

# Ingrid's Virtual Reality

Matt Spicer's dark comedy *Ingrid Goes West* is a telling and penetrating critique of the iPhone culture that has swallowed up so many young people today. Now I know: I have an evangelical ministry that uses social media and reaches out through iPhones and other similar devices. Moreover, I have been known from time to time even to use such instruments personally. So I'm not going to use this review as an excuse for a broad brush dismissal of social media. But I will indeed use it to encourage you to see this film, which artfully explores the shadow side of living in virtual reality.

Ingrid Thorburn is a twenty-something outcast from Pennsylvania who heads west after a particularly embarrassing meltdown involving a former friend and a can of mace (see the movie for the details). She is drawn to California, because she is dying to meet Taylor Sloane, a blonde, beautiful woman whose Instagram postings appear to advertise an idyllic life of visits to the beach, gallery openings, trendy clothes, and the coolest friends. Through a combination of manipulation (Ingrid kidnaps Taylor's dog and then returns it to its grateful owner) and dumb luck, she manages to insinuate herself into the world of her hero. As the two women go on adventures and outings, Ingrid obsessively photographs everything and posts the pictures on Instagram. When she discovers that Taylor's boyfriend is an artist, Ingrid immediately buys one of his hopelessly mediocre "paintings" and, naturally, tells her Instagram followers about it. On one particularly charged excursion to the desert, Ingrid and Taylor stay up all night gazing at the stars and exchanging secrets. It appears as though Ingrid's wildest dream of intimacy has come true.

As she is increasingly immersed in Taylor's virtual world of postings, followers, and likes, Ingrid is becoming involved with Dan, a young man from whom she is renting her apartment. It is apparent that Dan actually likes Ingrid, but Ingrid sees him largely as a prop to facilitate her relationship with Taylor. She borrows his van (and wrecks it) because Taylor wanted a ride; she brings him along to one of Taylor's parties, because she had lied about "having a boyfriend."

Everything blows up when Taylor's brother, Nicky, a loathesome, self-absorbed

fellow, absconds with Ingrid's phone and discovers her obsession with his sister. When he threatens serious blackmail, Ingrid (again, using Dan) concocts a plan to kidnap Nicky. But this goes south and Dan ends up in the hospital and Ingrid exposed as a pathetic stalker. When every attempt to reconnect with Taylor fails, Ingrid finds herself at the end of her rope. After taking a copious number of pills and swigging down some whisky, she records a final, tearful suicide message for her Instagram account and falls into oblivion.

When she awakens in the hospital, her first words are, of course, "Where's my phone?" Then she sees a kindly nurse who welcomes her back to the land of the living and tells her that lots of friends have been concerned about her. Puzzled, she spies the cards and balloons and gifts that festoon her room. It seems her video had gone viral and millions of people reached out to her through the social media. Finally, she focuses on Dan, who, she learns, had seen her Instagram message, called the paramedics and saved her life. Incredibly, after all she had put him through, Dan still cares for her. The movie ends with Ingrid scrolling through the myriad messages of support, a blissful smile on her face.

As the credits roll, we think that we have had our happy ending. In a supreme irony, Ingrid's dream had come true, not through a polished and contrived presentation of herself, but rather through allowing people to see her in her complete vulnerability. Honesty triumphs over pretense. But then we remember Dan, the one person, amidst an army of self-preoccupied phonies, who actually loved Ingrid for her own sake, who was even willing to suffer for her, and who in the end was the one responsible for saving her life. As this one great manifestation of grace sits at her bedside smiling, Ingrid remains preoccupied with the virtual "friends" on Instagram, people who will forget her soon enough and move on to the next Internet sensation. If upon awaking, she had cried, "Where's Dan?" instead of "Where's my phone?," we might suspect that some substantive psychological change had occurred. We might have grounds for hoping that she had broken through the fog of virtual reality and touched *reality*. Alas, no.

I think this is the ultimate point of the film. The social media space can become so enticing that we strangely distort ourselves in order to conform to it, and we prefer its artificiality to the density, challenge, and opportunity of the actual world. Should

we use the social media in order to communicate and make connections? Sure, but we oughtn't to let the means become an end. Followers on Instagram and friends on Facebook are, at best, simulacra of the real thing. So let's, at least from time to time, put down our phones so that we don't miss the grace of real friendship and real intimacy that might be on offer.