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INTERVIEW

John Carpenter

On the Tools of His Trade

To call [John Carpenter](#) a powerhouse of a director would be an understatement. Since his early days with *Dark Star* (1974) and *Assault on Precinct 13* (1976), the multitasking craftsman has proven himself a stalwart cult figure, having written, directed, scored, and even acted in over 20 films. His crowning achievement may be formulating the slasher movie with *Halloween* (1978), but Carpenter continues to this day to make a wide variety of cult fiction in the low-budget tradition of B-movies. A sampling of his numerous guilty-pleasure classics also includes *They Live* (1988), *The Fog* (1980), *Big Trouble in Little China* (1986), *The Thing* (1982), and *Escape from New York* (1981), the last three of which star the filmmaker's favorite leading man, Kurt Russell, as a sneering, bad-boy hero. The release of a two-DVD special edition of *Escape from New York* gave Barnes & Noble.com a chance to speak with Carpenter.

Barnes & Noble.com: What is it that makes this Special Edition so special?

John Carpenter: Primarily the fact that it has a brand-new transfer made right from the original negative, which was only found recently after many years. None of the previous video versions were mastered from the original negative, which typically yields the best-looking transfer you can get.

B&N.com: The original negative was lost?

JC: Well, let's say it was "misplaced." While people were searching for various film elements on *Escape*, it turned up somewhere in the Midwest, in an old salt mine that had been converted to a film-storage facility. How it wound up at that particular place, I have no idea. But at last the movie looks really good, the way it ought to look on DVD.

B&N.com: And we owe it all to chance....

JC: Actually, the negative turned up in the search for a ten-minute sequence I had cut from the movie just before it went into release. We've put that on the Special Edition, too.

B&N.com: A ten-minute sequence? What is it?

JC: It was intended to be the beginning of the film. It shows Snake [Plissken, the character played by Kurt Russell] committing a bank robbery and being captured after a wild subway chase. When we had a test screening of the movie, I realized that the story really doesn't get started until Snake arrives in New York. Snake's legendary tough-guy reputation was established in dialogue, and it didn't matter *why* he was sent to New York. So I just lopped off that whole opening to get into the plot quicker.

B&N.com: Have you restored that sequence to the film?

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John Carpenter

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JC: No, you'll see it on the Special Edition as a supplement. I still think the movie plays better without it.

B&N.com: After making your name as a director of horror films, *Escape* came as quite a change of pace. Did you have any idea while you were making the film that it would occupy such an important place in your career?

JC: To be perfectly honest, I never believed that *anything* I did would be important. At the time I just wanted to step away from the horror genre and do something different. It was just another project to me back then. I'm not saying I didn't enjoy it, I just didn't think of it as something as special as it's regarded today.

B&N.com: What inspired you? Were you trying to emulate other films or filmmakers?

JC: I actually wrote *Escape* in the '70s, after I'd seen *Taxi Driver* and *Death Wish*. They portrayed New York as kind of a bad place, a dangerous place, and I figured I could write something which took that idea a step further. Also, I remembered a book written by [science-fiction author] Harry Harrison about the toughest planet in the universe, where somebody sends the toughest man in the universe to get something done. So that's how the character of Snake was designed, as a really tough guy needed to do a really tough job.

B&N.com: Was Kurt Russell your first choice for Snake? He certainly made the role his own, but it was so unlike anything he'd done previously.

JC: Actually, my first choice was Clint Eastwood, but we couldn't afford him. *Escape from New York* wasn't a big-budget movie. The studio wanted Charles Bronson, but after the *Death Wish* films his asking price had gone up dramatically.

I had directed Kurt previously in a TV movie about Elvis that played on ABC. At the time I wasn't aware of that early "clean-cut" stuff he'd done for Disney, and he really impressed me with the way he submerged himself into the character of Elvis. So I felt he could do a good job as Snake, and as soon as the movie got green-lighted I asked for him.

B&N.com: How much, if anything, did Russell bring to the character of Snake Plissken? Was it all laid out in the script, or did he contribute elements of his own?

JC: Practically everything you see in Snake was brought to the table by Kurt. For example, the eye patch was his idea. I think he got that from an old movie called *The Vikings*, which has Kirk Douglas as this incredibly tough Viking warrior with an eye patch. Most of the other stuff -- the way he walked and carried himself, the pitch of his voice and his speech pattern -- most of that came from Kurt. He already had the character down, which was a big help to me when we actually started shooting.

B&N.com: Was it a difficult shoot?

JC: No, it was a pretty smooth shoot, actually. Although I remember it was very hot in St. Louis, where we shot some exteriors. Those days were pretty uncomfortable.

B&N.com: You said *Escape* wasn't a big-budget movie. Did you have studio executives looking over your shoulder every minute?

JC: No, for the most part they left us alone. I had established a track record by then, so there wasn't a lot of interference. I mean, the movie had a big scope, so we had to simplify certain things. We used the same special-effects company that [B-movie filmmaker] Roger Corman had used, so they knew how to get the most out of a low budget. We could easily have spent twice as much money making it, but we were able to get up on the screen most of what I had in mind.

B&N.com: Did you stick closely to the script, or did you improvise on the set?

JC: We stuck pretty close to the script, although I remember there were a few things I changed. For example, in the scene when Snake goes over the wall, I originally had Lee Van Cleef's character kill the character played by Isaac Hayes. But while we were blocking that scene I realized it would be more effective to have Donald Pleasance do it.

There was a little ad-libbing here and there. I have no problems with ad-libs as long as the actor doesn't change the meaning of the speech, as long as what he says doesn't change the narrative in any way.

B&N.com: So you were happy with the completed film?

JC: Oh, yeah, I was excited about it. I mean, we went up against some *big* box-office movies that year, and we did pretty well.




B&N.com: As DVDs go, this has been a pretty good year for you, what with the release of Special Editions of both *Halloween* and *Escape*, as well as *They Live* and lesser known movies like *Prince of Darkness*.



JC: Yeah, I'm really amazed that people keep buying the new "editions" of these movies. I mean, to an extent they're just carbon copies of the original, but people keep buying them. Of course, it makes sense with *Escape* because they'll be getting a better-looking transfer than they've seen on VHS, laserdisc, or the earlier DVD.

B&N.com: Are you a fan of DVD yourself?

JC: Oh, absolutely. I think it's fabulous. I'm a collector myself. You get the best-looking versions of these films, and the extras -- watching the supplements is like going to film school! You can really get an education on making movies from these things. Like on the *Fight Club* DVD, I remember watching all those extras and thinking, Wow, I wish I'd had stuff like this to watch when I was starting out. Getting all the behind-the-scenes information *does* demystify the filmmaking process, but shows like *Entertainment Tonight* and everything on the E! Channel have taken the magic out of moviemaking anyway. So including that kind of material on the DVD is a real asset.

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