

Who's the real Mickey? Does it matter?

In Bong Joon Ho's new satire, both versions of the title character are as expendable as the underclasses that fuel our capitalist system.

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Robert Pattinson in *Mickey 17* (Photo courtesy Warner Bros. Pictures)

Longtime readers of this column may know that I have a soft spot for both actor Robert Pattinson ([vampire hero](#) and [Batman of our age](#)) and director [Bong Joon Ho](#) (whose 2019 movie *Parasite* is one of my all-time favorites). It would be cliché to say

that I would follow their work to the ends of the universe, but that is what the two of them offer in *Mickey 17*, and I was gratefully along for the ride.

The movie opens with our titular character Mickey (Pattinson) navigating blizzard conditions on the far-off planet Niflheim. He crashes through the ground into a majestic icy cave, where he waits patiently to die. Dying, it turns out, is Mickey's job. He is an "expendable," sent to Niflheim as part of an expedition hoping to colonize the planet. Part menial laborer, part lab rat, Mickey does all the jobs that are too dangerous for ordinary humans. Need someone to rewire the spaceship's external ports in extreme conditions? Or a living body to test the foreign toxins of a new atmosphere? Or someone who can track down the indigenous inhabitants of the new planet regardless of the threat they pose? Mickey's your man. When he dies, which he inevitably does, a new body is printed out again using the recycled organic waste on the ship. His memories are regularly uploaded to a hard drive, so that each time he is reprinted he is restored to his previous consciousness.

The satire is pointed, dark, and played for laughs. In a rapid-fire sequence, Mickey sits naked in an isolated plastic tube, reminiscent of a human-sized hamster cage, vomiting blood as his body fights the toxic infection in the new planet's atmosphere. His body is wrapped in yellow hazmat material and shunted into a furnace. He is right back in the hamster cage. Rinse. Repeat.

This is one of Bong's favorite themes: the way advanced capitalist societies create underclasses and caste systems that we refuse to acknowledge in our official rhetoric of meritocracy. His films dramatize these class conflicts—which almost always end in violence—by borrowing and mixing tropes across many genres, from horror/terror (*Parasite* and *The Host*) to fairy tale/parable (*Okja*) to sci-fi thriller (*Snowpiercer*) to gangster movies (almost all his films). As we watch Mickey die in gruesome and spectacular ways, it isn't hard to see how he stands in for every expendable needed to make the bizarre experiment of capitalism work. The work Mickey does for the space expedition is like the real-life hazardous jobs that have built wealth for a privileged few. The only difference between our reality and his is that we tend to paper over the death of expendables, whereas the wealthy people who benefit from his death can kill him outright, in any way they see fit, to advance their mission of colonization and resource extraction.

The Mickey we meet is the 17th version, but when he unexpectedly survives the ice cave and makes it back to home base, he discovers he's already been

reprinted—and Mickey 18 isn't going to go quietly into oblivion. At the same moment, the colonists are facing a showdown with an indigenous species. Thence begins a wildly escalating ride of mistaken identity and species survival.

There are a lot of big ideas floating in the atmosphere of *Niflheim*, and not all of them touch down on solid ground. The mission is led by a failed politician, Kenneth Marshall (Mark Ruffalo), whose devotees wear red hats and are falling over themselves to start a pure new colony under his command. Marshall's wife, Ylfa (Toni Collette), soothes his ego and stokes his rage while seeking exotic ingredients to invent new culinary sauces ("the true litmus test of civilization"). When promising to consult the mission's board of directors, Marshall repeatedly refers to them as a church and then quickly corrects himself, "I mean company." Maybe when the movie was written a few years ago, a satire about celebrity politicians and billionaires adopting religious rhetoric to gut the social safety net and promise salvation in outer space might have seemed silly and farfetched. Today, the buffoonery is so pointed it isn't that funny.

So too, the movie leaves unexplored the larger philosophical questions suggested by the technology of human printing. Sometimes there are minor glitches in the printing process and the new Mickey has an altered temperament. One is clingy and whiney; another is hyper and silly. Mickey 18 is angry, surly, and ready to burn the entire expedition to the ground in righteous indignation. This could raise fascinating questions about personhood and identity, but it is mostly played like a comedy of mistaken identity.

Then again, maybe leaving Mickey's personal integrity an open question is part of Bong's point. Mickey faces his own existential crisis—if he dies before Mickey 18, whose memories will be uploaded into the new printout? Is one of them more real than the other?—just as the humans face the crisis of their species' survival. The planet's indigenous inhabitants—a cross between a furry opossum and a giant roly-poly—seem designed to repel anthropomorphizing sympathy. Most of the humans are ready to obliterate them with all the firepower they can muster. Only Mickey can imagine them as sentient beings with feelings, desires, and intentions of their own. Whether Mickey is "the real Mickey" or even a real person, Bong suggests, is answered not in philosophical or technological speculation but in ethical action.

This is an ancient litmus test. Jesus teaches his disciples that whatever they do for "the least of these," they do for him (Matt. 25:40). "Treat every living being as if it had once been your mother," stresses a Buddhist proverb. This may be Bong's most

ambitious movie yet, and it doesn't hold together as tightly as some of his earlier attempts. But this is a message he has been refining in all his films: The measure of humanity is always found in whether we can resist the urge to label any living creature expendable.