# Having Bad Social Life Conditions in Mickey's Thanatophobia in *Mickey 17* Film (2025)

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**Abstract**

This study examines how bad social life conditions contribute to the development of thanatophobia in the main character, Mickey Barnes, in Bong Joon Ho's film *Mickey 17* (2025). Thanatophobia refers to the fear of death and the anxiety related to mortality. Using a qualitative descriptive method and applying Ernest Becker's theory of death anxiety, this research analyzes selected dialogues, scenes, and character interactions that reflect social degradation, economic instability, dehumanization, and authoritarian control. The findings reveal that Mickey's poor social environment marked by economic desperation, manipulation, violence, disposability, and loss of autonomy intensifies his awareness of mortality and reinforces his existential anxiety. The study concludes that Mickey's fear of death does not emerge merely from repeated physical deaths, but from the social system that treats him as replaceable and strips him of human dignity.

**Keywords:** Bad Social Life Conditions, Death Anxiety, Dehumanization, Mickey 17, Thanatophobia

## INTRODUCTION

Thanatophobia refers to the persistent fear of death and the anxiety associated with mortality. In psychology, thanatophobia is not merely the fear of physical death, but also fear of non-existence, loss of identity, and the uncertainty of what happens after life ends. The awareness of death often triggers psychological distress, especially when individuals live under unstable social conditions. According to Becker (1973), human beings develop psychological defense mechanisms to manage their fear of death, often through symbolic systems, authority figures, or social structures that provide meaning and security.

In contemporary society, social life conditions such as economic instability, violence, dehumanization, and authoritarian control can intensify death anxiety. Individuals who experience poverty, social rejection, and lack of autonomy are more vulnerable to existential fear. Poor social environments may increase one's awareness of mortality, especially when survival becomes uncertain. Therefore, thanatophobia is not only a psychological condition but also socially constructed through one's lived experiences.

Bong Joon Ho's film *Mickey 17* (2025) presents the story of Mickey Barnes, an "Expendable" worker who is repeatedly killed and reprinted for dangerous missions. Although technology allows Mickey to return to life after death, the film paradoxically reveals deeper existential anxiety. Mickey lives in a system that treats him as replaceable and less valuable than material objects. His decision to join the expedition is driven by economic desperation, manipulation, and fear of violent consequences on Earth. Throughout the film, Mickey's bad social life conditions including financial crisis, dehumanization, exploitation, and authoritarian control contribute significantly to his thanatophobia.

This paper aims to analyze how bad social life conditions shape Mickey's fear of death in *Mickey 17*. By applying Ernest Becker's theory of death anxiety, this study explores how social degradation and loss of human dignity intensify existential fear within a technologically advanced yet morally corrupted environment.

## METHOD

This paper is examined through a qualitative exploratory method that investigates certain ideas. The purpose of designing qualitative exploratory investigations is to identify aspects of qualitative research that describe occurrences rather than explain them. The connection between *Mickey 17* and thanatophobia theory is described using both online and offline sources. Secondary sources, both online and offline, are drawn from books and journals to comprehend the topic. Carefully watching the film and gathering sources, comparing with related issues, quoting from dialogues, and recording references are all part of the data analysis process. After being observed, each scene is taken apart into its component parts. The narratives and settings of the film are principally involved to indicate the significant condition of bad social life in Bong Joon Ho's *Mickey 17*.

# RESULT AND DISCUSSION

## Having Bad Social Life Conditions in Bong Joon Ho's *Mickey 17*

*Mickey 17*, which directed by Bong Joon Ho, tells the story of an expendable worker named Mickey Barnes who repeatedly dies and is reprinted for dangerous missions. Throughout the entire film, Mickey's life is shown under extremely poor social conditions. He experiences economic instability, violence, dehumanization, and authoritarian control. These conditions gradually contribute to the development of his thanatophobia. Although he can be physically revived after death, Mickey continues to experience psychological fear and anxiety (Syaif et al., 2024). He is treated as a replaceable object rather than a human being with dignity. The system around him ignores his emotions and personal identity in order to maintain efficiency and survival. The quotation provides the following evidence of Mickey's bad social life conditions and their influence on his fear of death:

**Data 1**
*MICKEY: You shouldn't have to take the risk, huh?*
(00:03:03,290 - 00:03:04,931)

In this scene, Timo chooses to take the flamethrower instead of saving Mickey because it cannot be reproduced like Mickey's body. This shows that material objects are valued more than human life. The situation reflects the degradation of social and moral values in the colony (Ho, 2025).

