**Exploring the Folklore and Mythic Elements of *Lamb***
***A Conversation with* Sjón**
By John Bucher

Sjón is an Icelandic poet, novelist, lyricist, and screenwriter. He has collaborated with musicians including The Sugarcubes and Björk. He was nominated for an Academy Award and a Golden Globe for the song "I've Seen It All" from the film *Dancer in the Dark.* Known for the use of surrealism, folklore, and myth in his work, director Valdimar Jóhannsson invited him to co-write his latest project, *Lamb*, the story of a childless couple who discover a mysterious newborn on their farm in Iceland. The unexpected prospect of family life brings them much joy, before ultimately destroying them. *Lamb* was selected as the Icelandic entry for the Best International Feature Film at the 94th Academy Awards. John Bucher, Creative Director for the joseph Campbell Foundation, sat down with Sjón to discuss the use of myth and folklore in the film.

*This interview has been edited for clarity and length and features some minor spoilers.*

**John Bucher**: Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me today. I'm really honored.

**Sjón**: Well, thank you.

**John Bucher**: I've been following your work, since *Dancer in the Dark*, and this is a real treat to get to explore this this film with you.

**Sjón**: Thank you.

**John Bucher**: To give you some background on where some of my questions will come from, I have a PhD in mythology, so my work and my study is all around folklore and myths and stories. I work with a foundation called the Joseph Campbell Foundation and that's what we do is study folklore and myths so *Lamb* is of incredible interest to us because it is connected to so much of the Nordic folklore that exists. I wonder if you might begin by talking to me about where the initial ideas for *Lamb* came from in your mind.

**Sjón**: Well, it started with the director coming to me asking me if I would like to work with him on an idea that he already had. And the reason he came to me was because I had already been working with folklore and mythical elements in my novels, so he thought I might be the right person to talk to, and it turned out that I was fascinated by his original idea. His original idea was simply (based on) images that he had put together of women holding babies with lambs' heads and for some reason this image had come to him and now he had brought it to me. I immediately connected with it. There was something so fascinating about it because on one hand, you have images of the Virgin Mary holding Jesus but Jesus had a lamb's head and then (you have other) images of ordinary women with children and lambs' heads. What was fascinating to me was that I realized that the challenge would be to make this image real to the audience, to bring the audience to a place where they would accept it. This image is the reality of the story, so that's how it started.

**John Bucher**: Thank you. Once you began to unpack this folklore for yourself. What was your journey into this material and how did you begin to find your way into the story?

**Sjón**: Well, the motive in folk stories is, of course, (that) the couple lives somewhere outside the center. (They are an) an isolated couple that live somewhere and (strange) things happen in their lives. A child the size of a thumb or it can be something else. It can be a Raven that they decide to take on as a child. I was quite well acquainted with these stories and the journey was to find that story in modernity. Because this was not going to be like in old times. It had to take place now. It was quite early that we realized, "Okay, they are sheep farmers and this tiny creature gets born in their world. So, sheep farmers in a contemporary setting where this creature is born. That was the first step of the journey. Then we just started exploring the psychology of it because there had to be something in the lives of these people that made them accepted. Usually in folk stories people are living in a (magical) world where strange things happen. They happen because they are a possibility in the world, but when you have a modern setting, you need other kinds of explanations for people to accept the unbelievable, so we started looking for what it was in their emotional journey, what it was in their lives, that would make them become parents to this creature, and obviously there was a backstory of having lost a child and therefore having the need for something to take care of in that world but, as you know, it's a creature that exists on the border of the human and animal.

**John Bucher**: You bring up the psychological and, of course, there's this long tradition of myths and folk stories about parents who are unable to have children that do birth a child, who is a magical child, even stories of Jesus Christ or Moses, or the Buddha, all throughout religious traditions. We see in these stories, often times, that the child then becomes what the Greeks would call a pharmakos -- they must be sacrificed in order to bring healing to the community. Your story ends with a very different type of sacrifice. Can you talk about the way that you approached the idea of death and sacrifice in this story?

