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Ever Deadly

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Ever Deadly

Abstract

This is a film review of *Ever Deadly* (2022), directed by Tanya Tagaq and Chelsea McMullan.

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Author Notes

Sherry Coman is the Director of the Centre for Spirituality and Media at Martin Luther University College in Waterloo, Ontario, where she also teaches courses in film, media and spirituality and also in gender justice. An ordained deacon in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, she is also a writer, educator and story editor with more than thirty years experience in theatre and film. She works privately as a development consultant with writers and artists in film, fiction and digital media and is the curator and creator of online devotional projects.



***Ever Deadly* (2022), dir. Tanya Tagaq and Chelsea McMullan**

Trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RBHUvomFleU>

The air is so clean you can smell the difference between smooth rock and jagged.
You can smell water running over shale.
- Tanya Tagaq, *Split Tooth*¹

Early into Tanya Tagaq and Chelsea McMullan's collaborative film *Ever Deadly*, Tagaq walks over the stony shoreline of a favorite coastal area and remarks on the sound of feet walking on shale, telling us she has always loved it. The sound is familiar to her, a reminder of the landscape that is home, and also inextricably woven into her aural vocabulary: the sound of feet on shale is a sound inside her, as are so many Arctic sounds, of rock and earth, of animal and weather, and the capacious deeper longings of an entire people. The strongest accomplishment of *Ever Deadly* is how many of these sounds make it onto the screen.

Tanya Tagaq is an award-winning contemporary musician who like Jeremy Dutcher and others has been able to forge a unique expression of an Indigenous cultural tradition within a contemporary music sound, in her case crossing over into many musical genres from classical to punk. A winner of the prestigious Polaris Music Prize, Tagaq has helped to lift into a wider public space the gift of throat singing, where two women stand closely face to face and share in an intimate exchange of sound created entirely through their own control of breath. Finding herself drawn to the tradition while studying at the Nova Scotia School of Art and Design, she developed a solo practice of the technique that she then integrated into public performance — entirely because she could not find a singing partner.

That kind of innovation characterizes much of her artistic motivation which seems always to be on an exploratory edge, walking into spaces of charged history or political tension. Throat-singing is what she is known for, but that is only one part of her massive talent: Tagaq's formal training is as a visual artist and she is also a novelist. Collaborations with artists like Björk and Mike Patton helped to bring her to international attention and acclaim but she was headed there even without them. No matter where her career has taken her, her heart has remained steadfastly in the Arctic but she has also taken the Arctic with her wherever she goes.

Ever Deadly is a documentary, a narrative film, and a performance art film. Collaborating with documentary filmmaker Chelsea McMullan (*My Prairie Home*), an internal narrative develops among the two filmmakers as they implicitly (never overtly) dialogue about what should be in the film. Tagaq talks to the camera but is clearly talking to McMullan; they share jokes we enjoy but don't quite understand. It doesn't matter: Tagaq's enormous presence and personality fill every frame of the film, even when she is absent from it and the film's deeper currents have been given over to stark and challenging animated sequences created by herself-legendary Inuk

graphic artist Shuvinai Ashoona. The combined gifts of all the artists involved makes for a sensually drenching feast.

There is nothing esoteric, however, about the combined effect. Tagaq's down-to-earth pragmatism on Indigenous issues acts like a gravitational field, keeping us always in the present-day harsh realities of living in a colonial world, populated with the realities of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls like Loretta Saunders, and the ever-unfolding nightmarish legacy of residential schools. As a residential school survivor herself, Tagaq has lived under that oppressive weight and has also found a way to break free. Indeed, freedom is a central theme of the film. "It's so nice to see kids free," she says, watching her own children scramble over coastline rocks, making their own sounds on shale.

Tagaq has also been a vocal advocate for traditional Inuit hunting practices, defending them against animal welfare protests over the seal hunt. At one point in the film, we visit a profoundly remote bay in Nunavut where Tagaq informs us there is absolutely nothing, from cell coverage to hospitals. If someone got hurt right now, she explains on camera, they would have to be driven to a place where a helicopter might take them to a hospital. This is how her people have always lived, she tells us. She then imagines aloud putting anti seal-hunting protesters down in a place like this and left to survive. The implicit result is that they would be forced to hunt. The traditional Inuit way of life has meant and continues to mean relying on the land in every way one can imagine.

For many years, Tagaq performed a live accompaniment to a projection of *Nanook of the North*, the 1922 silent film by Robert J. Flaherty that was an early docudrama intended to capture the life of Inuit communities for a European audience. Despite the film's sincere intentions, it has long been controversial for Flaherty's colonial perspective and for his manipulations of the actual lives of the subjects. In 2012, on the occasion of the film's 90th anniversary, TIFF invited Tagaq

to provide the film with an original live soundtrack unlike anything an actual film soundtrack could offer, her voice transforming into the sounds of wind, wolves, the very air itself. In doing so she made *Nanook* seem three-dimensional, re-centering it in an Inuk experience. Although she toured this live accompaniment for years, she eventually gave it up, uncomfortable with the film's deeper dynamics and its history.

In *Ever Deadly*, we hear that Tagaq's grandfather had himself been featured in another NFB docudrama. Excerpts from this film are offered in juxtaposition with Tagaq interviewing her mother in an unrelated discussion of how her family and her community were relocated, a practice undertaken by the Canadian government throughout the north, to create coastal communities in places where Canada might better make a case for controlling the Northwest Passage. Her mother's family were convinced to move under pretense of richness of opportunity where they would be going, only to find literally nothing when they arrived. Her mother recalls her own father struggling to even build a tent.

The National Film Board of Canada produced *Ever Deadly*. Having participated in the cultural appropriation and misrepresentation of Indigenous Peoples, it has also provided many opportunities over the past decades to uplift the work of Indigenous filmmakers whose films might not otherwise see wider exposure, in a commitment that has led to special Indigenous collections.² McMullan's long string of documentaries were also made largely under the auspices of the NFB. It is to the Board's credit that the filmmakers appear to have been given full artistic freedom.

Threading through the film's visual exploration of Tagaq's imaginative and intellectual preoccupations is the unfathomable capacity of her body to make sound. The vocabulary for a review to capture that is about more than 'vocal range' in the way we might consider a singer. Tagaq's vocal range is a series of inhabitations, even as she also possesses an extraordinary singing

voice. Inevitably, it is her voice which sustains and captivates us like an electric current, even as it challenges our senses. Tagaq jokes at the film's beginning that if her audience really hates it, the exit is not far away. Watching a live performance of Tagaq, however, forbids any easy exits. She galvanizes and pins our very souls to our seats.

“Sound can heal; sound can kill. Sound can be a spear or a needle,” Tagaq says in the film. Coming from the depths of her being, sound is all of these and also transformative. It lives on in the space it occupies, and will hopefully echo in our imaginations for decades to come.

¹ Tagaq, Tanya, *Split Tooth* (Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2018), p. 6.

² See “Indigenous Cinema”, on the website of the National Film Board of Canada.
https://www.nfb.ca/indigenous-cinema/?&film_lang=en&sort=year:desc.title&year_min=1939&year_max=2022