**Data 2**
*MICKEY: Well, because I had a friend who told me that one day macarons would sell better than burgers. And because I trusted this shitty friend and I got an enormous loan from a wonderful gentleman to open a macaron store.*
(00:09:07,340 - 00:10:26,290)

In this scene, Mickey explains why he decided to join the program and leave Earth. He trusted his friend Timo and took an enormous loan from a mafia to open a macaron shop, which later failed. This shows that Mickey's life is shaped by manipulation and poor social relationships that lead him into financial destruction (Ho, 2025).

**Data 3**
INDEBTED GUY: I hear it loud and clear. I'm late. I'm late. The money is late.
It's coming.
(00:10:23,210 - 00:10:26,290)

In this scene, the indebted guy begs the mafia after failing to pay his loan. Mickey and Timo witness him being tortured and killed by Darius Blank. This shows the brutal consequences of debt and becomes the main reason Mickey leaves Earth (Ho, 2025).

**Data 4**
*MICKEY: I guess everybody's got money problems.*
(00:11:37,820 - 00:11:39,380)

Mickey's statement suggests that financial struggle is common among those who join the expedition. He assumes that everyone is running from economic crisis just like him. This shows that the program is filled with desperate individuals rather than stable people. The normalization of extreme risk reflects how death becomes less frightening compared to financial destruction (Ho, 2025).

**Data 5**
*MICKEY: The whole room was full of people eating this crappy food.*
(00:18:45,520 - 00:18:48,500)

The cafeteria scene illustrates the poor social atmosphere inside the spaceship. The colonists eat low-quality food in silence without meaningful interaction. Instead of building social connection, they focus only on survival. This reflects emotional isolation and collective dissatisfaction within the colony (Ho, 2025).

**Data 6**
*MICKEY: Until Kenneth Marshall and his wife, Ilfa, walk in. And a whole bunch of people just started going nuts.*
(00:18:52,960 - 00:19:02,460)

When Marshall enters, the silent cafeteria suddenly turns into loud cheering. The colonists instantly shift from miserable silence to exaggerated admiration. This shows how authority becomes a symbolic source of hope in a stressful environment. Their reaction reflects blind obedience shaped by fear and dependency (Ho, 2025).

**Data 7**
*YLFA: The point is, Kenneth is talking to the committee about banning all sexual activity on the ship.*
(00:21:12,291 - 00:21:17,450)

The announcement about banning sexual activity demonstrates extreme authoritarian control. Even the most personal human behavior is regulated for efficiency. This illustrates how survival logic overrides autonomy and emotional needs, showing a decline in social and psychological well-being (Ho, 2025).

**Data 8**

*MICKEY:  was super busy every day taking care of Nasha. She's an all-in-one elite agent. And it's not easy supporting someone who's a soldier, a police officer, and a firefighter.*
(00:23:27,170 - 00:23:39,950)

In this scene, Mickey describes his relationship with Nasha, an elite agent in the colony. Although their relationship appears supportive, it still exists within a militarized and high-pressure environment. Nasha's multiple roles reflect the colony's unstable and dangerous condition. Even personal relationships are shaped by survival duties rather than emotional comfort. This indicates that Mickey's social life is built within a stressful and controlled system (Ho, 2025).

**Data 9**

*MICKEY: Imagine spending years elbow to elbow with these bozos. It was enough to push anyone over the edge. Sometimes even if Nasha, who is a model citizen, would have to step in and remind us that we were all one big happy family. There to help one another.*
(00:24:09,715 - 00:24:26,990)

Mickey expresses frustration about living closely with unstable and immature colonists. The tension in the cafeteria eventually leads to conflict and chaos. This scene reflects poor social harmony and emotional instability among the crew. Instead of forming healthy relationships, the environment encourages aggression and irritation (Ho, 2025).

