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SURVIVAL OF THE STREETS

Snake Plissken, the Cro-Mags, and the Persistence of Megatoilet Nostalgia

BY SAM MCPHEETERS, ILLUSTRATIONS BY CHRISTY KARACAS

NEWSLETTER

DOS & DON'TS



“Its actually awesome that Aunt Ruth kicked me out of the house ‘cause now I get to wear whatever I want, whenever I want.”

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You can tell you've picked the wrong borough to live in when even the homeless can't stop themselves from shitting on it.

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New York City's comeback has been an odd thing to watch from afar. When I moved out of Manhattan in 1990, the city was every inch the pee-smelling woe zone I'd known since childhood. When I returned this spring, I couldn't even find key graffiti on subway windows. Taxi rides are like something from a science-fiction movie now—not because New York cabs have televisions in them, but because these televisions actually work. People still talk to themselves in the streets, only now there's someone on the other line.

And yet the changes aren't nearly as strange as the nostalgia. A lot of people seem to miss the lawless megatilet city of a generation ago. In the 1990s, it was possible to write off this wistfulness as a natural reaction to the excesses of Mayor Giuliani. But as the city has grown cleaner and safer over the past decade, so has the melancholy grown more mawkish and the mawkishness more entrenched. In 2006, the schmaltz surged with the drawn-out funeral(s) of CBGB, a dank dive bar that'd lingered two decades past its expiration date. For \$24.50, you can still visit the club's original awning at the new Rock & Roll Hall of Fame Annex on Mercer Street. If you have any money left over, you can take the "underbelly tour" through the refurbished South Bronx with Guardian Angels founder Curtis Sliwa.

Here's the thing: Outrageous prices and sweeping gentrification are symptoms of the economic booms and collapses of the last 20 years. These problems aren't unique to New York City. The current nostalgia for bad NYC runs deeper than these problems. "There are too many healthy people in New York now," one friend grumbles when I press him on the issue. Most locals I know offer some version of this same beef. The new New York is too soft. Too clean. Too Disney. Not enough dirtbags. Inconvenient for perverts. Inauthentic. No soul.

Writer James Wolcott compressed all these gripes into his article "Splendor in the Grit" in last June's issue of *Vanity Fair*. Of the bad old days, Wolcott writes,

One key difference between the 70s and today is that in the 70s the tourists looked scared. Getting back to the hotel alive was one of the main items on their checklists. Now they beam as if they find everything on display cute and flaunt their bulging shopping bags like hunting trophies... In the 70s there was a much sharper divide between Us... and Everybody Else.

Wolcott seems unmoved by New York's current cleanliness and security (as of 2002, the city is safer than Provo, Utah). Contrasting the city of the 70s with the city of the 00s, his conclusion is stark:

Really, I much prefer rubble.

How bad *were* the old days? A brief recap is in order. During the administrations of mayors John Lindsay, Abe Beame, and Ed Koch—1966 to 1990—the city’s murder rate jumped 340 percent. In the late 60s, sanitation and transit strikes forced New Yorkers to wade through rivers of filth. By the mid-70s, the city was broke, staring down bankruptcy, slashing jobs, crippling its own police department, and leaving infrastructure to rot. A deliberate withdrawal of firefighting service—the “planned shrinkage” of poor zones—obliterated whole neighborhoods. For every shock of Watergate/malaise-era America, New York City matched the emergency and raised the stakes. Where America had an energy crisis, New York had a blackout; where America had pollution, New York had cascading garbage; where America had failure in Vietnam, New York had failure in the Bronx.

An entire generation of New Yorkers grew up with an expectation of violence and apathy. There was the private shame of “mugger money” that citizens carried to placate criminals, and the public pathos of “No Radio” signs in parked cars. For a year following the bicentennial, Son of Sam terrorized the city with killings and unsigned letters explaining, “I love to hunt.” By the 80s, the city was awash in crack and grappling with AIDS, and few public surfaces remained unsploshed by graffiti or bodily fluids.

Add to all this the uniquely New York problem of concentrated mass insanity. After deregulation in the mid-60s and Reaganomics in the early 80s, thousands of insane people scattered across the city, screaming and muttering from doorways and dumpsters. One could plan for crime—crazies struck anywhere. In the mid-90s, *Times* columnist Bob Herbert described the fear “that from out of the chaos some maniac will emerge to... cast you into oblivion.”

It’s a safe bet that New Yorkers of the 1880s didn’t pine for the time of the Draft Riots. New Yorkers of the 1950s probably did not yearn for the “authenticity” of the Great Depression. Even the current Muscovite nostalgia for Soviet days is at least based on lost prestige. When have people of another city so hankered for a time past when “things”—*all things*—were noticeably worse? Why does New York look back?

The answer hides in plain sight. Other failed cities don’t have awesome movies made about them. New York had four: *Death Wish*, *Taxi Driver*, *The Warriors*, and *Escape From New York*. And if oral history has driven folklore throughout the ages, imagine how cinema will shape mythology from here on out. These four films—along with their countless derivatives—helped redefine the Big Apple as the Bad Apple, a label that still holds serious weight even now that the city has gotten its act together.

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hi fructose, on Oct 6, 2009 *wrote*:
jesus... this is a novella. worth it though. great read. i shouldn’t have been surprised.
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You've got to be out of your mind to commit suicide by tiger.

