



Character Transformation in Adaptation: Life and Death Drives in Edward Ashton's *Mickey7* and Bong Joon Ho's *Mickey17* Movie Adaptation

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Abstract. The intention and purpose of creating adaptations are often discussed in the film adaptation and comparative study. By using adaptation theory from Desmond and Hawkes (2006) and the instinctive theory of life and death from Sigmund Freud, this research aims to analyse the different ideas between the novel “Mickey7” and the film “Mickey17”. The analysis includes finding the intrinsic elements of both data sources and by using Freud’s life and death instinct theory, psychoanalysing the two main characters. The result showed that “Mickey17” is an intermediate adaptation. The main characters in the novel, Mickey7 and Mickey8, represent the life instinct as they both want to live and show that they want to live by solving their problem together to not being eliminated. However, the main characters in the film, Mickey17 and Mickey18, represent life and death instincts, respectively. While Mickey17 has affection and sexual desire, Mickey18 is a Mickey who is more violent and antagonistic towards Mickey17 and the other characters around them.

Keywords: adaptation, life and death instinct

INTRODUCTION

Adaptation is an interpretation, involving at least one person’s reading of a text, choices about what elements to transfer, and decisions about how to actualise these elements in a medium of image and sound (Desmond and Hawkes, 2006). Therefore, film adaptation is an interpretation of a text that is made into a film. An interpretation may differ from one person to another. More often than not, the people who want to create an adaptation, the adapter, will read the text beforehand to adapt according to the text. However, it is not rare to see others adapt the texts to new media. It means that they alter the text to fit the new medium they desire. The discourse surrounding whether an

adaptation is faithful or not has been going on for the past decades. Additionally, the people who decide to adapt a literary text would consider more factors than satisfying such criteria, such as their creativity (Salasati & Garnida, 2021). Thus, the intention and purpose of creating adaptations are often discussed in the film adaptation and comparative study.

Particularly in this research, an adaptation film, "Mickey17", directed by Bong Joon Ho, was recently released in 2025. This movie is adapted from a novel titled Mickey7 by Edward Ashton, that is published in 2022. Mickey17 is a story about an 'expendable' Mickey Barnes, who used his body to help the human colony test various items and perform dangerous tasks that were too risky for humans to undertake. The narrative follows Mickey17 and his copy, Mickey18, as they struggle to maintain their sanity while enduring the deaths and rebirths that result from the dangerous exposure to what is given and ordered to them to do. Therefore, the topic of the life and death instinct is an interesting topic to analyse from the characters of the narratives.

This study is inspired by previous studies that also analyse life and death instincts. Hidayat et al. (2023) analyzed the comparison of character and characterization of life and death instincts in the novel and film *All the Bright Places*. By comparing the novel and film and using Freud's theory and adaptation theory, it shows that there is a life and death instinct in Finch's character that is different between the novel and the film. The novel shows more death instinct to show the message of adolescent psychological problems, while the film shows more life instinct with the aim of emphasizing the romantic side. In conclusion, through this adaptation analysis, there are differences in ideas or themes between the novel and the film *All the Bright Places*. The novel emphasizes the theme of adolescent mental problems, while the film emphasizes the problem of teenage romance.

Additionally, Minderop and Hidayat (2022) studied how Hawthorne uses characterization techniques and figurative languages such as metaphor and simile to describe the mental state of Arthur Dimmesdale and Hester Prynne's characters. The theory used in this research is the theory of life instinct and death instinct by Sigmund Freud. The results of this study show that Hawthorne uses characterization techniques and figurative language to tell the conflict between the life and death instinct in Arthur Dimmesdale and Hester Prynne. This study concludes that Hawthorne uses characterization techniques and figurative language, such as metaphor and simile, to show the characters, Dimmesdale and Hester. They experience inner conflicts and life and death instincts.

This research is different from the previous research. Based on previous research, no one has combined Sigmund Freud's theory of life and death instinct (2003) with adaptation theory by Desmond and Hawkes (2006). By using adaptation theory and the instinctive theory of life and death from Sigmund Freud, this research aims to analyse the different ideas between the novel "Mickey7" and the film "Mickey17".