**Data 10**

*TIMO'S BUYER: This is the pure stuff, right? Undiluted?*
*TIMO: Who do you think you're talking to? This is pure uncut oxy. It's fucking rare. You only get two oxysulfide capsules and one flamethrower, man.*
(00:46:49,500 - 00:47:06,050)

This scene reveals illegal substance trading within the colony. Timo's involvement in black-market activities reflects high stress and moral instability among the crew. The existence of illegal coping mechanisms indicates that the social environment is unhealthy and emotionally pressured (Ho, 2025).

**Data 11**

*MICKEY 18: Let's kill him.*
*MICKEY 17: Are you crazy? He's like my only friend.*
(00:47:41,570 - 00:47:46,850)

This scene occurs in the recycler chamber. Mickey 18 suggests killing Timo, but Mickey 17 refuses and defends him as his only friend. This line highlights Mickey's limited social circle and emotional dependence. Despite Timo's manipulation in the past, Mickey still sees him as his only connection. This reflects social isolation and lack of healthy support systems (Ho, 2025).

**Data 12**

*CAPTAIN: You heard the rumor?*
*TIMO: Huh?*
*CAPTAIN: Some guy out there is dealing undiluted oxytocin.*
*TIMO: What? That's crazy. That's pretty messed up.*
*CAPTAIN: Between us, Timo? A drop here and there before bed to take the edge off? I get it. But the pure uncut stuff is crossing the line.*
*TIMO: Oh, yeah, absolutely. That's... bad.*
(00:50:06,560 - 00:50:25,360)

The captain questions Timo about illegal oxy distribution. Although the captain criticizes the pure substance, he indirectly admits using diluted oxy himself. This scene exposes hypocrisy within leadership and normalization of moral compromise. It reflects corruption and unstable ethical standards in the colony (Ho, 2025).

**Data 13**

*K.M. ADVISOR: Hey, brother. I was just headed to your room to catch you, but here you are. Looking good, Mickey.*
*MICKEY 17: Yes, sir.*
*K.M. ADVISOR: Stand there. Arm around, please. Great. Big smile, Mickey. Sorry. Could you just stand there? Great. Thank you. And action.*
*PIGEON GUY: Congratulations. This month's lucky winner, the fortunate soul who will have the privilege of a private dinner at the camera, will have a private dinner with the one and only Kenneth Marshall Is that the barrel? It's Mickey.*
(00:51:19,470 - 00:51:52,500)

Mickey is used as a propaganda symbol in a video promoting Marshall's leadership. He is portrayed as a "lucky winner" to maintain morale among the colonists. This shows how the administration manipulates Mickey's identity for political purposes, reducing him to a tool of public image (Ho, 2025).

**Data 14**

*K.M. ADVISOR: Now, Marshall wants you to come ASAP, okay? He's got a whole feast prepared just for you. The Lord is truly blessing you today, Mickey.*
*MICKEY 17: I need to go back to my room.*
*PIGEON GUY: You get to stuff your fucking face, Mickey.*
(00:51:58,050 - 00:52:09,311)

The advisor frames Mickey's invitation to Marshall's dinner as a divine blessing. However, Mickey appears uneasy and hesitant. This moment suggests manipulation disguised as honor. Authority uses religious language to maintain control and obedience within the colony (Ho, 2025).

**Data 15**
*MARSHALL: But we didn't invite you here simply to comfort you. We've had our eyes on you, Cass.*
*KAI: Me, sir? May I ask why?*
*MARSHALL: You're one of us. With your impeccable genetics, you are the perfect specimen for the colony I envision.*
*KAI: Thank you, sir.*
*MARSHALL: That's why the church, I mean, um, company, has chosen me to lead this expedition. The Earth's beyond saving with all its muddied people. But you, you're something special, and I'm creating a world on a pure white planet full of superior people like you and us.*
(00:53:56,475 - 00:54:41,860)

Marshall expresses his ideology of genetic superiority and a "pure" colony. This reflects extremist and hierarchical social values. The colony is not built on equality, but on classification and exclusion. Such ideology reinforces division and moral degradation (Ho, 2025).

