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Taylor's Aura: *Ingrid Goes West* and its Challenge to Walter Benjamin's Views on Art

"Art is subjective" is a tired cliché, often used in bad faith to deflect criticism or avoid conversation. In reality, there are many objective metrics that are used to describe art, such as color theory, symbolism, and composition, to name a few. Early twentieth-century writer and philosopher Walter Benjamin would add "aura" to this list, a term he coins in his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility," which refers to the "here and now" of an artwork (21). When people attempt to claim that "art is subjective" an excuse to never analyze it, they are completely missing the point. The subjectivity of art lies in each viewer's experience, and sometimes a person's reaction will defy the expectations of artist and analyst alike. There is no way to account for all the associations and biases that each viewer will bring with them. The story of *Ingrid Goes West* centers around one such improbable reaction to art: a woman named Ingrid is so moved by the artwork of social media influencer Taylor Sloane that she feels a need to travel across the United States and befriend the artist by any means necessary. Once in California, Ingrid successfully tracks down Taylor and her husband Ezra, and their bizarre relationship begins to grow. *Ingrid Goes West* illustrates Benjamin's concept of aura while also demonstrating that aura as an aspect of art is fundamentally subjective.

The narrative of *Ingrid Goes West* revolves around Taylor, a social media influencer who lives in scenic Los Angeles and makes her living from brand deals on her Instagram. Taylor is kind, cheerful, and always looking for a good time — traits which earn her the adoration of Ingrid Thorburn. Ingrid is at a crossroads in life when she first finds Taylor's Instagram page. Recently discharged from intensive therapy and loaded with cash inherited from her late mother, Ingrid has

the freedom and the means to do whatever she pleases. So Ingrid decides to fly to LA to become Taylor's best friend by any means necessary. Not long after settling into her new home, Ingrid creates an opportunity to meet Taylor by kidnapping her dog and later returning him. As insane as it is, the plan works, and Ingrid finds herself sitting down to dinner with Taylor and her husband. Ezra is an artist who chooses to live offline, preferring instead to "let [his] work... speak for itself," though what his work has to say is not especially impressive. The piece Ingrid ends up buying, for example, is a painting of galloping horses over which Ezra has written "SQUAD GOALS."

While Ezra may call himself an artist, it is Taylor's work that is far more interesting, and to properly analyze it requires a discussion of aura. Walter Benjamin's term "aura" can most simply be defined as the history and uniqueness of an artwork. A replica of an artwork, no matter how precise, cannot have aura because it is divorced from the rich history of the original (21). This applies not only to visual art but also to performances, and here Benjamin draws a distinction between the work of actors on stage and on film. The audience experiences the performance of a stage actor in real time. It is the fleeting nature of live theater that gives it aura, "for the aura is bound to [the actor's] presence in the here and now" (31). Film, however, is undermined by its permanence. The actor is separated from the audience in both time and space. The performance can be viewed anywhere at any time, and so it can never have the "here and now" that underlies aura (31). Next is the issue of monetization. A film actor's career is governed entirely by the wallets of their distant audience, thus undermining the integrity of each performance (33). The goals of mass appeal and artistic integrity are seldom compatible.

While Benjamin lived decades before the age of Instagram and the internet, many of his thoughts on film stars still apply to a modern-day influencer such as Taylor. Early on in *Ingrid Goes West*, we see a montage of Taylor's various Instagram posts. In addition to the candid and product placements one would expect, we also see many mood pieces for which Taylor has carefully considered subject and composition. Calling her only an influencer is not entirely fair: Taylor is also

a skilled photographer and deserves credit in this regard. Even Benjamin, despite his distaste for photography, acknowledges that “technological reproduction... [has] captured a place of its own among the artistic processes” (21). If Benjamin openly recognizes film and photography as forms of art, then it is hardly a stretch to apply his writings to modern influencers. Internet stars, much like their counterparts in film, perform before a camera for an unseen audience, and they are constantly forced to maintain the persona expected of them by their fans. The influencer, however, is even more closely governed by monetary needs. Without employers to pay their salaries, influencers must instead earn money by hiding ads among their posts. Taylor admits to this herself in her first meeting with Ingrid, though she puts it in more benign terms: “occasionally, brands, they pay me to post things online.” By Benjamin’s definition, the work of an Instagram influencer like Taylor cannot possibly have aura, for Instagram posts suffer from the same permanence as film while carrying an even more insidious form of monetization.

Ezra, despite his own questionable taste in art, comes to this very same conclusion regarding his wife’s work. Following one of the many parties that Taylor and her friends seem to produce at will, Ingrid stumbles upon Ezra sulking alone by the pool. The two begin talking, and naturally the topic of conversation turns to Taylor. “Everything is ‘the best’ with her,” Ezra laments. “Have you been to this new restaurant? It’s the best! Have you tried these new clothes? They’re the best! [...] it’s not the f—king best. It’s f—king exhausting.” Ingrid then discloses to Ezra that Taylor plans to buy a nearby property and convert it into a hotel called “Desert Door,” a reference to her favorite book *The Deer Park*. Upon hearing the news, Ezra solemnly reveals that “*The Deer Park* is [his] favorite book” and “Taylor’s never even read it.” What Ezra has caught onto and what Ingrid has just experienced for the first time is Taylor’s superhuman ability to muster enthusiasm for anything and everything, including a book she hasn’t read. It is this quality that makes Taylor such an effective advertiser, but when her compulsion to promote infects her daily life, it alienates Ezra. To put it in Benjamin’s terms, Taylor has lost her aura. Some part of her is always trying to do or say

whatever will make her popular, and over time this tendency has eroded her uniqueness and authenticity as a person. Ezra may still enjoy being around Taylor, but he finds it increasingly difficult to connect with her in any meaningful way.