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ALSO BY SAM MCPHEETERS



"DUDE, NO"

By Sam McPheeters



Three of these pictures sprang from the 1970s; *Death Wish* (1974), *Taxi Driver* (1976), and *The Warriors* (1979). In each film, New York is no longer a fully functional city. The police of *Death Wish* can't protect their own citizens. *The Warriors* shows nighttime Manhattan as a playground for rampaging street gangs. *Taxi Driver* crashes urban loneliness into urban violence. And each film had a

profound effect on audiences. *The Warriors* resulted in gang violence in theaters nationwide. *Taxi Driver* inspired a presidential-assassination attempt.

1970s New York seemed doomed. In *Death Wish*, there is the moment when a businessman in the Tucson airport tells Paul Kersey (Charles Bronson), “If you ever get tired of living in that *toilet*, you’re welcome here.” In *Taxi Driver*, Travis Bickle (Robert De Niro) sees the city as something even lower, telling a political candidate, “I think the president should just clean up this whole mess here, should just flush it right down the fuckin’ toilet.”

The world “toilet” appears nowhere in the fourth film, *Escape From New York* (1981). It shows us NYC after it has been flushed.

The baby of the bunch, *Escape From New York* is very much a film of the 1980s, the only one of the four to overlap Reagan’s term. The movie opened three weeks before MTV debuted, and its bold dystopian style—along with that of *Blade Runner* and *The Road Warrior*—greatly influenced music-video and production design for the entire decade. Directed by horror wiz John Carpenter, *EFNY* was written during Watergate but not taken seriously by any studio until he was called on to fulfill a contractual obligation to AVCO Embassy Pictures after the success of 1980’s *The Fog*.

By 1981, New York’s decline was old news. Most of the NYC dramas released this year—*Nighthawks*; *Fort Apache, the Bronx*; *Ms. 45*; *Prince of the City*—took this decay as their starting point. Corruption and crime were backdrops, not novelties (to be fair, 1981 NYC also gave us *Arthur* and *Eyewitness*, a curious crime thriller with picnicking and horseback riding in Central Park). In *Downtown 81*—a time capsule of 1981 New York rediscovered and released in 2000—Jean-Michel Basquiat saunters through a Lower East Side that resembles Berlin in 1945. It looks, he narrates, “like we’d dropped the bomb on ourselves.”

Escape From New York gathers every complaint against Lindsay-Beame-Koch New York and extrapolates the whole mess into the future. A narrator takes us to an alternate 1997, nine years after the American crime rate has exploded fourfold and Manhattan has been turned into the country’s only maximum-security prison. The city is walled, its bridges mined, and its perimeter manned by the sleek fascistic foot soldiers of something called the United States Police Force. The prison operates with the simple rule of a roach motel (or North Korea’s Total-Control Zones): Criminals check in, but they don’t check out. Exile to New York can be read as a life sentence or a death sentence. Either way, the verdict is final.

The prison is run by police commissioner Bob Hauk, played wonderfully by aging western star Lee Van Cleef. Although Hauk sports a single gold hoop-earring and the same studded leather wristband Pacino wore in *Cruising*, he carries himself with the manly grace of yesteryear’s Hollywood. Van Cleef spent the shoot in constant pain from a previous injury, but you’d never know it from his performance. In every scene, he towers over Carpenter regulars Tom Atkins, Charles Cyphers, and John Strobel.

Hauk’s squinty resolve stands in sharp contrast to the simpering mollicoddle of an American president, played with great understated relish by Donald Pleasence. En route to a Connecticut peace summit (WWIII rages but has not yet gone nuclear), Air Force One is hijacked by a left-wing revolutionary and crashed in Manhattan. A padded presidential escape pod survives the impact and drops to the prison floor. With time running out, Hauk needs to decide between a rescue mission and a military invasion.

Fortunately, the warden has been blessed with a coincidence of cosmic proportions. Snake Plissken has been captured this very night! Snake is an eye-patched renegade, a war hero gone bad. Given an offer he can’t refuse, Snake pilots a glider over New York Harbor, lands on one of the Twin Towers, and descends into the prison to rescue the leader of the free world.

Plissken is played by Kurt Russell as a loose impression of Clint Eastwood in Sergio Leone’s “Man With No Name” trilogy. Russell matches Leone veteran Van Cleef squint for squint—with lesser actors, these scenes would read as hammy and self-referential. But where Eastwood had supernatural shooting abilities, Snake has only his wits and his excellent physique. It’s one of many delightful performances in *EFNY*, and one that instantly transformed Russell’s career. By ’81, the 30-year-old actor already had more than two decades of family films behind him. His transformation here was a shock to contemporary audiences. It would be as if Zac Efron blossomed into a credible badass overnight.

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SURVIVAL OF THE STREETS

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The nod to the western was in keeping with John Carpenter's gushing love for the films of Howard Hawks, and critics have sometimes viewed *Escape From New York* as a western dressed up as science fiction. The late 1970s/early 1980s was a time of bleep-bloop *Star Wars* knockoffs, so the comparison is probably kind (certainly the disastrous, unreleased first reel of *EFNY* would have confused the issue greatly, as it actually hands the first line to a bleeping droid—a talking Roomba—and then compounds this error by following Snake's getaway on a high-speed commuter train).

It's a hard film to peg. In one scene, Snake takes refuge in an abandoned diner only to run into a character played by Kurt Russell's real-life wife, the actress Season Hubley. The conversation threatens

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So many people have jumped on the Sarah Silverman bandwagon recently it's nice to run into an OG fan still keeping the flame.

