

Bong Joon-ho's *Mickey 17*: Capitalism's perfect worker—expendable and recyclable: “My entire life's a ... punishment”

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Mickey 17, directed by Oscar-winning, South Korean filmmaker Bong Joon-ho (*Memories of Murder*, *Parasite*), is a science fiction black comedy based on Edward Ashton's 2022 novel *Mickey7*. With a budget of \$118 million, *Mickey 17* premiered at the Berlin International Film Festival on February 15, 2025, and was released in South Korea on February 28. The film debuted in the US March 7.

In the opening scene, Mickey 17 (Robert Pattinson), in fact, the once and future Mickey Barnes, the film's main protagonist, wakes up in a snowy cave, having fallen through a crevasse. He is overjoyed when a pilot, Timo (Steven Yeun), surveying the area, comes across him. “You haven't died yet?” the pilot shouts in surprise. He grabs the valuable gear Mickey dropped on the way in and leaves Mickey to his fate. “They're going to reprint you back out tomorrow anyway!” Before leaving, Timo nonchalantly asks, “Hey Mickey! ... What's it feel like to die?”

This sets the tone for the first half of the movie, set in the year 2054 when human printing and space travel have been developed and Earth is plagued by sandstorms, the cities resemble something out of *Blade Runner* and there are still vestiges of parliamentary democracy.

From Pattinson's high-pitched, cartoonish narration we learn about the absurd existence of Mickey 17, a so-called “expendable.” Mickey is part of a crew on a spaceship that left Earth to colonize the icy planet of Niflheim. He signed up for his role after a failed business venture with his friend Timo (the pilot), which got him into debt and almost killed by sadistic loan sharks.

Mickey's job consists of undergoing endless gruelling testing and undertaking dangerous missions that always end in painful death. At that point his body is unceremoniously cremated in the ship's “recycler.” When Mickey dies, his personality and memories get transferred into a new body that emerges from an MRI-resembling, giant 3D printer. He then gets assigned a new number and job. Sixteen “expendable” Mickeys have come and gone in this gruesome manner on the space voyage by the time the film begins.

Mickey and most of the other workers on the ship live in

cramped, grey quarters furnished with only the bare essentials, which match their grey uniforms. They eat literal slop served at a cafeteria allotted to them based on their body weight and the work they perform each day. Engaging in sexual contact is forbidden, because it burns calories and is considered a waste of the mission's resources.

There seems to be no culture, entertainment or real social life on board. Mickey has a dislike for his workmates because day after day they all ask him about the experience of death. His only joy is his romantic relationship with Nasha (Naomi Ackie), a tough-minded security officer.

The colonizing mission is led by politician and church leader Kenneth Marshall (Mark Ruffalo), who, after losing reelection, departed Earth to carry out his project of a racially pure Niflheim. His supporters, who feature in an early scene, all sport red baseball caps with his slogan on it. Ruffalo's satirical portrayal of Marshall definitely incorporates some of Donald Trump's mannerisms, but it is part of a more general buffoonish, Dr. Evil-like character. Marshall's space colonization plan echoes Elon Musk's grandiose projects involving his SpaceX company and his pro-natalist and eugenicist views. Marshall's wife Ylfa (Toni Collette), dressed in gaudy colors, constantly whispers guidance into Marshall's ear and is obsessed with creating sauces.

The movie tackles a great deal of important issues, and often amusingly. Bong has a definite touch. Pattison and the others perform well.

Expendables are clearly a stand-in for the working class (albeit an imperfect one, which we will touch upon later). The scenes of Mickey being experimented on and of him zipped up inside a body-bag and thrown into the cremator over and over again are disturbing because they recall other events—mass graves during the COVID pandemic, children's corpses in Gaza lying in the street, the electrocution of a worker in a Tesla factory in Austin and most recently the death of a homeless man in Berlin who had taken refuge in a rubbish container. The next day the man was crushed to death when the container was emptied into a mobile compacter.

