

Ingrid Goes West and *Wind River*: Hardly scratching the surface

By Joanne Laurier
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Ingrid Goes West, directed by Matt Spicer, screenplay by Spicer and David Branson Smith; *Wind River*, written and directed by Taylor Sheridan

Ingrid Goes West

Two current films, *Ingrid Goes West*, a cautionary tale about social media, and *Wind River*, a murder investigation near a Native American reservation, only skirt around significant social issues. They end up largely tangential and uncritical works.

Ingrid Goes West concerns itself with Instagram celebrity and such. Director and co-writer Matt Spicer presents a world in which distressed, unhappy people fill the emptiness in their lives through self-promotion or obsession with the self-promoters. One of the unstated reference points here is the vacuous Kardashian family—and others who achieve and maintain their fame at a certain point simply for being famous.

This widespread social malaise is ripe for exploration and drama (and comedy). Unfortunately, the somewhat self-satisfied makers of *Ingrid Goes West* travel in the same general social orbit as their characters. The lack of critical distance dooms the film for the most part.

Ingrid Thorburn (Aubrey Plaza), leading a drab existence in Pennsylvania (director/writer Spicer was born in Hatboro, Pennsylvania), is grieving over the recent death of her mother. She learns about the wedding of a social media “friend,” publicized on an Instagram feed as “The couple that yogas together, stays together ... prayer-hand emoji.” In fact, the virtual “friendship” exists primarily in Ingrid’s imagination. Enraged that she has not been invited to the event, she reacts violently and lands in a psych ward.

Soon after her release, Ingrid comes across an *Elle* profile of the apparently flawless Taylor Sloane (Elizabeth Olsen), a social media “influencer” whose every move is recorded for the edification of her Internet followers. Ingrid, using a \$60,000 inheritance, relocates to California with the single-minded goal of becoming “BFF” with Taylor.

Copying her idol, Ingrid undergoes a makeover that includes adopting new hair and clothing styles and Taylor’s favorite eating and (supposed) reading habits.

“Another day, another avocado toast,” intones Taylor on

Instagram, and Ingrid slavishly trails along, even when the cauliflower samosas make her gag and a smarmy waiter inquires, “How can I nourish you today?” Virtual stalker Ingrid settles into an apartment in Taylor’s neighborhood, run by the decent and humane Dan (O’Shea Jackson Jr.), a Batman enthusiast. Through a ridiculous dog-napping scheme, Ingrid gains entrance into the inner sanctum, i.e., Taylor’s real, living world. The latter includes a useless appendage of a husband (Wyatt Russell), maker of trivial pop art, and a criminally-minded brother (Billy Magnussen).

The fulfillment of Ingrid’s dream is short-lived, leading her to take a devastating, all-too-real and none-too-glamorous action.

In an interview included in the movie’s press notes, Spicer informs us that, like Ingrid, “I’ve had plenty of moments where I’ve felt like I had to act a certain way to get people to like me, so part of it is a satire of myself as much as the city. I eat avocado toast at Grateful Kitchen and Café Gratitude, and I live in Los Feliz [a Los Angeles neighborhood] and run into people like Taylor and her crowd all the time, so I’m as guilty of a lot of this behavior as anybody.”

That’s fine, but, unfortunately, Spicer does not delve deeply into the implications of the conformism and emptiness he refers to—his or anyone else’s.

Indeed, the film excludes from the start one of the principal social facts determining the current socio-psychological climate: the economic condition of vast numbers of young people. It is impossible to treat seriously the mood of the younger generations without taking into account, first of all, the profound economic insecurity, instability and precarious existence of millions.

That the creators of *Ingrid Goes West* choose to provide their central protagonist with a backpack full of cash—literally—directs them at the outset away from grasping the desperate, darker side of social media obsessiveness. It also adds to the movie’s fundamental inconsistency or incongruity: an attractive young woman with plenty of cash and, eventually, the love of a good man (Jackson is one of the best things in the movie) yearns to be a cipher. Why? Her severe neediness is rather carelessly presented as borderline mental illness. If that’s the case, where is the wider significance? The

overwhelming majority of those devoted to Instagram do not suffer from mental illness or anything close to it.