LITERATURE REVIEW

Adaptation

Adaptations can be made from novels, short stories, novellas, plays, nonfiction books, essays, graphic novels, or narrative poems. Even when the adapter attempts to transfer the original story to film as closely as possible, film is another medium with its conventions, artistic values, and techniques, and so the original story is transformed into

a different work of art. Adaptation, then, is an interpretation, involving at least one person's reading of a text, choices about what elements to transfer, and decisions about how to actualize these elements in a medium of image and sound (Desmond and Hawkes, 2006).

Life and Death Drives

This research also uses the theory of life and death drives by Sigmund Freud (2003). Freud defended the notion that human action is controlled by two intrinsic forces: life and death (Freud, 2003). Eros, which reveals itself in sexual practice, affection, creativity, and life-sustaining growth (Freud, 2003). The death instinct (Thanatos instinct) is behind threatening, damaging, and antagonistic attitudes (Freud, 2003).

METHOD

This study employs descriptive qualitative methods. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research includes a detailed explanation of the sampling process, as well as the procedures for collecting the data. In addition, it describes the steps of how the data is analysed, including the strategies used to present and interpret the findings, methods for ensuring the validity of the results, and the possible implications or outcomes of the research.

The data sources used for this study are: 1) the novel Mickey7 by Edward Ashton in February 2022, with a total of 336 pages and 2) the movie Mickey17 directed by Bong Joon Ho that was released in March 2025, with a total duration of 137 minutes. The novel and film were chosen as the primary data sources for this research, as both works present an interesting exploration of life, death, and identity through a "disposable" human clone named Mickey Barnes. The data for this study are in the form of excerpts or quotations.

In conducting this study, the data were collected using the following steps. First, researchers read and watched the novel Mickey7 and the movie Mickey17 more than once to gain a comprehensive understanding of the narratives, characters, and thematic elements, as the narrative approach (Putria & Nurhadi, 2020). Second, the researchers identified and gathered relevant data based on the statement of the problem and objectives. And last, a detailed analysis of the collected data is conducted to draw a conclusion. In analysing the data, the researchers used Freud's theory of life and death instincts to examine the motivation and internal conflict of the protagonist across both media, particularly how the life and death instincts manifest through decisions and dialogues. Additionally, Desmond and Hawkes' theory of adaptation served as a framework for comparing the novel Mickey7 and its film adaptation Mickey17.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. Intrinsic Elements Analysis

Compared to the novel, there are some noticeable changes made in its movie adaptation, "Mickey17". In the novel, the plot centers around the expendable Mickey7 and his unexpected clone, Mickey8, after a failed mission that leads to both versions of him existing simultaneously. On the other hand, in its movie adaptation, the protagonists are changed to Mickey17 and Mickey18. While still following the plot and the time setting of the novel, the change of number in both protagonists shows that Mickey Barnes, the original identity, has experienced more death and rebirth in the movie adaptation. As for the other characters, there are no remarkable changes aside from their names. For example, Mickey's best friend, Berto, whose name changes into Timo in the movie.

The themes of both media are quite similar. Edward Ashton's "Mickey7" centers on themes of identity, mortality, and personal action. The main character, Mickey7, explores what it means to be human in a scenario where one's life can be endlessly replaced. While the movie "Mickey17" is based on the same premise, it shifts the focus toward sacrifice, human worth, and the ethics of cloning. The film visually intensifies the emotional and moral dilemmas of being expendable, emphasizing how repeated deaths and rebirths deeply affect Mickey's sense of self and existential stability.

The novel "Mickey7" is told from a first-person point of view, allowing readers direct access to Mickey's inner thoughts, emotions, and personal struggles. This narrative choice fosters an intimate connection between the reader and the protagonist, highlighting Mickey's existential dilemmas, sarcastic tone, and evolving self-awareness as he grapples with his expendable role. In contrast, the movie "Mickey17" employs a mixed point of view, primarily using a third-person cinematic perspective that presents events externally, enabling viewers to observe characters and actions without direct insight into their internal thoughts. However, the film occasionally shifts into a first-person perspective through internal monologues or subjective camera angles during key emotional or psychological moments, offering a more immersive glimpse into Mickey's personal experience while maintaining a broader, more detached visual narrative overall.