**Data 16**
*YLFA: Oh, sauce is the true litmus test of civilization. People who devour burnt meat are barbarians.*
(00:55:36,260 - 00:55:42,360)

Ylfa equates food preference with civilization and superiority. This line shows elitism and class-based judgment. It highlights how social value in the colony is based on status and taste rather than humanity (Ho, 2025).

**Data 17**
*MARSHALL & YLFA: Dear Lord, Jennifer Chilton's one and only soul was taken from her wonderful friend, Kai. Dear Lord, Jennifer Chilton... Rejoice in the Lord our one and only Almighty Let us sing for our father's grace*
(00:56:16,140 - 00:56:44,220)

The prayer ritual for the deceased elite agent appears solemn but functions to justify death as divine will. Religion is used to normalize sacrifice and maintain authority. This reflects ideological control within the colony (Ho, 2025).

**Data 18**
*YLFA: You can't tear a hole in my fucking carpet!*
*MARSHALL; Well, we'll just shoot him from the side.*
*YLFA: But what about the blood? This is a Persian tavern!*
*MARSHALL: Honey, calm down.*
*YLFA: Shoot him now.*
*KAI: What the hell is going on? This was supposed to be a fucking dinner!*
(00:59:56,480 - 01:00:12,220)

In this scene, Ylfa worries more about her carpet than the act of killing someone. Her concern about material damage instead of human life highlights moral decay within the leadership. This reflects a social condition where material value is prioritized over humanity (Ho, 2025).

**Data 19**
*KAI: I drink this whenever I have a stomachache. It's from Earth. It's precious. So, I've been saving it. But I made some for you.*
(01:01:36,280 - 01:01:50,610)

Kai offers Mickey a special drink from Earth as an act of kindness. This rare empathy contrasts with the harsh social environment. It shows that compassion still exists, but only in small and personal moments (Ho, 2025).

**Data 20**
*KAI: Are you and Nasha open?*
*MICKEY 17: I have to go. Nasha. Please forgive me. The guy that you're having sex with. That's not me. That's not me. You motherfucker. How dare you touch her.*
*NASHA: Seventeen. I knew this would happen at some point. Wait, wait, wait, wait. Stand, stand. Stand next to each other. Wait, take this off.*
*MICKEY 17: What?*
*NASHA: Yeah, I want you to look the same. Oh, my God.*
*MICKEY 17: Nasha, how can you laugh right now? This is a multiples violation. I'm as good as dead.*
*NASHA: Oh, come on. When else am I going to get these shots?*

(01:04:59,930 - 01:06:32,280)

Mickey expresses fear after realizing that having duplicates is punishable by death. His anxiety reveals that despite being repeatedly reprinted; death remains a real threat under the colony's law. This scene directly connects social regulation with existential fear (Ho, 2025).

## The Significance Idea Behind Having Bad Social Life Conditions

Individuals who live in unstable social environments are more vulnerable to psychological distress, especially anxiety related to survival and mortality (Wijaya et al., 2025). Social life conditions include economic stability, interpersonal relationships, moral values, and institutional structures that support individual well-being. A healthy social environment provides emotional security, mutual support, and a sense of belonging, which are essential for psychological stability (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Pearlin et al., 1981). When individuals feel valued and supported within their social system, stress can be buffered, reducing vulnerability to anxiety and existential fear.

However, individuals who experience poor social conditions—such as financial crisis, violence, dehumanization, and authoritarian control—are more likely to develop existential anxiety. According to Becker (1973), awareness of death becomes more intense when individuals lack symbolic systems that provide meaning and security. Similarly, research in Terror Management Theory suggests that when social stability is threatened, mortality salience increases defensive and anxiety-driven responses (Greenberg et al., 1986). In unstable environments, survival becomes uncertain, and fear of death becomes more concrete rather than abstract. Social degradation can therefore function as a trigger for thanatophobia, especially when human dignity is repeatedly threatened.