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Few women will admit how primally attracted they are to Bluto (either one) because a) it's weird, and b) doing so would open the floodgates on a slob revival that would threaten the very basis of the sex-for-basic-decency exchange.

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to grow flirtatious when Hubley is abruptly sucked down through the rotten linoleum and the whole thing transforms into a horror film. At other moments—a skyward glance, a mention of secret plans—the film stands solidly alongside *Escape From Alcatraz*, *Papillon*, and *The Prisoner of Shark Island* as a grand island-prison-break caper.

But far more than a genre movie, *EFNY* is one of the great New York movies, able to hold its own against any Scorsese-Woody-Spike Lee love letter. Inside the prison, Snake encounters a broad range of Big Apple stereotypes: the New Yawk Native (Ernest Borgnine as the 1960s taxi driver who stayed on), the Kvetchy Intellectual (Harry Dean Stanton), the Streetwise Bombshell (Adrienne Barbeau, unruffled in a city of rapists), the Hostile Weirdo (Frank Doubleday, in the single most underrated performance of American cinema).

Then there's the Ultimate Pimp: R&B singer Isaac Hayes as the Duke of New York. As an actor, Hayes had more presence than emotional range (one of his only previous roles had been on an episode of *The Rockford Files*), which is pretty much what the role demands. But it demands even more style, and on that front the Duke is a little light. After arriving in a marvelously tricked-out 1977 Cadillac Fleetwood with tinkling chandelier hood ornaments, Hayes steps onto the street in comparatively humble attire. With his meager rings, chains, and gold epaulettes, he looks like a poor man's Afrika Bambaataa meets a poor man's Cap'n Crunch.

John Carpenter had to accept a lot of poor man's choices—costumes, sets, effects, backgrounds—and somehow make his thrift look expensive. Accounts vary of the film's budget, but none go higher than \$7 million. (For some perspective, that's only \$16.5 million in 2009 dollars, or less than the cost of this year's forgettable low-budget comedy *Away We Go*.) For this paltry sum, Carpenter created an entire ruined metropolis out of garbage, mattes, miniatures, and a shrewd use of affordable interiors. Most impressively, he rigged an existing miniature skyline with reflective tape, then shot this huge diorama under black light to simulate 3-D wire-frame animation. It's CGI before CGI existed—a stunning effect, and one smartly used for a grand total of 60 seconds (another 1981 sci-fi film, *Looker*, used similar sleight of hand to imagine more ambitious CGI than existed then—or now, for that matter—but the trick was overused and gaudy).

Designing a credible fascist future state is probably an easy thing to overdo. After one quick glance at Lady Liberty (one of only two NYC shots in the film) we are taken to Liberty Island Security Control, filmed in the concrete basin of the Sepulveda Dam, north of Los Angeles. Flourishes of overt sci-fi design are used sparingly. From the police armory, Snake is issued a MAC-10 with an oversize suppressor and rifle scope. The silencer doesn't work—it's one of the loudest guns in the film—but the overall effect is futuristic without being *too* futuristic. Hauk's office, meanwhile, harks back to New York's past, with the old-timey style of Tammany Hall. (Some art design fails—the blinking Lite-Brite computers in the main compound are less sophisticated than those in Carpenter's ultra-econo 1974 debut, *Dark Star*.)

The cold efficiency of prison headquarters contrasts sharply with the prison itself. When police helicopters swoop down into the ruined city, we're shown the failed state of a zombie movie. The streets are terrifying trashscapes strewn with a lifetime of furniture, appliances, and auto wreckage (all of which had to be bulldozed aside every morning, when shooting wrapped). Producer Debra Hill intended the chugging junkers of the inmates to suggest the scarcity of post-embargo Havana. New York Maximum Security Prison is revealed to us as the ultimate squat, permanent Katrina, benign neglect taken to its logical extreme. The difference between the blinking machines of Liberty Island and the torch-lit world inside the prison is the difference between Tel Aviv and Gaza.

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Many of the prison exteriors were shot in sections of East St. Louis that had been left uninhabitable after a devastating series of fires in October 1976. In an eerie echo of NY's planned neglect of the Bronx, overworked Illinois firefighters had staged a massive "blue flu" sickout and let large sections of the city burn to the ground. It was one of the few examples of urban blight that could match New York.

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DOS & DON'TS



See? You turn around and there's another one, distracting us with more stupid, gay skulls. What are they supposed to be? Scary?

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The only thing wrong here is the chest tattoo, but even it ties into the overall Frida-Kahlo-Miranda-goes-to-Monaco package, so we're going to resume making our plans to dump all our current friends and find a place that sells spats and nosegays.

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It also cost a fraction of a New York shoot. East St. Louis allowed Carpenter to shut off electricity for entire blocks, and the abandoned bridge used in the film's chase finale was purchased from (and then resold to) the Army Corps of Engineers for one dollar. The film's beauty seems born of frugal necessity. When Carpenter and Russell reteamed five years later for *Big Trouble in Little China*, they had three times *EFNY*'s budget. But the special effects on that film rivaled, in sheer loopy cheapness, any mid-80s live-action kids TV show.

It is almost possible to chart New York's decline, at least in popular opinion, by the graffiti in its films. In 1985's *Desperately Seeking Susan*, the city is covered in what looks like centuries of tags and vandalism, and the scene where Will Patton stalks Rosanna Arquette could have been shot on Carpenter's set in East St. Louis. Five years earlier, *Cruising* only shows graffiti in Central Park, perhaps to underscore the lawlessness.

