

Invitation to World Literature: Popol Vuh Video Transcript

Rocca:

Sometimes you just want a creation myth that's violent, blood-drenched, full of lies and deceit, the Popol Vu delivers.

Hansen:

It has all of the Intrigue of the human existence.

Giron:

The Popol Vuh holds the code of ethics was call Los Hombres Verdaderos, the real men.

Christenson:

You're looking at the combined knowledge of one of the world's great civilizations compiled into a single text.

Amlin:

It's the story of this hemisphere.

Rivera:

They're just impossible stories, that make perfect sense in a dream.

GRAHPIC: POPOL VUH

Giron:

The first time I encountered the Popol Vuh was when I was 11 years old.

Ritchie:

As a child we had all the encyclopedias, things like that, Greek myths, Norse myths, and I came across what I remember vividly as the craziest myth of all and that was the Popol Vuh.

Hansen:

And at first my initial impression was, this is weird. This is bizarre material.

Damrosch:

I first heard about the Popol Vuh in an art history course as a freshman in college. Thought this was the most amazing art I'd ever seen, and I came across some of the poetry. And I thought, I need to learn more about this world.

Coe:

While reading all the background on the Maya, I came across translation of this Popol Vuh. I thought that is a really terrific story, ever since then I've been a Popol Vuh buff.

Amlin:

I was in Guatemala City, and I was reading the Popol Vuh, and I was so turned on, and I said, wouldn't this be a really good idea to make a film and to illustrate the Popol Vuh?

Giron:

The name Popol Vuh has always sounded in our ears. It was breast-fed to us as little children.

GRAPHIC: SACRED BOOK OF THE MAYA

Rocca:

If you're gonna talk about the Popol Vuh, be prepared to repeat the words Popol Vuh a few times.

Christenson:

It's actually pronounced Popol Wu. Wu is pretty easy. It means paper or book. And so it is the book of Popol.

Giron:

The word pop, comes from the word mat, it was like the Book of the Mats, like the Book of Counsel, the book of the community.

Taylor:

The sacred book of the Maya in Guatemala.

Christenson:

It may have been based on an older book in a hieroglyphic form. But that was expanded through world tradition.

Coe:

This story was known to everybody. It was not only pan-Maya, but to a certain extent pan-Meso-American.

Christenson:

Why do birds sing? Why does the rain fall? Myth is an attempt to understand that, to explain why those things happen. The Popul Vu is a world myth in the same way the Greek mythology or Roman mythology or any other kind of mythology is

Coe:

The fact that the Maya took the trouble to write all of these early historical and mythological things down, shows that they wanted to retain as much of their culture as they could

Hansen:

(Reading): This is the beginning of the ancient traditions. Here we shall write, and we shall begin to tell the ancient stories of the beginning.

Damrosch:

This book is both a history of the world and a series of vivid tales about particular characters. Good stories are woven in to the history of the universe.

Coe:

It's a compilation just like the Bible is.

Damrosch:

It's got a lot going on in it.

GRAHPIC: THE MAYA

Christenson:

The world of the Maya is huge. It includes much of southern Mexico, all of Yucatan peninsula, all of Guatemala, much of El Salvador, much of Honduras, all of Belize. It was a very large area.

Coe:

Maya civilization begins around 700BC, in what we call the pre-classic or formative period. By the end of that pre-classic they had the largest of all Maya sites, the El Miredor, probably largest pyramid in the New World and perhaps even the largest pyramid in the world in terms of bulk .

Hansen:

Mel Gibson did a film called Apocalypto. And in that film he kind of shows the society at this time. These were complex societies. These were sophisticated societies what he was doing was trying to show opulence and wealth. The Maya are one of the five founding civilizations of the world. The founding civilization, the civilization that has a script. We have Chinese. You have the Indus Valley, Societies of the Harappan cultures. You have Mesopotamia. You have Egypt and you have the Maya.

Coe:

Compared to what was going on in Europe, in their day they were among the most advanced people in the world.

Ritchie:

These people with nothing really more than their eyes and some trees and some giant stones, were able to figure out what it took Western Civilization an additional thousand years to figure out. Which is the processionary movement of the earth and the enormous calendrical structure of the universe itself.