Moreover, dehumanization plays a significant role in shaping death anxiety. When individuals are treated as replaceable objects rather than human beings, their sense of identity and moral worth weakens (Haslam, 2006). Dehumanization reduces empathy and facilitates moral disengagement, allowing harmful systems to persist without resistance (Bandura, 1999). Living in a system that prioritizes efficiency over humanity suppresses emotional connection and normalizes inequality. In addition, individuals under existential threat are more likely to support rigid and authoritarian systems as a way to regain psychological certainty (Jost et al., 2003). Such conditions reinforce obedience and reduce critical agency, which further intensifies feelings of insignificance and mortality awareness.

Furthermore, social environments characterized by economic desperation and chronic stress often lack constructive coping resources. Continuous exposure to uncontrollable hardship may produce helplessness and psychological withdrawal (Seligman, 1972). Chronic stress processes also erode personal resources and increase vulnerability to anxiety (Pearlin et al., 1981). Without meaningful social support or adaptive coping strategies, individuals may internalize pessimism and existential insecurity (Carver et al., 1989). Therefore, bad social life conditions are not merely passive background settings, but active contributors to psychological distress and heightened fear of death, particularly thanatophobia.

## Having Bad Social Life Conditions in Bong Joon Ho's *Mickey 17*

This section discusses having bad social life conditions in *Mickey 17* reflect the development of thanatophobia in the main character. These conditions are further examined in the data analysis above.

**In Data 1**, Mickey's position as an expendable clearly reflects dehumanization. He is treated as replaceable and less valuable than others, shown when Timo prioritizes a flamethrower over helping him. This aligns with Becker's statement that societies create cultural systems to protect individuals from "the terror of death" (Becker, 1973). By labeling Mickey as expendable, the system reduces others' anxiety by projecting vulnerability onto him. He becomes a symbolic sacrifice within a structure designed to manage collective fear.

**In Data 2**, Mickey's financial failure and blind trust in Timo show dysfunctional social relationships. Cohen and Wills (1985) explain that weak social support increases vulnerability to stress and poor decision-making. Mickey's desperate decision to join the expendable program reflects Becker's idea that individuals cling to symbolic solutions when facing existential threat (Becker, 1973). His escape is not only economic but psychological—an attempt to regain meaning under pressure.

**In Data 3**, the indebted man's fearful response to Darius Blank illustrates learned helplessness and submission under threat. Seligman (1972) argues that repeated exposure to uncontrollable punishment erodes agency. This situation mirrors Becker's view that oppressive systems maintain power by manipulating death anxiety (Becker, 1973). The fear of violent consequences forces obedience, demonstrating how mortality terror sustains authority.

**In Data 4**, Mickey's statement that "everybody's got money problems" normalizes financial suffering. Pearlin et al. (1981) note that chronic stress reduces sensitivity to danger, making risky decisions seem necessary. Becker (1973) emphasizes that individuals often accept harmful conditions when existential pressures feel unavoidable. Mickey reframes the expedition as practical survival, which functions as a defense mechanism to suppress anxiety about death.

**In Data 5**, the cafeteria scene reflects emotional loneliness despite physical proximity. Wolters et al. (2023) describe loneliness as psychological distress caused by the absence of meaningful connection. Becker (1973) argues that people often conform to numbing systems to avoid confronting mortality. The cafeteria becomes a symbolic space where resignation replaces authentic community.

**In Data 6**, the crew's exaggerated admiration for Marshall shows dependence on authority. Fritsche et al. (2013) state that under threat, individuals increase support for powerful groups to restore control. Becker (1973) calls this a "hero-system," where symbolic leaders absorb collective anxiety. Marshall becomes a figure through whom the crew seeks psychological stability.

**In Data 7**, the ban on sexual activity demonstrates authoritarian control over autonomy. Jost et al. (2003) explain that existential uncertainty increases acceptance of rigid authority. Becker (1973) similarly argues that individuals surrender freedom to gain symbolic security. Controlling intimacy becomes a strategy to deny vulnerability and mortality.