There is also the crucial political dimension. The hypocritical, double-dealing of Barack Obama, who promised change and instead ramped up military interventions and presided over the biggest transfer of wealth to the oligarchy in history, was extremely dispiriting to many who had voted for him. Moreover, Obama's wretched performance and record opened the door to the vile, fascistic Trump with his entourage of generals and CEOs, who seeks to go the way of Mussolini and Hitler.

Spicer comments in the above-mentioned interview, "I was feeling very disillusioned after the election and it made me feel better to scroll through my Instagram feed and see how many people felt the same way I did." This is very weak, and helps explain the essentially tepid character of *Ingrid Goes West*.

Tension and depression, something far more serious than Clinton supporter Spicer's mild "disillusionment," are affecting considerable numbers of people. The combined effects of economic misery and the official political bleakness help explain the rampant opioid addiction and increasing suicide rates, a measure of the sense of hopelessness afflicting a portion of the younger population. Spicer is largely missing the real sources of acute social alienation and disorientation.

Likewise, the filmmakers are also oblivious to the all-important fact that social media is increasingly used to mobilize opposition to governments around the world, a phenomenon that terrifies those governments and makes them lash out.

Spicer has constructed a too narrow critique of his own "obsession with Instagram and how it brings out the worst in us, making us feel bad about ourselves, while also being wildly entertaining and addictive. ... All the characters in *Ingrid Goes West* represent different sides of ourselves [referring to himself and co-writer David Branson]." Inadvertently, the director points toward the pettiness and insularity of a certain milieu.

Wind River

In the headline of its review of *Sicario* (2015), the WSWS included this phrase: "A *Zero Dark Thirty* for the 'war on drugs.'" We noted that "The visceral *Sicario*, whose title means 'hitman' in Mexican slang, is a confused and shallow work that asks whether illegal, brutal CIA and FBI operations in the so-called 'war on drugs' are justified, and answers—reluctantly or otherwise—in the affirmative."

The movie was written by Taylor Sheridan who now stands behind the camera in his directorial debut with *Wind River*, which could be likened to another Katherine Bigelow movie, *The Hurt Locker* (2009).

As in *The Hurt Locker*, Jeremy Renner plays the ultimate fighting machine in *Wind River*. This time, however, he is not an American bomb diffuser participating in the neo-colonial invasion of Iraq, but a Fish and Wildlife Service agent on the

Wind River Indian Reservation in Wyoming.

In the harsh cold and snow of the wilderness, Cory Lambert (Renner) finds the frozen corpse of 18-year-old Native American Natalie Hanson (Kelsey Chow). She has been raped and beaten. Cory, too, has lost a daughter years earlier in apparently similar circumstances. The trauma led to the divorce between Cory and his Native American wife (Julia Jones).

An FBI agent from Las Vegas, Jane Banner (Olsen again), is flown in to assist the tribal police chief (Graham Greene). But the real hero is Cory, the inexorable tracker and hunter, who is able single-handedly and sadistically to vanquish the mostly white culprits. Second in triumphant line is of course an FBI agent. (Olsen and Renner worked together in *Captain America: Civil War*, so there is a certain unhappy logic in their reprising their roles as super-heroes, now on a reservation!)

There was no apparently compelling reason why Sheridan had to locate his film in Indian territory, although to justify itself the movie's postscript mentions that large numbers of women are not reported as missing in Native communities. This is certainly not where the heart of *Wind River* seems to lie. A few of the more troubled Indians live in a rough state, but there is little else that shows the appalling conditions on Native American reservations.

There is certainly nothing in *Wind River* that points to the astronomical poverty and misery, with some tribes reporting 85 percent unemployment. Nor is there any indication of the extraordinary rates of disease and infant mortality, as well as life expectancy well below the national average.

Neither casinos nor *relentless* trackers and FBI agents are the solution. Why can't a movie be made imbued with *relentless* opposition to the existing social order?

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