The 70s offered a brief time span when directors could still be selective about graffiti. At the end of the decade, the Warriors "bomb" tombstones in a Bronx graveyard, then board subway cars layered in swoops and squiggles of spray paint. A half decade earlier, in *The Taking of Pelham One Two Three* (1974), the city is foulmouthed and recognizably modern, and it looks nude without its graffiti. But when Charles Bronson hunts in the Central Park of *Death Wish* that same year, we see lots of the stuff on stone walls and sweeping staircases. A year earlier, the writing is back on the streets in *Serpico* (1973). Perhaps, again, it's there to emphasize lawlessness and corruption. Or perhaps the director just happened to be shooting in the right neighborhoods.

Oddly, the most brutal of all Bad Apple films contains almost no graffiti. Jules Feiffer's *Little Murders* (1971)—an unrelenting psychotic nightmare disguised as satire—came out a decade before *EFNY* and easily surpasses the worst horrors Carpenter could think up. Elliott Gould plays an "apathist," a shell-shocked schlub who meekly submits to street beatings and engages the city like a robot. After a sniper kills his new bride—the plucky, Liza Minnelli-ish Marcia Rodd—he slowly embraces violence. This New York is a sordid orgy of rampaging youth, uncaring bystanders, perverts, mashers, rioters, robbers, and vigilantes, but the only spray painting is done to apartment walls, by home invaders, *Death Wish*-style (both movies also share the portly powerhouse Vincent Gardenia). By the end, Manhattan looks a lot like mid-90s Sarajevo, and Gould and his adopted family are living in a steel-shuttered apartment. It's rough.

It is strange that gentrification, not crime, is the meat of 1983's *Escape From the Bronx*, one of four early-80s Italian *EFNY* rip-offs. The film opens in the year 2000, with men in space suits forcing residents out of their homes. The entire borough has been declared uninhabitable, and locals are to be relocated to "solar homes" in New Mexico. Soon our rugged hero, Trash, uncovers the truth: The spacemen are the Disinfestors, the relocation a genocide. A corporation wants to build a suspended future city over the ruins of the Bronx, and the original inhabitants are mere speed bumps to progress.

Trash is played by Mark Gregory, a stunning physical specimen who spent the 80s as Rome's action-film-knockoff champion. He charges around dirty, cheap sets and engages in action sequences set to porno music. In many shots, moving cars are visible in the background—guerrilla filmmaking by default. The gentrification angle is just a strange twist on a familiar vision. If *EFNY* is a complaint against Giuliani Time, *EFTB* is a complaint against Bloomberg Time.

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Escape From the Bronx is actually a sequel to the even seedier 1990: *Bronx Warriors* (1982). Parts of this film were also shot in the borough itself, although that doesn't stop Trash's motorcycle gang from driving down to the Bronx River and emerging between the Brooklyn and Manhattan bridges. Several of

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DOs & DON'Ts



Girls who try to do weird 1940s Lana Turner shit with their hair usually end up looking like the playbill for Murder Mystery Night at the Ft. Lauderdale Dinner Theatre, but letting a wink of it peek out from the top of a motorcycle jacket while everyone else in the city is still a frumpy, sexless Michelin mummy is like combining the first blossoms of Spring with that part in *The Wall* where the flowers fuck.

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I can't say I've had a lot of problems with early-80s LA deathrock girls on the jogging path lately, but still, pays to be cautious.

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the gangs they encounter seem pulled from *The Warriors*, and one—the Iron Men—arrives to tinkly piano jazz; its members wear the tap shoes, canes, and gold bowler hats of extras from *The Wiz*.

Both movies far outshine 1983's *2019: After the Fall of New York*. In this Italian reworking, the fake Snake Plissken, Parsifal, grapples with laser guns, robots, ape men, mutants, spaceships, a *Mad Max* demolition-derby sequence, and two scenes in a Santa's-workshop-style Alaska. The movie opens with a long pan across a grade-school diorama of ruined Manhattan, and the grime and beggary of the entire production is a little stomach-turning. Aside from the American lead, this appears to have been made by people who wouldn't be able to find New York City on a map.

Even in American films, crucial details of New York life slip past non-New York directors. Few films capture the musical tones of the city: the shrill fife note of subway brakes, the chronic percussion of jackhammers near and far, what Laurie Anderson calls "that snare roll that happens when cabs roll over manhole covers." *Taxi Driver* is one of the very few movies to include the muffled bass of TV and conversation as sifted through apartment walls.

Subways, that special terror of the bad old days, held their own traps for non-natives. Few directors have caught the resemblance of station platform enclosures to holding cells, or those micro-blackouts, never more than a couple of seconds, that used to wink through the cars. *The Warriors*' own premise—escape by subway, the first thing jettisoned from *EFNY*—is a harder call. Wouldn't a real New York street gang have just stolen a car? (The 96th Street station where cops chase the Warriors is another casualty of a kinder, gentler NYC; next year the MTA plans to pipe in the sounds of chirping birds and babbling brooks.)

Escape From New York passes none of these tests. Its version of the New York Public Library is missing its stone lions, and the Duke's train yard is unrecognizable. The WTC lobby looks a lot like it was shot in Culver City, California. Then there's the "69th Street Bridge" that gives the film its finale and New Yorkers a snicker. It's all shot beautifully, with the otherworldly glide of Steadicam and the expansive range of Panavision (what Carpenter calls "the ultimate rectangle"). But to locals, the discrepancies are jarring reminders that *Escape From New York* was made by a bunch of Californians who had no terrifying cities of their own.

