

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of The Study

Film serves not only as entertainment, but also a powerful tool for communicating social, political, and economic issues to the audience. Since the inception of film, many directors and screenwriters have used film to criticize social injustice, expose labor exploitation, and build critical awareness of oppressive systems. As Paul Wells (2002) states, *“Animation and film can serve as a means of social commentary, reflecting and critiquing the world around us.”* Through narrative and visuals, films have the power to represent complex social realities, invite audiences to reflect on the condition of society, and even encourage social change.

The role of films as social criticism is not only limited to documentary or drama, but can also be found in various other genres, including science fiction. These genres are often used to depict class inequality, labor exploitation, and forms of ideological domination that may be challenging to express directly. As stated by Bordwell and Thompson (2010), *“Film is a powerful medium to exploring social issues and can provoke thought and discussion.”* Therefore, films function not only as a form of artistic expression but also as a tool that can reinforce or challenge existing power structures.

Science fiction, beyond its futuristic themes and advanced technologies, serves as a compelling genre for critiquing contemporary social and economic systems, particularly capitalism. As Darko Suvin (1979) argues, *“Science fiction is*

a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interactions of estrangement and cognition,” allowing us to view social realities through the lens of alternate worlds to explore issues like labor exploitation, social inequality, and resistance to oppressive systems.

The theme of labor exploitation in sci-fi films is often explored in narratives that display the dependence of the capitalist system on workers who experience alienation, both physically and psychologically. Representations of class inequality are also commonly found in sci-fi films, where society is often divided into an upper class that has full control over resources and a working class that experiences structural oppression. Sci-fi films not only offer fantasy-based entertainment but also become a reflection of existing social realities, especially to labor exploitation and ideological domination in the capitalist system.

In the capitalist system, labor exploitation and ideological domination are the two main mechanisms that enable the continuation and reproduction of class inequality. Capitalism as an economic system is based on private ownership of the means of production, where the upper class or capital owners control the labor of the lower class to generate profits. This relationship not only generates economic surplus for capital owners but also creates conditions for repeated exploitation.

Labor exploitation occurs when the surplus value generated by workers is not fully returned to them but rather accumulated by capital owners. In this context, workers experience structural inequality as they have no control over the fruits of their labor. Capitalism continues to create conditions where labor is treated as a

commodity, and humans are reduced to means of production that can be replaced or renewed according to the needs of the system.

Beyond economic exploitation, capitalism also maintains its dominance through ideology. Antonio Gramsci's (1971) concept of Hegemony illustrates that power is not only maintained through coercive force but also through social approval obtained through ideological apparatuses such as media, education, and culture. Ideology serves to legitimize social inequality by helping the consciousness of the working class to accept their subordinate position as natural or inevitable. As *Eagleton (1991)* asserts, *“Ideology is not just a set of ideas, but a way of understanding the world that shapes our perceptions and actions.”*

This relationship between ideology and social class in sustaining capitalism is key in understanding how exploitation is reproduced. The capitalist system does not only survive because of economic power, but also because of the creation and internalization of ideologies that make exploitation seem natural. In other words, labor exploitation in capitalism is not just an economic problem, but also a matter of how social consciousness is constructed to ensure the sustainability of the existing system.

Mickey 17 (2025) is a science fiction film directed by Bong Joon-ho and adapted from the novel *Mickey7* by Edward Ashton. The film follows the journey of Mickey Barnes, an “Expendable” assigned to a dangerous planetary colonization mission. In the world portrayed in the film, Mickey's body can be duplicated multiple times each time he dies in the line of duty, while his memories and consciousness are transferred to the new body. This system makes him a disposable

worker who repeatedly experiences death for the benefit of human exploration in space.

Mickey Barnes, as the protagonist, represents the figure of a laborer in the capitalist system who is constantly exploited. Through the process of replication, the film shows how labor in a fictional world is considered a resource that can be easily replaced. The colonization system in *Mickey 17* shows how human value is reduced to merely an instrument of production, where individuals are stripped of their identity for the purpose of economic interest and power expansion. The supporting characters in the film, such as the scientists and expedition leaders, also reflect complex class dynamics. These characters are representations of the ruling class that controls this system of exploitation, while Mickey and other workers in lower positions experience a repetitive cycle of alienation and injustice.

