

FILM REVIEW:

MICKEY 17 (2025)¹

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Joon-ho, Bong, director. *Mickey 17*. Warner Bros. Pictures, 2025.

Mickey 17 (2025) is Bong Joon Ho's return to theaters after his widely acclaimed, record-breaking *Parasite* (2019). A genre-blending synthesis—as per usual in his filmography—*Mickey 17* is an imaginative science fiction work firmly couched in black comedy that takes Bong's distinctive social commentary beyond Earth's confines. The film owes its plot and futuristic setting in a spaceship bound for another planet to Edward Ashton's 2022 novel *Mickey7*. Bong has adapted the book to accomplish a playful picture teeming with political relevance, with Robert Pattinson heading the cast in a display of his versatility—he performs two primary roles—and Mark Ruffalo and Toni Collette starring as the distasteful chiefs of the spacecraft. *Mickey 17* delivers the polished close-ups on technology we expect from a sci-fi film and exploits its extraterrestrial context to inspire awe visually. While its genre hybridity is well-managed, its scattered ambitions seem to impinge on the indictment of colonialism, condemning it to a piecemeal approach to one of its central subject matters.

After the opening scene, protagonist Mickey Barnes narrates the events leading up to it in a 32-minute flashback, a fourth of the film's length. Bong takes recourse to voice-over narration throughout its entirety, a choice that feels justified for this interjection of events, but in which he occasionally overindulges as the plot advances. The character we meet is Mickey's seventeenth iteration, the previous sixteen ones having

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died during worktime only to be artificially reprinted again, as specified in his contract. These are Mickey's job conditions, capital's absolute encroachment on the natural limits of the workday and retirement age. Under the command of former politician, now simply capitalist trailblazer Kenneth Marshall, his pseudo-immortality entails an ignominious treatment rife with lethal tasks. Four years earlier, in 2050, Mickey had been unable to pay his illegal moneylender back and enlisted in this intergalactic colonial enterprise trying to stave off the impending deadly settling of accounts. Like him, many others desperate to escape from earthly financial misery tried to enlist en masse as intergalactic settlers. Mickey managed to secure a spot by registering as an Expendable, embarking on the explicitly eugenicist colonial endeavor headed by the over-the-top, egotistical Marshall.

Mickey 17 has come out at a contentious moment in American (and international) politics when spectacle runs rampant. Their ever-increasing conflation with entertainment is apparent in the unprecedented levels of attention-grabbing remarks that bear the unlikely stamp of political leaders. Beyond public announcements and social media posts, the deployment of spectacle in the political sphere extends as far as these figures' participation in eye-catching, highly unserious scenarios. Two weeks before the film's release on March 7th, Elon Musk flaunted on the stage of a conservative conference the "bureaucracy chainsaw" Argentina's president, Javier Milei, had gifted him. Musk's outrageous theatricalization of the US federal service cuts reasserted *Mickey 17* as a timely corollary to the current American political landscape.

Accordingly, the film lampoons ludicrous political personalities of the kind for their out-of-pocket behavior and the reactionary politics that attend it. Their portrayal in Marshall and his wife Ylfa rings true thanks to the extraordinary accuracy with which the film captures the multilayeredness of the right-wing rhetorical apparatus. The worship of meat and the merely performative embrace of inclusive language—"my brother travelers . . . and sisters"; "mankind . . . humankind" (00:25:23; 1:48:30)—are two subtle threads running throughout *Mickey 17* that show Bong's fastidiousness. Marshall's adoption of gender-neutral terms is always mediated by Ylfa. In a modern tweak of the familiar model where the public-facing man is influenced by his wife, she builds for her husband a much-needed politically correct, egalitarian facade aimed at pleasing certain sectors of the crew. Ylfa is indeed ancillary to the man's leadership, but this complementarity carves out a space for the actors to shine. Ruffalo and Connette flawlessly bring to life the honesty of

the characters' trust in each other and the (his) project. Running against the grain of their plan, according to which only Marshall is meant to be the center of attention, both of their outstanding performances make us grateful that they are granted similar screen time. The film further problematizes his idiotic self-aggrandizing ego by recasting it as a fully-fledged cult of personality. Marshall's obsession with being recorded for historical remembrance is one of several elements Bong uses to hint at an ongoing fascistization process in today's spectacle-prone right wing, and further encapsulate its ethos.

Yet *Mickey 17* has a head start on other satires of the political right for reasons other than the faithfulness of its portrayal or its performances. By juxtaposing the facts that the same egregious narcissist who leads the spaceship is the one to have garnered working-class support, the film makes a point that other pieces easily gloss over. The scenes where Marshall successfully whips up his followers hence make for a nuanced political message. These acolytes of his may be on an intergalactic mission, but their reasons for enlisting have their roots on Earth: the majority of them are on board on account of "money problems" (00:11:20). Economists have long pointed out the ubiquity of debt in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, whereby it "has become a way of life not merely for the poor but for the middle class as well" (Martin 12), and one can only imagine that it has only expanded by 2054. Here, the film muses on the societal polarization and animosity prevailing today. It aptly proposes the impoverishment of the masses and the spread of debt as the catalyst for the widespread uptake of a dog-eat-dog mindset. *Mickey 17*'s painfully crude insight is the linkage of a stage of the mode of production with the drive to give in to supremacist (eugenicist) discourse and trample on others out of necessity, both humans (Mickey) and non-humans (the species they might find on the new planet). Bong poignantly deplores the course global capitalism is running by making the average person go to any lengths to fix their dire economic straits, no matter if this entails getting involved in a eugenics-inflicted endeavor that submits Mickey to extreme suffering and is set to exploit another planet's resources without regard for its native species.

Unfortunately, the film loses some of its incisiveness due to its overreliance on elements external to the colonialist endeavor to articulate its critique. The two axes across which this happens are Marshall's governance and the institutionalization of the Expendable program that forces Mickey to slave away across multiple lives. If there is no question of finding Marshall agreeable, Mickey's unthinkingness and the medical

experimentation he must go through—this parallel with animals the film willfully explores—are meant to amplify our sympathy for him. But his gullibility is taken to the extreme, a characterological issue evident in the villains as well: *Mickey 17* struggles with totalizing its characters. In any case, Marshall's wickedness and its expression in the treatment of Mickey he enforces seem to carry the whole symbolic weight of the immorality of the colonial enterprise. There is little to nothing the film does to disapprove of it apart from capturing their tyranny and suffering, respectively. This raises the question of whether such a project is not ill-conceived at its core, regardless of its specifics: Would the colonialist campaign be a noble one if it were not for its human exploitation system and the leader that allows it? The viewer has to make a judgment call that *Mickey 17* shies away from. Its sharpness partly deflates with this narrow scope. Surely, here the film seems to embrace the inevitability of it all for the crew members. For them embarking on the spaceship was not an option, and the refusal to pass judgment on the *fundamentals* of the mission may be aligned with their blamelessness. Intentional or not, *Mickey 17*'s forgetfulness of the necessary implications of any instance of colonialism is deeply unsatisfactory.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

MANUEL SANZ BREA is a graduate student in the English Department at the University of Kentucky. He holds a BA and an MA from the Autonomous University of Madrid, where he will be returning to pursue his PhD in English. His MA thesis delved into English-speaking Marxist literary criticism in the second half of the twentieth century, and he aims to continue his work from Marxist analytical coordinates.

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