**Sjón**: So yeah, this this magical child comes from the outside. We start the story by showing that on Christmas Eve, the farm is visited by an unknown force. In the spring this magical child is born to the sheep and they (the humans) take it on and instantly there is a conflict, because who does this child belong to? In this case, we have we a birth mother, which is the sheep and have the setup for conflict between the humans and the one who brought them the magical child. The first death is the death of the (sheep) mother and it is a murder and it's an unjust murder and because it is an unjust murder, we know that it there will be consequences at the end. The human mother kills the original mother, the birth mother of the of the lamb, and we might think that she is the one who will be will be punished with death, but she will be punished with something more than death. She will be left alone with nothing in her world anymore, so the sacrificial victim is the interceptor in the story.

**John Bucher**: As you've mentioned, you work a lot with folklore in your novels and in your poetry. I'm very excited about your next project, *The Northman*, focused on Viking folklore. Can

you tell me why you feel that folklore is still important in our day and age? What does folklore have to say to us in our current situation and culture?

**Sjón**: Well, I've been fascinated with folklore since I was a kid basically. I started reading stories at the Icelandic bookstore when I was eight and they stayed with me into my into my adult life as a writer. I really think that the fable is at the origin of human invention and human creativity. A good fable should have an element of openness, so that a new audience, a new culture, can read itself into it, not only over geographical distances, but also distances in time. It is amazing that we can still read things 3000 years old and they speak to us directly. I think in the times that we're living in, with the climate emergency happening, we will need these oldest tools of human invention and creation to be able to survive and that's why, today, I think, not only looking to the past is important, but also looking to the cultures that we have all around us today that know how to work with these tools and of course I'm talking about indigenous cultures all over the world.

**John Bucher**: Thank you for that. That's a very powerful statement and a very powerful thought. I wonder, with *Lamb,* with the idea that there's this connection between humans and nature, humans and animals, that is so metaphoric, yet it's so explicit in this this story -- what have you heard, as far as feedback, that audiences are reading into this, the story of the connection between humans and nature?

**Sjón**: Well, yeah, obviously people are picking up on this. They're picking on this animal nature relationship on different levels. Everything from what I mentioned earlier about climate change and man's place it in that story and man's relationship with nature on a grander scale. And then of course we're talking about man's hubris against the ground, the great forces that he has been he has been meddling with and are now retaliating. We have to really think about how we have behaved so far and how we're going to keep behaving but then it's also about our closer relationship with animals, and in this case farm animals, because farm animals are already treated as creatures that do not belong wholly to nature, though I think they would disagree with that, you know. I think they have their own agency in this world. That feeds into the whole discussion about how we how we treat the animals that are close to us, farming or whatever scale. Many people define farm animals as prisoners, as slaves, you know. The dark dream of enslaving nature as a whole.

**John Bucher**: Last question for you. I thought it might be interesting to provide you with a quote from Joseph Campbell and ask what comes up in you when you hear this this quote. Joseph Campbell said that People are not so much looking for the meaning of life, but instead the rapturous experience of being alive. What does that bring up in you?

**Sjón**: Hmm. well. For me personally, going into myths and experiencing the world that comes with it, is very much about understanding existence. I had a very strong experience in 2004 in Greece, when I visited the great Poseidon's temple there. It's, of course, in ruins (now). There is nothing left (except) for the ruins. I thought how things have changed. The temple is on a cliff. The ocean (was) lying just in front of my eyes there, and of course, I realized that even though

man had (removed) Poseidon and his temple, Poseidon was still there, in this enormous mighty force (of the ocean). I was there having that rapturous experience.

**John Bucher**: That gives me chills to hear. Thank you so much for taking time to speak with me. It's such an honor.

**Sjón**: Thank you so much, and of course you're talking to a great admirer of Campbell.

**John Bucher**: We are so honored that you would take the time to talk to us and we, as the Campbell foundation, are just so grateful for you and the work you do.

**Sjón**: Thank you. Thank you so much.