As part of the science fiction genre, *Mickey 17* offers not only a futuristic narrative of space exploration but also a social critique of capitalism and labor exploitation. Science fiction is often used as a tool to reflect on the social, political, and economic conditions of contemporary society, and *Mickey 17* does the same by illustrating how technology can be used to prolong and reproduce systems of injustice. As the newest work from director Bong Joon-ho, *Mickey 17* continues the exploration of the themes of social class, identity, and dehumanization that were previously raised in *Snowpiercer* (2013), *OKJA* (2017), and *Parasite* (2019). However, *Mickey 17* places these narratives in a futuristic science fiction context, with cloned characters forced to die and resurrect as part of a modern system of human exploitation. If *Snowpiercer* highlights the class structure in a closed society,

OKJA discusses industrial exploitation of living beings, and Parasite reveals social inequality in urban life, then Mickey 17 brings these elements together within the framework of existentialism. Therefore, Mickey 17 is interesting to discuss because it not only shows technological advancement, but also how humans can lose the meaning and value of life in a dehumanized system.

The concept of class struggle proposed by Karl Marx becomes relevant in understanding how Mickey 17 represents the social inequality between workers and capital owners. As Marx and Engels (2008:7) said, *“the class will always be in the history of all societies. The bourgeoisie controls the means of production, wealth, and power, while the proletariat, who must sell their labor to survive, is often exploited and oppressed by the bourgeoisie.”* Mickey, as a cloned worker, is a symbol of the proletariat class that is constantly exploited without the value of individuality. The owners of capital in the film, represented by expedition leaders and scientists, have full control over resources and labor, ensuring that the system of exploitation continues without resistance.

In Mickey 17, a form of Hegemony is also seen in the way the capitalist system makes Mickey and others accept exploitation as normal. They are convinced that their role as replaceable labor is part of a “bigger interest,” which is for humanity's survival. Furthermore, the propaganda and doctrine used in the film show how capitalism creates a narrative that the individual is less important than the stability of the system. By embedding the idea that Mickey's death was a natural duty, the film shows how hegemony works to mask justice and make sure there is no uprising from the working class.

The film's depiction of repeated cloning and consciousness transfer introduces an extreme form of alienation from species-being for Mickey Barnes, as his identity and body are reduced to reproducible commodities. This aligns with biopolitical control, where, as *Michel Foucault (1976)* who explained that modern power shifted from "the ancient right to take life or let live" to "a power to foster life or disallow it to the point of death," arguing that it operates not merely through repression but managing and optimizing populations and individual bodies for systemic ends.

Through the lens of Marxist and Hegemony theory, Mickey 17 can be understood as a critique of how capitalism continues to reproduce exploitation in various forms, both in the real world and in science fiction representations. The film offers a discussion on how social systems can maintain injustice in subtle ways but remain effective in controlling individuals and the working class as a whole.

Previous research related to exploitation, alienation, and class struggle in fiction has been conducted from various perspectives, especially in film and literature studies. Qingyue Peng (2018) in "*Fears in the 21st Century Through Sci-Fi Movies*" examines how society's fears of the future are reflected in science fiction films. One of the main focuses is how social and technological changes reflect economic uncertainty, environmental degradation, and capitalist control over individuals. The use of films such as *Blade Runner* and *Blade Runner 2049* shows how labor exploitation, entrenched capitalism, and environmental degradation are major issues in modern science fiction. Peng also links exploitation in science fiction films to the Marxist concept of alienation, where the worker is

separated from the fruits of his labor, loses control over his life, and is only considered a means of production for the capitalist elite.

Koechlin (2024) in *“This Time We Take the Engine! Class War in Dystopian Films of the Occupy Era”* analyzes how dystopian films that emerged after the 2007-2008 financial crisis, such as *Snowpiercer*, *Elysium*, and *The Hunger Games*, explicitly depict class struggle and labor exploitation. It uses a Jamesonian approach to highlight how these films construct a world where the oppressed 99% live under the domination of an elite class that systematically controls access to resources.