**In Data 8**, Mickey's relationship with Nasha functions as emotional protection. Becker (1973) explains that people attach to "heroic" figures to mask their fear of death. Nasha's elite status symbolizes strength, giving Mickey a sense of security within an unstable environment.

**In Data 9**, normalized aggression among the crew reflects existential distress. Van Tilburg and Igou (2019) associate meaninglessness with increased aggression. Becker (1973) suggests that violence can serve as a mechanism to suppress helplessness and mortality fear. Social domination becomes a substitute for genuine connection.

**In Data 10**, Timo's drug dealing shows maladaptive coping. Carver et al. (1989) describe how individuals under stress may resort to risky behaviors to regain control. Becker (1973) explains that such behaviors function as symbolic attempts to overcome fragility. Selling oxy becomes a distorted form of power.

**In Data 11**, Mickey 18's violent impulse reflects existential nihilism. When meaning collapses, aggression can emerge as a defense. Becker (1973) argues that individuals react strongly when their symbolic security is threatened. Mickey 17's attachment to friendship contrasts this, showing an attempt to preserve meaning.

**In Data 12**, even authority figures misuse substances, reflecting systemic moral decay. Becker (1973) states that cultural systems often conceal anxiety rather than resolve it. Drug use becomes a collective escape from mortality awareness.

**In Data 13**, Mickey is manipulated as propaganda. Becker (1973) explains that societies elevate symbols and individuals to maintain belief systems that deny death. Mickey's image serves to reassure others, though his humanity is ignored.

**In Data 14**, the forced dinner framed as a "blessing" reveals ideological manipulation. Becker (1973) describes religion as an "immortality project" that gives symbolic meaning to suffering. Religious language disguises exploitation and control.

**In Data 15**, Marshall's obsession with genetic purity reflects the desire for symbolic immortality. Becker (1973) argues that people seek transcendence through legacy or superiority. Creating a "pure colony" becomes Marshall's attempt to overcome mortality symbolically.

**In Data 16**, Ylfa's labeling of others as "barbarians" reflects dehumanization. Becker (1973) explains that degrading others strengthens group identity and suppresses insecurity. Social inequality becomes psychologically functional.

**In Data 17**, Marshall's prayer transforms death into propaganda. Becker (1973) emphasizes that religion can be used to transform mortality into heroic narrative. Jennifer's death is ritualized to legitimize power.

**In Data 18**, prioritizing material objects over life shows moral collapse. Becker (1973) suggests that individuals create illusions of control through dominance and violence. The carpet becomes more symbolically valuable than human existence.

**In Data 19**, Kai's small act of kindness represents resistance to existential anxiety. Becker (1973) notes that meaningful relationships can buffer death awareness. Her gesture restores humanity within a dehumanized system.

**In Data 20**, Mickey's identity crisis illustrates existential destabilization. Becker (1973) argues that threats to identity intensify mortality anxiety. Mickey's anger and jealousy are defensive reactions when his symbolic self is endangered.

## CONLUSION

In conclusion, the analysis reveals that Mickey's thanatophobia in *Mickey 17* is not merely the result of repeated physical death, but is deeply rooted in the bad social life conditions that surround him. Economic desperation, manipulation, dehumanization, authoritarian control, propaganda, moral degradation, and identity instability collectively intensify his awareness of mortality. Through Ernest Becker's theory of death anxiety (Becker, 1973), it becomes clear that the colony functions as a symbolic system designed to suppress collective fear of death by sacrificing individuality and human dignity. Mickey, as an expendable, becomes the embodiment of this system's denial mechanism—treated as replaceable in order to maintain social stability. However, instead of eliminating fear, such conditions amplify existential anxiety, as seen in Mickey's emotional instability, anger, and identity crisis. Therefore, this study concludes that bad social life conditions play a significant role in shaping Mickey's thanatophobia, proving that fear of death is socially constructed and psychologically intensified within oppressive environments.

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