



sound + noise

Review: Tanya Tagaq's take on "Nanook of the North"

By David Falk | 2.10.14

I am sitting in the balcony of the Garneau Theatre on a cold January thirtieth. There is a movie playing but I haven't looked at the screen for the last minute. My eyes are firmly fixed on modern throat singer and vocal improviser Tanya Tagaq and her two partners in crime (Cris Derksen on cello and Jean Martin on drums) as they re-soundtrack all seventy eight minutes of *Nanook of the North*. Robert Flaherty's 1922 silent film set the bar for documentaries, and yet still got it almost all wrong.

The film opens with a short preface by the filmmaker stating that Nanook is "the brave, kindly, simple Eskimo." Nanook, despite being "brave" and "kindly", is portrayed as one-

dimensional and simple-minded. A particularly lingering scene plays out with Nanook and his family at the outpost of a Quebec fur trader, where they are particularly amused by the man's gramophone and how it enables "the white man to can his voice." The image is of one of a simple, exotic people who marvel at the sophisticate's power – they are amused by technology, but surely they do not understand it. The sequence ends with the description of "some of Nanook's children are banqueted by the trader – sea biscuit and lard! But Allegoo indulged to excess, so the trader sends for castor oil." Again, the Eskimo, the Other, can partake of this new world, but the white man is the enlightened one, the saviour.

In an updated version of the film available on Youtube, all of this plays out to a nice upbeat orchestral score. Tonight in the Garneau Theatre, the trader's gramophone is given a new song to play. The score is - hypnotic mix of avante garde and traditional, with only one English word spoken throughout the whole set: "colonizer, colonizer, colonizer."

"I was embarrassed when I first saw the movie," Tagaq explained in her brief introduction. "I resented the depiction of a "happy Eskimo". Not because I'm *not* a happy Eskimo, because I am. But I think that there is more to the story than just being simple." That story includes issues of land rights, environmental protection, poverty, a legacy of systematic oppression and racism – things that aren't simple.

"The church in the colonies is a white man's Church, a foreigner's Church. It does not call the colonized to the ways of God, but to the ways of the white man, to the ways of the master, the ways of the oppressor." That's a quote from post-colonial writer Frantz Fanon that perhaps best describes my feelings of the concert better than any adjectives describing the music. Though *Nanook of the North* never deals explicitly with Christianity or any 'religious' context, it removes the Inuit peoples from their own stories, myths, and histories. Instead, the film presents them as how the colonizer sees and wants them to be seen, as a primitive, exotic, quaint people. But this depiction took major liberties with the truth. By the time Flaherty's lens had turned northward, Inuit culture had long since begun to incorporate western style of dress and methods of hunting, and yet the filmmakers chose to have them act out their way of life using spears and primitive tools. It isn't an accident that the stereotype of the "noble savage" was further perpetuated.



Criticisms such as these oftentimes will be dismissed by some as “it was another time”, or “film is deceiving”, but what was and is inherently problematic is that this exotic dramatization was presented as real, lived experience of the Inuit. The fact is that the film portrayals of the lives of these people are so far from reality that there is no way one can call it a “documentary”. The namesake of the film wasn’t even actually named Nanook; his name was Allakariallak.

This led to an idea to reclaim the *Nanook* and its portrayal of Inuit culture by re-examining the film with a new voice guiding us through it. Tanya Tagaq’s live score goes from loud and intensely disorienting, strange and trance-like, to minimal, soft, haunting and beautiful. It was so emotionally driven and different from any concert I’ve attended before that to employ the list of adjectives I just used seems a little dishonest. It was an experience that I’ve never encountered before, and every attempt I’ve made in the last few days to describe it to people has ended up sounding flat and hollow. It stays with and within you, something which I’ve concluded may be the most beautiful part of the performance.

Tagaq created a new framework which gave the audience a chance to re-engage and to break the stereotype – a chance to recognize the film for what it was and how it was made, and not what it was pretending to portray. This was the ultimate triumph of Tanya Tagaq’s performance. Tagaq turned the film into an opportunity for Inuit people to reclaim their identity and tell their own story. From where I sat in the theatre, for a few fleeting moments, perhaps for the first time, *Nanook of the North* seemed real, raw, and yes, honest.