The study argues that Occupy Wall Street-era dystopian films not only criticize economic exploitation but also present narratives of revolution as a response to social injustice. Koechlin show that in many dystopian films, the oppressed must take radical action to wrest control from the ruling class pattern that recurs in various forms of capitalist exploitation.

Exploitation and class struggle have long been major themes in science fiction, but *Mickey 17* offers a new perspective: exploitation that is not only social and economic but also biological and existential. In *Snowpiercer* and *Elysium*, class oppression can be resisted through revolution; in *Mickey 17*, exploitation is cyclically reproduced through cloning. Mickey is not just an oppressed worker, he is a labor force that can be reproduced indefinitely, eliminating the possibility of resistance as the system continues to replace him with new versions. This reflects an extreme form of capitalism that not only controls labor, but also the identity and existence of the individual.

This research, offers novelty by highlighting the inescapable cycle of exploitation where workers are unable to escape the system because their very existence has been commodified. This research will show how exploitation in science fiction evolves from the control of labor to the total control of life itself.

1.2 Research Question

1. How does Mickey 17 (2025) represent the cyclical reproduction of labor exploitation and ideological domination under capitalism, particularly through cloning as a metaphor for extreme commodification?

1.3 Purpose of The Study

The purpose of this study is to analyze how Mickey 17 (2025) represents labor exploitation and ideological domination within the capitalist framework using Marxist and Gramscian perspectives. This research aims to explore how the film critiques capitalism's cyclical reproduction of class inequality through cloning as a metaphor for alienated, replaceable labor, and the hegemonic normalization of this exploitation.

1.4 Scope of The Study

This research focuses on the representation of labor exploitation, and class struggle in Mickey 17 (2025) using Marxist theory, Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony, and Daniel Chandler's semiotic approach. The analysis is limited to the narrative structure, characters, dialog, and visual elements in the film that show the mechanisms of capitalist domination and ideological control. This research does not discuss technical aspects of cinema such as cinematography techniques or

audience response. The main focus is on how the film convey socio-political criticism through symbolism and theme development. This study only uses the film as the main source and does not include the original novel (*Mickey7* by Edward Ashton).

1.5 Significance of The Study

This research has several important significances, both from academic and social perspective, especially in film studies, theory, social, and cultural studies. This research will enrich the literature of analyzing film in social and political contexts, especially in connecting social themes with Marxist theories of class struggle. By focusing on *Mickey 17* (2025), this research will offer a new interpretation of film as a medium that not only function as entertainment but also as a critique of contemporary social issues, such as class inequality, working-class exploitation, and upper-class privilege.

In addition, this research will expand the understanding of the relevance of Marxist theory in a modern context. Although the theory of class struggle originated in the 19th century, this study will show how class inequality, the difference between the upper class and the working class, and the exploitation of the working class are still very relevant in contemporary society and can be identified through popular media, such as film.

1.6 State of The Art

Research on the representation of labor exploitation, alienation and class struggle in film has been widely conducted in literature and film studies. Various

theoretical approaches, particularly Marxism and semiotics, are used to explore how media represent social inequality and dominant ideologies. A study by Qingyue Peng (2018) shows how science fiction films such as *Blade Runner 2049* reflect social fears of capitalistic control and environmental degradation, and relates them to Marx's concept of alienation. Meanwhile, Koechlin (2024) discusses how Occupy Wall Street-era dystopian films such as *Snowpiercer* and *Elysium* explicitly voice class struggle through revolutionary narratives.

While many studies have examined the issue of exploitation and class struggle in science fiction films, *Mickey 17* (2025) offers a more radical approach. The film not only depicts physical exploitation, but also explores biological and existential exploitation through the mechanisms of cloning and consciousness transfer. Thus, exploitation is no longer limited to working hours or wages, but extends to the control of the human body and identity.

This research fills this gap by combining the three approaches to analyze how the capitalist system in this film is reproduced not only economically, but also through ideology and the construction of visual meaning. With this approach, this research not only expands the study of capitalism in science fiction films, but also introduces the dimension of dehumanization in the context of modern exploitation. *Mickey 17* is an interesting case to see how the human body is treated as a commodity, and how the ideology of capitalism continues to work through symbols, narratives, and technology to shape consciousness and maintain power structures.