The stupidity, arrogance and total disregard of the ruling class

for human life is represented in the Marshalls, who live in luxurious quarters and indulge in their bizarre and misanthropic worldview. In one scene, which sharply recalls the pandemic, Mickey is tasked to be the first to leave the ship on Niflheim and instructed to breathe in the surrounding air by the on-board scientists. It turns out Niflheim's atmosphere is contaminated with a deadly airborne pathogen and Mickey is the guinea pig for a vaccine. There are echoes of the illegalization of abortion in the US when Kai, whom Marshall selects as an ideal childbearer for the colony, protests "Am I just a uterus to you?"

Unfortunately, Bong's movies tend to have unnecessarily convoluted plots and lose their way somewhat, and this is the case in *Mickey 17* too. There are two competing storylines that by the end of the movie distract from the problem the director claims to be "obsessed" with: the class divide on the ship headed to Niflheim.

In the cave scene at the beginning, Mickey gets rescued by Niflheim's indigenous and intelligent bug-like creatures called "creepers." When he returns to the ship, he discovers (since he was expected to die in the ice cave) he has been (shoddily) reprinted and a mentally unstable, aggressive Mickey 18 is occupying his quarters. "Multiples" are forbidden by law and dealt with by killing them irrevocably.

Nasha convinces both Mickeys to pretend there is only one of them and share the work as well as the relationship with her. While Mickey 17 is meek, simple-minded and people-pleasing, Mickey 18 is dominant, cunning and vengeful. Shenanigans ensue. In the end, good and bad Mickey learn to complement one another, and with the help of their superhero girlfriend (Nasha), prevent Marshall's extermination of the creepers (the latter gives the order "Gas them all" after the creatures have surrounded the ship in search of their stolen creeper-baby).

Bong Joon-ho, following the success of his biting *Parasite*, which won four Academy Awards in 2020, was rewarded with a huge budget. He chose once again to undertake a social critique. The author of the original novel, Edward Ashton, has commented, "I wrote a short story a number of years ago that explored ... a sort of crappy immortality. ... I liked the idea and wanted to see how that could be expanded if you coupled it with an exploitative social structure."

Whatever the studios expected, perhaps a new superhero franchise, Bong selected to tackle modern capitalism, in a film that ends optimistically, if a little implausibly. His recent evasive comments claiming that the figure of Marshall is not based on Trump are threadbare, but his choice to once again focus on the working class and a string of current issues is laudable.

Bong's portrayal of the working class as naïve and ultimately powerless, which was already present in his earlier works, weakens his critique. For *Mickey 17* there is no reprieve, no escape and while we empathize with him, he also has little interest in others apart from his girlfriend.

In a recent interview in the *New York Times*, Bong expressed

his sympathy with what he describes as a new mood amongst young people in South Korea:

The "very popular concept" of *sohwakhaeng*, i.e., small but touchable happiness. "There are some young people saying, 'I reject this, I hate all this, I'm not joining this craze of competition ... their lifestyle is different. They are not hippies, but they organize a calm and small life. My generation, and older generation, never had that. But the younger generation, they invented that concept. Don't need a lot of money. Not that ambitious goal. Relatively less interested in politics, just trying to keep their own small universe."

This is also Mickey's wish at the end of the film—"a calm and small life," which of course excludes any real challenge to the status quo. From this standpoint, the optimistic conclusion of *Mickey 17* assumes the character of a *deus ex machina* in an already absurdist drama. Mickey's girlfriend ultimately becomes an elected leader of the colony and orders the cloning device to be destroyed. How this popular-democratic process suddenly becomes possible is not explained. In any case, the thrust is a healthy one.

The death of Marshall the tyrant (apparently a solution to all the problems which caused Mickey's mishaps) is achieved through the intervention of the friendly and wise species of animals—the "creepers."

This theme of animals saving the day is similar to Bong's other environmental-capitalist critique *Okja*, and Bong has been a vocal fan of Hayao Miyazaki, whose work also features animals as teachers of "humanity as a whole" who destroy the environment. Bong, who is "interested in how humans appear from the animal's perspective," has announced that his next movie will be an animation revolving around deep sea creatures.



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