Coe:

The civilization however, goes into decline in the 9th century. Mostly to do with agricultural collapse and drought. However nobody should get the idea that the Maya have disappeared, that's it's, you know, a dead civilization. There is still at least 8 million, possibly 10 million Maya in the world today.

Hansen:

We can see a certain continuity that goes for thousands of years. Popol Vuh lets us have a vision to what that society might have been like.

GRAPHIC: EXPERIMENTS IN CREATION

Christenson:

The Popul Vu is made up of three major sections. The beginning is creation. This is the beginning of the creation account in the Popul Vu in the original Quiché language.

(Reads in Quiché)

Taylor:

(Reading): All alone the sky exists. The face of the earth has not yet appeared. Alone lies the expanse of the sea along with the womb of all the sky.

Ritchie:

The very beginning of the story they talk about how there isn't even anything to make a story out of. Only the maker, modeler alone, sovereign plumes serpent. The bearers begetters, are in the water, and of course there's the sky and there is also the heart of sky.

Coe:

You have the origin of the universe but then the gods want to be praised with speech and knowledge so the first time they go through it's animals.

Taylor:

(Reading): And they say, speak therefore our names. Worship us for we are your mother and your father. Call upon us. Worship us, they were told. But they did not succeed.

Rocca:

(Reading): They did not speak like people. They only squawked and chattered and roared. Their speech was unrecognizable We shall now make one who will give honor. Your calling will merely be to have your flesh eaten

Not a great job. That's kind of lousy.

Coe:

And then they come up, let's make people, so they make them out of mud or clay. And this is pretty crummy too.

Ritchie:

Right at the start you have this idea of the flawed creator. They're not like the Judeo-Christian God who says oh, and he makes it and it was good. They're we're like oh we made it, and it sucks. Let's get rid of it and start again.

Coe:

Then they go into the wood people.

Rivera:

It's not quite man, it's a man made of wood or made of sticks. Like the tree people from Lord of the Rings without the branches.

Taylor:

The humans who were made out of wood looked a little bit better.

Giron:

But they did not have feelings and they did not remember their creators.

Rivera:

Man doesn't pray back to their god. And because he's not praying back to the gods, they get a little bit upset and they figure let's, this is not going to work, let's just end it. That's pretty interesting. And I started to go, well how do I got about writing music to that?

(Music playing) And here comes the anger. And you'll see the flood is going to be sent. Here we go, the anger now. It's all based on that motive you know? And here comes the flood. You can almost see the water coming, (Music playing).

And to me of course it is very reminiscent of the story of Noah's Ark. And, that for me was like a connection that I had growing up as a Christian.

Ritchie:

So you can see this kind of text is about you know terrible things happen to those terrible people because they didn't pay enough attention to the primary forces that governed their environment. It can be understood; as a reflection of the natural world, if you don't pay attention to this environment don't worry we're paying attention to you and well get rid of you.

GRAPHIC: A STORY SURVIVES

Rocca:

The Popol Vuh has to be read in the context of an ancient civilization being overrun by the Spanish Conquest.

Coe:

The Spanish Conquest really begins with the arrival of Cortez and his, his small army and, 1518, 1519. Cortez has this terrible Lieutenant, Pedro de Alvarado, really one of the worst people who ever lived in the history of the world, cruel, but very resourceful.

Damrosch:

A footnote in our edition gives a letter to Cortez, from Pedro de Alvarado describing the conquest. He says I saw the (inaudible) their land and burning it. I could bring them into the service of his majesty.

Rocca:

(Reading): And I commanded to be burned, the town of Utatlan to its foundations. All they that were taken prisoners of war were branded and made slaves.

Christenson:

As part of the Conquest the Spaniards targeted hieroglyphic books for destruction. Hundreds, if not thousands were burned in the Maya world.

Hansen:

They caused tremendous grief, tremendous angst among the Mayans. They watched their history being burned up in flames.

Christenson:

Imagine that if you were being conquered by an outside power and the only copy of the Bible and the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution and Moby Dick were piled up in the mall in Washington, D. C. and burned before your eyes and you would never have those again.