The plot of "Mickey7" and "Mickey17" carries similar stages. Both works are in a back-and-forth plot. "Mickey7" started with a backstory by the narrator, Mickey7, and as the narration progresses, the pattern of flashbacks and present time continues to explain his struggle as expendable. Similarly, "Mickey17" has also started with a voice-over by Mickey17. Although the flashbacks are not as frequent in "Mickey17", it visually follows what is implied in "Mickey7" as the narrator's style to tell his story. The setting in "Mickey7" is a colony spaceship, Drakkar, that has landed on a new planet from Midgard. It is set millions of years after humans left Earth. Before Drakkar, they were floating in Himmel Station, a space station. The story alternates between what happens in Mickey's memories in Midgard and the present time. "Mickey17" carries similar settings, except for the time setting that is after Earth to Niflheim AD 2054.

The prominent symbol that is shown both in the novel and film is the concept of the "Expendable" experiment with the copy machine. Other than the literal meaning of expendable, that is to be of little significance when compared to an overall purpose, and therefore able to be abandoned, it refers to the person whose life can be wasted and made again with a body copy machine. Thus, giving his life more meaning and more function, for the circumstances of humanity in the story, but also less meaning as a human being, as death is no longer a dead end for him.

B. Life and Death Instincts

1. Life Instinct

Now, though, my heart is pounding in my ears and I find myself running down a checklist of everything that could go wrong if Nasha actually manages to get her lifter on the ground up there and makes a rescue attempt. Is the floor of the crevasse even wide enough for her to set down? If it is, will she be able to locate me? If she does, will she have enough cable to reach me? (Ashton, 2022:9)

Mickey7's heart is pounding, and his mind is actively racing through possibilities that might prevent a successful rescue. This anxiety shows a renewed attachment to life, that he wants to be saved. Eros, according to Freud, drives people to survive, to sustain

themselves, and to form bonds with others. Mickey7's fear that Nasha might fail in her rescue attempt reflects not only his will to live but also his emotional connection to another person, which is a key expression of the life instinct.

Another example of Mickey7's attachment to Nasha is shown in page 12 to 13 when he's afraid of losing Nasha as she was intended to save him. *"I can't have that. Nasha's the only clearly good thing I can point to from the past nine years of my life, and if she went down because of me, I couldn't live with myself."* (Ashton, 2022:12-13). His sentence suggests that she, Nasha, represents meaning and emotional fulfillment in his life. Mickey7's fear of Nasha's downfall because of him indicates a strong moral and emotional response. A desire not just to survive, but to protect what he loves.

"This isn't about fixing the blame," I say. "It's about fixing the problem."

"Okay, so let's fix both. You go jump in the cycler."

I shake my head. "No, that's not gonna happen."

He glares up at me, then grimaces and digs a chunk of hardened tank fluid out of one ear.

"How is this fair? I've been alive for, what, maybe twenty minutes? You've gotten a couple of months, at least. You should be the one to go." (Ashton, 2022:29)

The conversation between Mickey7 and Mickey8 reflects a struggle for survival, as both versions of the same person argue over which one deserves to continue living. Mickey7 tries to focus on resolving the issue without assigning blame, emphasizing practicality over emotion, but Mickey8 counters with a sharp demand that Mickey7 should sacrifice himself, highlighting the unfairness of their situation. The scene underscores the powerful drive both Mickeys exhibit to cling to life, continue existing, and assert their individual right to survive. Eros, as the instinct toward survival, connection, and self-preservation, manifests in their refusal to give up their claim to life.

In the movie, from the beginning of Mickey Barnes' life as an "expendable", he is told to be ready for what is about to come and get used to dying as a part of his job. However, despite various painful experiences he has endured as an expendable, he still finds love. His relationship with Nasha shows the indications of his life instinct, sexual practice and affection. He expresses his gratitude through his monologue in the movie.