Carpenter faced this problem with his first studio feature, *Assault on Precinct 13* (1976). How to make Los Angeles look scary? Most Bad Apple plot devices don't work in urban California: escaping into a New York City crowd (*Death Wish*) or disguising ritual killings as random street crime (*The Hunger*). Even the quintessentially Angelino *Blade Runner* used the Warner Bros. "old New York street" backlot to drum up some dread. And what other skyline is so friendly to menace? In 1980's *Maniac*, the badly lit cityscape hints at perversities in the underbrush. In 1982's *Liquid Sky*, the pointy skyscrapers look like hypodermic needles.

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SURVIVAL OF THE STREETS

Snake Plissken, the Cro-Mags, and the Persistence of Megatoilet Nostalgia

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Season Hubley bookended her *EFNY* role with two classic LA-gone-bad films. In 1979's *Hardcore*, LA

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DOs & DON'TS



Are you gay if you horse around with one of these androgynous Ryan McGinley types? Hey, if a bear shits in the woods and nobody's around does it make a sound?

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When you put a tramp stamp on a weeping child-angel on your unshirted back, you're basically taking out a restraining order against ovaries.

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is not so much scary as it is alien, with a nice ten-second stretch of skyline set to blurry synth yowls. Hubley was a chameleon in her younger days; she appears soft and spry in Carpenter's made-for-TV *Elvis* (1979), hard-bitten and trannyish only three years later in *Vice Squad* (1982). This latter version of bad Los Angeles is far more repulsive, but even the parade of human cruelty can't make LA look intimidating. "Jesus, man, the wombats are out tonight!" one cop roars while cruising the Sunset Strip. "I mean, whores, faggots, pimps, and hustlers. Junkies, drag queens, and freaks, man. This city sucks!" Only, it can't suck that much: There are palm trees everywhere.

No film better showcases this divide than 1988's *Maniac Cop*. The movie climaxes with a car chase on Manhattan's west side, when, almost imperceptibly, the menace evaporates. It takes a moment to figure out what has happened. There is a flash of blocky, non-New York graffiti, then a few frames of an unfamiliar street sign. The movie ends with palm trees waving lazily from the "Jersey" shore in the background. Oops.

Late one night in 1988, I caught a 1 local from Times Square to visit a friend at Columbia University. Somewhere just below my stop, the conductor calmly announced that the train would not be stopping at 116th Street but would instead continue on to 125th. The moment reminded me of that scene in 1984's *The Brother From Another Planet* when a card hustler asks the visiting space alien, Joe Morton, "Wanna see me make all the white people disappear?" It's an A-train joke, but the punch line is the same. I found myself sharing a subway car with a dozen scared Columbia-bound Caucasians, hurtling into Harlem at midnight.

After some confusion at 125th Street, it was explained that all we had to do was exit the station and cross the street for the southbound platform. I remember all dozen or so of us doing this en masse, making a tight huddle as we crossed 30 feet of nighttime Harlem in the open air. Two images stand out in my memory of this brief incursion into unknown territory: 1) There was a busted fire hydrant, gushing water straight up, and 2) a car was on fire.

Did I really see these things? Main Street Harlem wasn't the South Bronx. Broken hydrants normally gush water out into the street—it takes a major impact to make them fountain upward. And the odds seem kind of high that a car was actually burning, at that very moment, on that very street corner. I have to at least entertain the thought that my memories have been colored by years of Bad Apple films, that my brain—so conditioned to expect the cinematic worst—actually overlaid these false images onto my experience.

This was a common malady of old New York. People moved to the city and found themselves characters in a gritty movie of their own design. Call it Travis Bickle Syndrome. TBS could warp perceptions or actions. I've seen it dozens of times: Yuppies trying to kick through steel doors, businessmen shrieking in intersections, grown men fighting with chains (twice). On 12th Street, I once saw a guy use a police sawhorse as a jousting lance. In other cities, you'd blame such nutty behavior on drugs. In New York, people were just high on the city itself.

Some people moved to New York and caught Abel Ferrara Syndrome. This was a condition that had newcomers take on the physical traits of characters from 1979's *The Driller Killer*, that superb NY cult slasher movie where all the women look vaguely Laraine Newmanish and all the men look like combos of John Lurie and Richard Hell. It's a bygone look from a bygone world—tough, horsey, and ruggedly emaciated: real New Yorker (some newcomers wound up like Hell himself, in 1982's *Smithereens*, making a stranger plea: "Please don't do anything weird to me!").

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SURVIVAL OF THE STREETS

Snake Plissken, the Cro-Mags, and the Persistence of Megatoilet Nostalgia

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Vigilantes vary in Bad NYC. There are conservative wannabes (*Joe*) and reluctant liberals (*Death Wish*). In 1970's *The Out of Towners*, the vigilantes in Central Park are well-dressed young men, reflecting that strange pause between decades where even the muggers still wore snappy hats. In *Ms. 45* (1981), the lead slips from self-defender to vigilante to serial killer to mass murderer in less than 90 minutes.

By the time an actual vigilante showed up in 1984, the city had been primed with 15 years of on-screen street justice. After an unassuming white man shot four black teens on the subway just before Christmas, the NYPD set up a hotline to catch leads on the mystery gunman. The line flooded with calls of support, and local papers gushed over "*The Death Wish Shooter*." The meek, nerdy Bernie Goetz finally turned himself in, and the public split on the definition of "self-defense." Goetz won against the city, more or less, but eventually lost his civil trial. By then, the case was barely covered in the media; during 11 years of legal battle, New York's crime rate plunged almost as steeply as *Escape From New York* had predicted it would rise.