Damrosch:

What the authors of the Popol Vuh in the 1550s know is that armed resistance is useless. It didn't work; they need to find other modes of coexistence, cohabitation, reaffirmation of their key identity

Amlin:

1554 to 1558 somewhere in there, they felt a real necessity to write...write down the Popul Vu. They learn the Latin script and they use the Latin script to tell their story.

Damrosch:

(Reading): We should write about this now, amid the preaching of God and Christendom now.

Christenson:

The authors of the Popol Vuh are anonymous. Literally they say they're hiding their faces. They're anonymous because they have to be. Scribes, members of the royal family were being targeted. They were being persecuted. In many cases they were being killed.

Giron:

This anonymous writer of the Popol Vuh knew how important it was for this to come out.

Christenson:

You can almost hear the desperation in the voice of those that write this. This needs to be preserved,

Coe:

The lay Spaniards and the clergy were going to stamp out this culture completely. And they managed in spite of all of it, to preserve it. So we're just extremely lucky that they had the guts to do this.

GRAPHIC: SEVEN MACAW

Christenson:

Even though the Popol Vuh was written in the mid-1500's by a specific group of Maya living in the highlands of Guatemala, it contains ideas and even history that we now know date back at least twenty-five hundred years. Like the idea of creation, the idea of Hero Twins.

Coe:

They're called Hunahpú and Xbalanqué and their job is to set the world right.

Christenson:

The first appearance of the Hero Twins in the Popol Vuh text is the account of Seven Macaw. Who is a big huge parrot.

Ritchie:

(Reading): This is just when there was a trace of early dawn on the face of the earth. There was no sun, but there was one who magnified himself, Seven Macaw is his name.

Rocca:

Seven Macaw is a vain, prideful bird with bejeweled eyes and teeth who sets himself up as even more important than the creator.

Christenson:

If you're ever seen a scarlet macaw or heard one they have this horrendous screechy voice and they never shut up.

Damrosch:

(Reading): I am great. I dwell above the heads of the people, I am their sun, I am also their light, I'm also their moon.

Hansen:

Seven Macaw is portrayed as a predominant figure in pre-classic art. He's found in the murals at San Bartolo, prominently depicted in the trees there. He's found in enormous fashion on Structure One at Nakbe. And it...and it shows this very clear image of bird power

Christenson:

The hero twins say good shall never come of this. People will never be able to live here on the face of the earth for people cannot be created where only gold and silver are glory.

Damrosch:

The gods commission the twins Hunahpú and Xbalanqué to do away with Seven Macaw

Hansen:

They hit him in the teeth with a blowgun and it gives him a sore jaw. He's complaining about his teeth.

Christenson:

And because of this terrible pain he went to have his teeth fixed

Hansen:

And then they trick him by replacing his teeth with corn, soft corn,

Christenson:

They also took out his glowing, beautiful eye. If you've ever seen a macaw they have this bald white patch with a teeny, tiny eye on the inside as if something much larger had been taken away.

Ritchie:

The story of Seven-Macaw becomes in a way, the story of Lucifer. And the taking down of Lucifer, is really what the hero twins do, they're kind of the angels in a way, who take down the first false god. Which is a very common story in every other culture.

Taylor:

It's also about a kind of humility, the way the gods want human beings to be humble, not to over reach themselves, not to pretend that they're gods, not to pretend that they're all powerful,

GRAPHIC: BIRTH OF THE HERO TWINS

Christenson:

The arrangement of the Popol Vuh is a little odd, because it jumps back and forth in time. In fact the birth of the hero twins takes place after they have already defeated Seven Macaw and his sons.

Damrosch:

The story goes back and forth between our primary characters, Hunahpú and Xbalanqué and their father and uncle, Hun Hunahpú and Seven Hunahpú. They are sent down to the Underworld because of their skill in ball playing.

Rivera:

The ballgame is almost like what basketball is to America today. It literally was the sport. The pastime,. But they happened to be playing the ballgame in the wrong place. Right on top of where the underworld lords like to hang out.