Figure 1 Mickey17 Monologue of Nasha

His desire to live is also seen in his actions towards Mickey18. After Mickey17 was considered dead, Mickey18 was then printed. When Mickey17 survived his fall and went to his room, he found Mickey18 already on his bed. Their fight about who should die—since there should be only one Mickey, and if they were found out, both of them would be eliminated—didn't last long. He pitched an idea so both of them can still live, and that is to take turns on their appearance in their jobs and meal time. His critical thinking bought them time to figure out what to do with their incident. Again, through their now even smaller meal portions and maintaining their appearance in front of others, Mickey17 is proven to have still his life instinct strong.

2. Death Instinct

In my line of work, you spend a lot of time pondering different ways to die—when you're not actually experiencing them, that is. I've never frozen to death before. I've definitely thought about it, though. It's been hard not to since we made landfall on this godforsaken ball of ice. It should be pretty easy, relatively speaking. (Ashton, 2022:8)

Mickey7's casual thoughts about ways of dying due to his job shows a normalization of death and lack of emotional reaction or rejection to it. Mickey7's acceptance of death not as a threat but as an expected and even manageable part of his existence suggests a subconscious pull toward the dissolution of the self, aligning with Freud's idea of the mind striving to return to an inanimate, tension-free state.

The feeding legs are multi-jointed, and they end in nests of tentacles that could almost be fingers, tipped by two-centimeter-long claws. I struggle at first, but they hold my arms splayed and pressed back against the mandibles with a grip like a steel vise. I can kick my feet a little, but I can't reach anything worth kicking. (Ashton, 2022:14)

The quotation above can be categorized as death instinct from the way Mickey7 faces the threat in front of him. His effort to resist feels mechanical and resigned, suggesting a passive submission to the possibility of death. This is supported by his thought in the upcoming sentence, “... *so I hang there, imagining what it's going to feel like being ground up in that churning maw.*” (Ashton, 2022:15). The focus on physical restraint and futility highlights a psychological surrender, a characteristic of the death instinct in the face of overwhelming force. Another example of death instinct is shown in Mickey, “Yeah,” I say. “I know. You'd never leave your best friend to die, Berto. I mean, you might leave one iteration of a colony asset to die. What's the harm in that? If a friend was in trouble, though? You'd definitely be all over it.” (Ashton, 2022:68). Mickey7's sarcastic remarks towards Berto mocks the idea that friendship still matters in a world where people are treated as disposable, especially him who works as an expendable. His sentence shows bitterness and resignation, suggesting that Mickey Barnes may already believe he's been written off, that his life isn't valued, and that death is acceptable, even expected, in his role.

On the other hand, it is Mickey18 in “Mickey17” that strongly exhibits the description of the death instinct according to Freud's theory. Freud (2003) stated that behind the death instincts are threatening, damaging, and antagonistic attitudes. His apathetic nature while talking to Mickey17 is shown in expressing his needs. He has most of the memories Mickey17 has, but lacks his personality. Thus, he knows what he is, and he thinks that he has the right to exist more than Mickey17. He also rationalises that Mickey17 is to blame for his carelessness, which got them in their current situation.



Figure 2 Mickey18 confronts Mickey17

His behaviour doesn't stop there. After Mickey 17 and 18 make peace with each other, he still actively expresses aggressive behaviour. Not only to Mickey17 but also to the people surrounding them. Although his aggressiveness is to protect himself and Mickey17—since it's impossible to only protect himself and ignore the fact that they will be eliminated on sight if they are found out—he puts them in danger. This self-harming behaviour indicates the death instinct. At the end of the conflict of the narrative, it is finally proven that he didn't have the desire to live, but was simply protecting Mickey's life as a whole. He chose to die so that Mickey17 could live and continue Mickey's life. It is by his own will to sacrifice himself, thus demonstrating the death instincts by Freud.

CONCLUSION

The results show that the movie “Mickey17” has some noticeable changes while still following the majority of the plot in the novel. Therefore, Mickey17 is categorized as an intermediate adaptation. Additionally, as analyzed using Freud's life and death instincts, the movie adaptation transforms the psychological depth of the characters. In the novel, both Mickey7 and Mickey8 primarily represent the life instinct as both of them cooperate to survive and avoid elimination. In contrast, the film introduces a stronger duality: Mickey17 embodies the life drive with emotional bonds and self-preservation, while Mickey18 increasingly reflects the death drive through aggression and hostility.

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