It's always seemed curious to me that Hollywood waited until the last year of Ed Koch's reign to get their biggest vigilante property onto the streets. And even then, Tim Burton's cartoony *Batman* (1989) says very little about the rigors or pitfalls of vigilantism. This film's Gotham City is a silly parody of a

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I didn't know the Invisible Man was into wine-bar rave.

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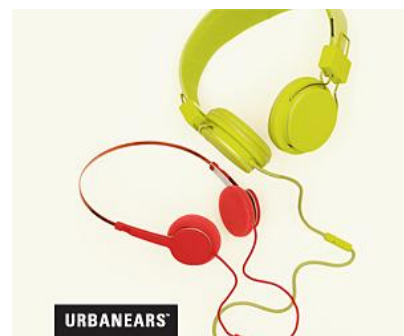
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Every summer there's a huge LSD rave next to a nuclear reactor on the Black Sea. Instead of glow sticks and stupid pants, however, Russians opt for construction signs warning of imminent danger and the broken branches of misshapen trees. Feel like a pussy yet?

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massive American city, not quite New York (although the Ed Koch look-alike mayor mentions budget problems), but clearly nowhere else. During the summer of 1989, the ubiquitous Batman-logo t-shirts made everyone in New York a vigilante.

The political upheavals between 1966 and 1990 created weird slipstreams for the films of this era. In 1977's *Annie Hall*, Woody Allen asks Tony Roberts, "Don't you see the rest of the country looks down upon New York like we're left-wing communist Jewish homosexual pornographers?" He's right, except that some New Yorkers shared this view too. It's interesting to note how the Bad Apple films of the 70s both reflected and shied away from the political turbulence they themselves stirred up.

Death Wish quickly establishes Charles Bronson as a New York liberal, then punishes this perceived weakness with a brutal attack on his wife and daughter. Later, after Bronson has set up his lethal alter ego, he attends a party where fellow urbanites debate whether or not the anonymous vigilante is a racist for killing more blacks than whites. And yet the film doesn't have the courage of its convictions to show any nonwhite rapists during the central attack scene (unless you count a young Jeff Goldblum). *Taxi Driver* screenwriter Paul Schrader created Travis Bickle as an overt racist, but later, during preproduction, the pimp Travis kills was changed from black to white to defuse controversy. And yet Bickle's misguided heroism counters the effete liberal Albert Brooks, who advocates "mandatory welfare" (it's a ridiculous throwaway line—I thought I'd misheard it the first few times).

The Warriors gives us that strangest of all 70s and 80s clichés, the multiracial street gang. No contemporary movie from this period shows realistic thugs operating in actual segregated units (*The Wanderers* hides in the safety of 1963). *Warriors* writer-director Walter Hill wanted his film to stay faithful to Sol Yurick's original novel, which involved a gang of blacks and Hispanics. Paramount, mindful of 70s racial sensibilities and wanting a bankable white star, said otherwise. On this one subject, no urban gang film of this era can match the unintentional realism of 1961's *West Side Story*, even with its street mob of prancing "Puerto Ricans" who look a lot like white people slathered in tanning oil.

Inspired by the gritty look of *Death Wish* and *Dirty Harry*, John Carpenter wrote *Escape From New York* as a science-fiction response to the "urban jungle" genre of the mid-70s. But it's easy to read his movie as the left-wing response as well (ironically, the studio wanted Charles Bronson, then 60, to star). Carpenter's hippie roots are obvious in 1987's *They Live*, which exposes Republicans and yuppies as alien ghouls, and 2001's *Ghosts of Mars*, in which illegal drugs save the main character's life.

It's probably a stretch to believe (as I do) that *Escape* is one of the best films ever made about fascism, far outshining *1984*. Ultimately, it's only in the same league as *High Noon* and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, films that can be viewed through whatever political filter the viewer brings to it. On *EFNY*'s original poster, the Statue of Liberty's head has been ripped off and dragged through the streets. But Lady Liberty has been appropriated by many different groups over the past 120 years, and that forlorn look on her face could signify almost anything. In last year's *Cloverfield*, itself inspired by that poster, the head signifies nothing more than 9/11 remade as a tacky monster flick.

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SURVIVAL OF THE STREETS

Snake Plissken, the Cro-Mags, and the Persistence of Megatoilet Nostalgia

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DOS & DON'TS



If a girl is really right for you and you feel it in your bones you can say shit like, "You are so 'my type' it's making my chest ache," and it will work.

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Eight-hole boots with no socks make most guys think of Fairuza Balk in *American History X*, that's why you need the gold studs to take it out of National Vanguard territory and over to somewhere a little classier like *Desperately Seeking Susan*.

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I caught a screening of *Escape From New York* in Los Angeles four months after 9/11. It was a typical Hollywood film-revival crowd, low-level film insiders laughing at the references to 1988 and 1997 and Lee Van Cleef's brick-size mobile telephone. And there were big laughs at the scene when a Secret Service agent feebly attempts to break down the Air Force One cockpit door, the mechanics of which all Americans were, by that point, intimately versed in. But there was merely silence at the shot of a hijacked jet soaring toward the World Trade Towers. This wasn't, of course, the only film to foreshadow 9/11 (1998's *Armageddon* blew chunks out of both buildings, and 1983's confusing and fascinating *Born in Flames* ends with lesbian revolutionaries—or maybe counterrevolutionaries—detonating a huge bomb atop 1 WTC). But it was certainly the most poetically filmed.