Ritchie:

They were heard by One Death and Seven Death, the Lords of Xibalba.

Giron:

They're forced to come down to the underworld to face them, in this ballgame.

Christenson:

Hun Hunahpú confronts the lords of death and loses.

Damrosch:

He's decapitated and his head is hung up on a tree.

Coe:

The head in the tree looks like a fruit. And the daughter of one of the lord's of the underworld goes up and looks at this.

Rivera:

And when she approaches the tree the tree spits on her hand.

Rocca:

(Reading): Straight away her children were created in her womb by the mere saliva.

So Lady Blood is impregnated by the spit from the head of a basketball player. If they had had tabloids back then, that one would have been on the cover for weeks.

Christenson:

She then goes up into the surface and gives birth to these two twins. The Hero Twins.

Amlin:

I love the story of the hero twins. The hero twins' story goes from Honduras all the way up through New Mexico.

Coe:

The Hero Twins are extremely important as monster destroyers. And you find it even among, the Iroquoian peoples, in the Northeastern, United States and Canada.

GRAPHIC: XIBALBA: THE UNDERWORLD

Hansen:

One of the great stories of the Popol Vuh is the hero twins' descent into the underworld.

Damrosch:
The underworld gods are not people you really want to meet. Flying Scab,

Rocca:
Pus Demon,

Hansen:
Bone Staff and Seven Death,

Damrosch:
Gathered Blood,

Rocca:
Demon of Jaundice,

Damrosch:
Skull Staff, Wing, (inaudible), Bloody Teeth,

Rocca:
Blood River,

Damrosch:
Bloody Claws.

Hansen:
These are the Darth Vaders of their society,

Amlin:
Hunahpú and Xbalanqué The Hero Twins were playing ball in the underworld. They were playing ball over and over and over. And, each time there was a test at the end of the ball game

Hansen:
The House of Cold. They move into the House of Jaguars. They move into the House of Fire. They move into the House of Bats.

Amlin:
And in the house of bats, a bat bit the head of Hunahpú.

Richie:
But everyone takes it in this kind of weird good humor, very like Bugs Bunny. They're like ah, man, you totally got me. I guess I'll just have to come back. And then it's all like big (inaudible) all around.

Amlin:

And at that point all the animals came bringing their food. Coati brought a pumpkin, flipped it over to Hunahpú. It became his head and then the next ball game they played with his head as a ball. But he got it back later.

Coe:

Through trickery they managed to defeat the lords of the underworld.

Giron:

They perform self-sacrifice.

Rivera:

That have this really, really cool attractive trick. And the trick is, to behead each other, and put the head back on.

Amlin:

(Reading): And then the evil lord said, Do it to us.

Damrosch:

(Reading): Do it to us. Sacrifice us, they said. Sacrifice us in the same way

Rocca:

(Reading): The first to be sacrificed was the very head of all the lords, One Death by name,

Amlin:

(Reading): Next they see Seven Death, they didn't revive them.

Rivera:

And at that point they have taken their revenge

Coe:

They rescue their father they resurrect him and bring him up to the surface of the world

Christenson:

He becomes the Maize god. He is the creator god. He's the one that actually goes in and frames and shapes the world.

Rivera:

Those Hero Twins rise, one becomes the sun, and the other one becomes the moon. And as the sun and moon are rising on the horizon man out of corn is being born.

GRAPHIC: CORN PEOPLE

Taylor:

Finally they create a human out of flesh. And this human is made out of corn. And so corn becomes the very sacred, it's life itself for the Maya.

Damrosch:

The new human race is ground into being by kind of earth mother figure, (Smokane). The yellow ears of maize and the white ears of maize were then ground fine with nine grindings

Christenson:

Because they were made of corn they had divine flesh and therefore they could understand and speak.

Damrosch:

And so there were four who were made, and mere food was their flesh.

Taylor:

This human being is so perfect that he and then later she can see everywhere. And then the gods have to rein them in, in order to reduce their power so that they don't out power the gods themselves.

Christenson:

And so instead of completely destroying them like they did the former creations they just impaired them a little bit. And the way that it's described is that they were blinded like breath on a mirror.

