In other words, how the fuck do we shoot this crap? But if we are talking visual language, I would again refer to the DP whose artistry and understanding was largely responsible for what you see on screen in its final form. We worked together really well in that I started with a very basic idea as to how the scene would be covered which he then expanded upon, bringing art to the purely mechanical. I might then make some alterations to it and finally we would arrive at a conclusion that satisfied us both.

There was also the decision to shoot in the ultra wide ratio of 3:1. I was against the idea at first as I could see no justification for it. After all, we weren't shooting a Roman Epic. When we visited Real de Catorce to scout locations, I came to realize that the more we could capture in the frame the better. 3:1 brings with it a responsibility to fill the frame with something meaningful or necessary but in fact the wide open spaces of Real de Catorce, and Paul's drifting yet magnetic presence within it, illuminated many of the ideas of the script in a way that a more conventional aspect ratio wouldn't have. There was also the marvellous production design of Claudio Ramirez Castelli which bore the ultimate quality of being invisible as well as utterly appropriate. It was so convincingly crafted that at no point in the film are you aware of it being production design. It simply seems to exist on its own, as thought it was always there and always will be.

Before we started work proper, I sent him a photo I took of Van Gogh's *Two Crabs* painting of 1889 which is predominantly green and orange but is mounted on a light grey wall. And so, it was muted green and grey that ended up informing the palette of the film. What I found most fascinating and rewarding was how a handful of very basic and conceptual starter points blossomed into what became the fabric of the film to the point where stylistic influences illuminated the root idea of the film.

**JW:** What I the music you use?

**DSG:** The remarkable blues song *Last Kind Words* which was recorded in 1930 by Paramount Records. I wish I could take credit for having found this song for the movie but in fact it was Sebastian Hoffman who brought it to my attention. I had never imagined in a million years that a country blues song like this would fit the world of *Opus Zero* but the second I saw it in the promo reel that was cut I was immediately hooked. Very little is known about Geeshie Wiley and most accounts are wildly contradictory although she was considered by some to be the greatest of all female Blues singers from the South. When you listen to her hard won singing voice, her loping, rhythmic guitar playing and her emotionally excoriating lyrics you understand why. Even seasoned blues musicians I've talked to about this song are taken aback. It's like a cyclone of pain, dignity and suffering that is impossible to not be moved by. The lyrics couldn't have been more appropriate for the film.

1. *On The Nature of Things*, a poem with the goal of explaining Epicurean philosophy to a Roman audience. Written 50 B.C.E [↑](#footnote-ref-1)