A few months later, I house-sat for friends in SoHo. I arrived on the first beautiful spring day since 9/11. After dropping off my luggage, I walked south to see Ground Zero. Behind the ruined Deutsche Bank building, I found the word "triage" spray-painted on a wall, with an arrow pointing down the alley. When I looked up at the deserted skyscraper, most of its windows smashed out, my only frame of reference was from *Escape From New York*. It looked like one of Carpenter's mattes. Later that afternoon, I asked my departing friends what I should do in the case of another attack—at that fragile period in New York, more doom seemed imminent—and we all seemed a little stumped (they'd earlier discussed options for escaping from New York but decided against sprinting eight long blocks to the Hudson with a rubber dinghy).

I found the New York of 2002 festooned with American flags. On large buildings, these often hung vertically, as if to underscore the very noncasual patriotism of the moment. In *EFNY*, producer Debra Hill had the Stars and Stripes hung vertically from the back of the Sepulveda Dam; she'd seen pictures of flags draped like this in Nazi Germany and wanted to evoke a similar feel for a future fascist America. In the movie's novelization, the Duke confronts Snake in the trashed lobby of one of the Twin Towers. "I saw your glider in the street," he says. "All these airplanes falling around here, it's not safe to walk anymore."

A mention is due the novelization, published the month of the film's release by Bantam. Author Mike McQuay must have read the script but not seen the movie; where most novelizations are the weak byproduct of studio marketing, this one lays out a much darker, bleaker, far more hopeless story. In McQuay's version, the imprisonment of New York followed an outbreak of concentrated mass insanity, a consequence of the chronic chemical attacks of WWII. All male prisoners are castrated. Before the story, Hauk had already lost one of his sons in the firebombing of Los Angeles. After the other son goes insane, robs a supermarket in Chicago, and winds up in New York, Hauk takes the police-commissioner

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job to find his child.

The book's Snake is first and foremost a disabled war veteran, spending most of the story jacked up on methamphetamines. In the film, his descent through 2 WTC is a matter of a single cut. In the book, it is a passage through 100 floors of corpses, a task of the hereafter. "Even with the meth," McQuay writes, "it seemed like he was destined to descend stairs for the rest of his life."

In the 1740s, Italian artist Giovanni Piranesi completed his "*Le Carceri d'invenzione*" prints, a series of elaborate sketches of a fictional and impossibly vast prison. The prints depict massive stone vaults and endless stairways leading off into darkness. Here and there, barely discernable figures, specters, skulk in the shadows. McQuay's *Escape From New York* is closer to those sketches than to the 1981 filmed version. Even if the logic of Hollywood capitalism makes a remake inevitable, I'd certainly love to see a filmed version of this book, WTC and all.

Not that it's easy to see these buildings now without that familiar twinge of foreboding. In years to come, their digital cameos in New York period pieces will probably serve only to heighten this feeling, as if their destruction had winnowed down all possible symbolism to only one awful inevitability (Steven Spielberg used a digital WTC at the end of 2005's *Munich* for precisely this reason).

These buildings had multiple meanings for films of the 20th century. In *Wall Street* (1987), the camera lingers conspicuously on the Twin Towers and Citigroup Center as emblems of power. A diorama miniature of the WTC serves the same function in the architect's office of *Death Wish*. 1983's *Vigilante* places them in the remote background behind an abandoned, graffiti-covered school, like the spires of a distant civilization, or the Emerald City. Five years later, *Maniac Cop* has the towers looming ominously over Greenwich Village like craggy peaks in a vampire movie. In 1984's *The Pope of Greenwich Village*, the WTC taunts the nickel-and-dime schemers from the skyline, a symbol of unattainable wealth. (*Midnight Cowboy*, filmed while the towers were being built, had to make the same point with Jon Voight listening to stock reports in his dingy hotel room.)

The Twin Towers' use in science fiction has always been a bit trickier. In 1975's *The Ultimate Warrior*—a dreadful postapocalyptic pap smear that someone tricked Yul Brynner and Max Von Sydow into—the Twin Towers are the sole establishing shot. In the last film the towers appeared in innocently, 2001's *AI*, Spielberg aged the buildings two millennia and trapped them in ice, probably just because he could. For his part, Plissken parks his glider on one of the towers because, as Harry Dean Stanton points out, there's nowhere else to land.

Snake steers clear of Times Square, probably out of budgetary concerns. It's not until 2007 that *I Am Legend* finally tackles the Crossroads of the World with nine and a half times the budget, although this abandoned New York actually is abandoned. It's also Mayor Bloomberg's New York, draped in gracefully fading advertisements for XM Satellite Radio and Verizon. The one apartment Snake invites himself into is full of rotting furniture. The apartment Will Smith breaks into features hardwood floors and exposed brick.

One documentary about Times Square sheds some light on New York's baffling nostalgia. Richard Sandler filmed *The Gods of Times Square* between 1993 and 1998. It's five years of rambling chats with drunks, zealots, hobos, street preachers, and assorted benign schizophrenics, covering the exact period when the square changed so dramatically. There's also some good footage of the Sons of Yahweh, a whackadoodle offshoot of the Black Hebrew Israelites whose disciples looked more like the Duke of New York than the Duke did.