If Taylor and, by extension, her Instagram are truly without aura, then they should exist as only as a momentary distraction, but this is not at all consistent with Ingrid's experiences. In the scene in which Ingrid scrolls through Taylor's Instagram for the first time, we see her posts not as images on a phone but in full screen, accompanied by upbeat music and a voiceover of Taylor reciting all the captions. All traces of the real world vanish as Ingrid examines every detail of her new idol's life. She does not see the room she is in or even the edges of her phone, and no external sounds reach her. By the end of the scene, Ingrid is crying with joy. This level of emotional connection with an artwork is what Benjamin describes as absorption. A person who is absorbed by an artwork "enters into [it], just as, according to legend, a Chinese painter entered his completed painting while beholding it" (40), the same way the film shows Ingrid entering the world of Taylor's Instagram. Benjamin attributes this level of engagement to an art lover, for whom an artwork is "considered an object of devotion" rather than a "means of entertainment" (39). Benjamin's own analysis of film stars would suggest that an artwork like an Instagram page should fall squarely into the second category, but Ingrid and her fascination with Taylor complicates that notion.

Explaining Ingrid's relationship with Taylor's artwork requires a subjective understanding of aura. History and uniqueness, the two main factors contributing to aura as defined by Benjamin, exist only in relation to each viewer's own prior knowledge. The history of a piece cannot be felt just by looking at it, nor can its degree of uniqueness. These are facets of an artwork that one must learn from external sources. This explains how Ingrid and Ezra can have such different interpretations of Taylor's aura. To Ingrid, as she lies in bed lost in Taylor's Instagram, it doesn't matter that Taylor is playing to an audience or lying about what products she loves. Ingrid can't see any of that. All Ingrid experiences in that moment is Taylor's raw joy and glowing enthusiasm for

life. Ezra, on the other hand, must live every day with Taylor. He has seen her grow as an influencer and worries that her whole persona is just a forced imitation of California culture wielded as an advertising tool. While Ezra and Ingrid have contradictory interpretations of Taylor's aura, it is impossible to argue that either experience is wrong. Given their differing prior knowledge, it is natural that they would reach separate conclusions about Taylor. Ingrid in this case lacks the knowledge of Taylor's history that would destroy her aura, so she is able to approach her artwork as authentic. The more jaded Ezra, however, looks upon Taylor's work knowing that she "used to be [a] total preppy sorority chick" and believes that she is simply projecting L. A. vibes for the sake of her brand.

This contradiction does not mean that Benjamin's concept of aura is completely wrong. Even in the example of Ingrid and Ezra, aura still applies. Where he falls short is in defining aura as a characteristic of the artwork, rather than as an aspect of the viewer's experience, but the underlying concept is sound. It is undeniable that viewing an authentic piece of art is far more inspiring than viewing a replica or a photograph, provided that you personally can tell the difference. When Benjamin discusses the difference between "art lovers" and the so-called "masses" (39), he almost touches on this very issue. What separates the two groups is prior knowledge. Of course, a member of the masses is going to amble past masterpieces with just a passing glance; the aura of an artwork is severely limited to the viewer who has not bothered studying it in advance. Conversely, someone lacking knowledge of art history may be inspired by a lesser artwork (such as an Instagram post) that someone with more "refined" taste would immediately dismiss.

*Ingrid Goes West* both illustrates and expands Benjamin's notion of aura by demonstrating how differences in perspective can alter one's perception of aura. Taylor's Instagram serves as an example of an artwork that is seen simultaneously as an inspiration by Ingrid and as an exhausting lie by Ezra. Arguing that one of those interpretations is right and the other wrong would be nonsensical; people feel what they feel, and no rules can meaningfully govern that. It is clear,

therefore, that Benjamin's definition of aura cannot be considered complete without a subjective element. Aura is not an innate property of the artwork itself, but a way of describing how viewers interface with it. Aura is how the viewer's knowledge of the artwork and its history combine with their other experiences in life to determine how they respond emotionally. This definition explains why Ingrid and Ezra would disagree as to whether Taylor has aura. Before moving to California, Ingrid has never encountered someone with Taylor's distinct friendly vibes. Ezra on the other hand, who has lived in California for at least as long as Taylor, knows that Taylor was once a completely different person and has merely assimilated to her new culture. Ingrid sees Taylor as fresh, unique, and alluring, but Ezra is just tired of her. Benjamin would in all likelihood declare that Ezra is right, that Taylor's work has no value as art and is only a tool to generate wealth. There is truth in that sentiment, but it completely discounts the genuine impact Taylor can have on people like Ingrid. Drawing distinctions between "high art" with deep history and prestige and "low art" with massive appeal leads to a simplistic and harmful understanding of art. All art should be criticized, but outright dismissal is never appropriate. At its most fundamental level, art is subjective, and it deserves to be evaluated as such.

Works Cited

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