GRAPHIC: BROUGHT TO LIGHT

Christenson:

From the 1550's until 1701 we have no idea what the history of the text was other than the fact that it was kept hidden the Spanish priest that next saw it, a man named Francisco Jimenez in 1701, was able to borrow the original 16th century version of the Popol Vuh and make a copy.

Giron:

He had earned the trust of the indigenous people. And he was able to speak different dialects.

Christenson:

And what he did was to copy on the left hand side the original Quiché text as he found it in the book that he borrowed. And then over on the right hand side he made rather flowery Spanish translation.

Hansen:

He was able to transcribe them and then give them the original back to the Maya. Now where that text is today we don't know.

Christenson:

Jimenez actually made two copies. The earliest one is the 1701 version. That undoubtedly was kept in the parish archives in Chichicastenango and it lay there until the early 19th century.

Coe:

And then there was a wonderful French (abaye) Brasseur De Bourbourg sort of a nut in his own way but a wonderful nut. And he was the one who really brought the Popol Vuh to light.

Christenson:

Either paid for it or took it to Europe where he had it bound together with grammar in a dictionary of Quiche and that was eventually donated to the Newberry Library in Chicago in the early 1900's.

Damrosch:

this book has been rediscovered, it's been translated several times; people are finding this exciting new mode of entry into this archaic world.

Christenson:

It's been translated in French, English, Spanish, Japanese.

GRAPHIC: PRESENTING THE POPOL VU

Giron:

One of the things that really got me from the Popol Vuh, that I could not get over myself was the fact that the book ended with the words that, it is not seen anymore. And it is not heard. So in my mind it's like, there's got to be a way to bring this book back there's got to be a way to reopen this book. We were able to put this wonderful puppet show and bring it to Guatemala to be presented in the Mayan ruins in Tikal, this is a Mayan epic of yesterday. A story that has been engraved in our blood, today like the wind and thunder, it comes back to my soul to scream to my soul and yours.

Damrosch:

The Popol Vuh is a major resource for artists around the world. It is a basis for ballet, it is basis for artwork.

Ritchie:

In 2009 I collaborated with Bryce and Aaron Dessner of the National and Kim and Kelly (Deal) known as the Breeders on a project called the Long Count. Which was an adaptation of the Popol Vuh, in a new kind of musical form, an attempt to create a kind of performed musical space. Use the story of the Popol Vuh rebuilding a myth for the new time that you're in and also in a way universalize it, like bring it across into the family of myths, because I do feel it's been kind of out there on it's own, like living on this kind of desert island.

GRAPHIC: THE MODERN MAYA

Christenson:

Why are the Maya desperate to communicate to the next generations It's because the Maya world is oftentimes cruel. It's oftentimes violent. They just went through a long Civil War where some wanted to forcibly assimilate them into Western society. It became illegal to wear native Maya dress, to speak the Maya language, to name children with Maya names. In the face of that kind of cruelty and that kind of violence there's comfort in the knowledge that you are perpetuating the lives of your gods and your ancestors by your very existence, by your very life.

Coe:

What is happened since the civil war a few decades ago in Guatemala is that the civil rights of the Maya have made a complete about face and the government actually has encouraged the Maya the know something about their past. And the Popol Vuh is taught in schools.

Giron:

Every kid in Guatemala, indigenous and non-indigenous is supposed to read in school.

GRAPHIC: 2500 YEARS OF LEARNING

Christenson:

The Popol Vuh is the single most important remnant of pre-Colombian Maya mythology, that we have. It ranks up there with the Iliad, The Odyssey, the Mahabharata, any, of the great national texts of our major world cultures.

Giron:

The Popol Vuh; it's, it's a tale of the past, the present, and the future. It holds all that.

Coe:

These great epic stories are still worth reading and can tell us something, about who even who we are and where we belong in the world,

Hansen:

And it gives us a window into an exotic culture that is found in the Americas, And it's just two hours south of our borders,

Christenson:

And what it is, is a great people with a great past putting their arm around your shoulder and saying this is what is important to me. This is what I've discovered in twenty-five hundred years of history and more

GRAPHIC: POPOL VUH