Times Square's Disney Store causes Sandler some grief. Disney attempted to reach backward, past the Bad Apple days to the neighborhood's prewar heyday, making the mistake of referencing a past that almost no one alive had experienced. To those who'd only known the contrast of the Giuliani era, the Disney Store on Seventh Avenue and 42nd Street became an emblem of huge and confusing changes in the city, some real (gentrification), some imaginary ("Disneyfication").

In one scene, Sandler skulks around a parade to honor the new store, clearly unhappy that the neighborhood has been invaded by smiling children. Under massive, groaning billboards, he asks pedestrians what they think of the corporate takeover of Times Square, oblivious to the irony of Times Square's long history as the most heavily advertised spot on earth. Later in the film there's footage of a man sitting in the street, and a brief conversation about why this isn't such a big deal.

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DOS & DON'TS



There, we cropped out the short hair so you can quit debating whether or not she likes guys and start trying to deal with the fact that the only way you're going to get her into your bedroom is on the off-chance she grew up with a Bud Bundy fetish.

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Professional dancers have got to go. They're always wiggling around like they have to go pee, even when they're at the dinner table. Then "Ring My Bell" comes on and they lean over going, "I don't know how you can sit still like that." Get the fuck away from me, snakey man.

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SURVIVAL OF THE STREETS

Snake Plissken, the Cro-Mags, and the Persistence of Megatoilet Nostalgia

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Besides John Carpenter (whose first short won an Academy Award in 1970), the only other Oscar winner on the *EFNY* set was Ernest Borgnine. Ernest won Best Actor back in 1955, for the title role in *Marty*. In this variation on New York City, Borgnine is a loveless blob of a Bronx butcher. He meets

young Betsy Blair, and they spend an enjoyable night together. It's all innocent, chaste fun for Betsy and Ernie, and alien terrain for the modern viewer. Blair can enter Borgnine's dark apartment long after midnight, simply because it isn't plausible that any rapists lurk in the stairwells, inconceivable that he'd long since turned the place into an urban dungeon. The rape and murder of Kitty Genovese is still nine years away. In this world, apartment interiors are stages for intimate dramas and insight into closed worlds, not depravity. The worst thing the city can throw at either of them is the same loneliness it throws at Travis Bickle 20 years later.

There's a lot of this loneliness in *Escape From New York*, courtesy of a synthesizer soundtrack performed by John Carpenter and collaborator Alan Howarth. A version of Debussy's "The Sunken Cathedral" drones somberly as Snake's fragile glider slips over the derelict financial district—a funeral dirge for an underwater city. Minus one campy cabaret piece lifted straight from the action ("Stab a priest with a fork/And you'll spend your vacation in New York") the soundtrack is a masterpiece of moody electronics, by turns eerie, stoic, mournful, and urgent. What it does not particularly evoke is New York City.

In fact, there was a gap, in the 1970s and very early 1980s, when New York's steep decline was not yet reflected in any music, particularly not in the music of New York itself. Saxophones are fine for conveying glitz, noir, romance, or even loneliness. They do not do such a great job with urban brutality. And for all the belligerence of the original CBGB punk bands, their music had much more to say about mainstream America than New York's squalor and violence. The Ramones' "Beat on the Brat" is a catchy tune, but it isn't the best soundtrack, I suspect, if you actually want to beat someone with a baseball bat. Of all New York's unique music subcultures from this era—the acidic little No Wave scene, the embryonic hip-hop movement, '81's hybrid mutant-disco phase—none of it conveyed urban apocalypse. The Bad Apple had cinematic expression long before it had musical expression.

Perhaps because of the city's musically illustrious recent past, New York's hardcore punk scene started at a disadvantage. These first, late-blooming bands of the early 80s struggled to release 7-inch EPs as the DC, Boston, Los Angeles, and San Francisco scenes flourished. And while some of these bands (Urban Waste, the Abused, Kraut, Antidote) made great music, their great music could just as easily have been made in the Midwest or Canada.

What early New York Hardcore bands lacked in distinctive output, however, they more than compensated for in sheer menace. As the scene coalesced in Reagan's first term, the New York Hardcore scene—known in the shorthand of graffiti and knuckle tattoos as NYHC—injects class into the subculture in a way that no other city could. It was a world marinating in poverty and violence. The skinheads of New York weren't as uniformly racist as skinheads in other cities, but gay-bashing was merry sport, and bystander-bashing a close second. Punk shows in early-80s Manhattan were good places to witness and/or receive a savage beating.

It's hard to see how NYHC could have existed, in its known form, without *Death Wish*, *Taxi Driver*, *The Warriors*, and *Escape From New York*. In the mid-1970s, Richard Hell (or Television's Richard Lloyd, depending on whose account you believe) walked into CBGB with a homemade "Please Kill Me" shirt. The message was theater. A decade later, hardcore shows at the same club were events where one could plausibly get killed. When I moved to Manhattan in 1987, legends of the ferocious skinhead-Puerto Rican wars of the early 80s seemed like something out of Hollywood. Without a cinematic tradition to step into, the wretchedness of New York could have been something for this scene to overcome, not celebrate.

In 1984, Agnostic Front released their debut album, *Victim in Pain*. It's an excellent, scrappy, unruly record, but again, the lyrics and music could have come from almost anywhere. The LP bolstered the band's standing as leading men of a scene that frowned on stardom. Actor Matt Dillon arrived at an infamous AF show this same year, got spotted from the stage, and was mocked by the band until he fled. At a different show, a local news crew tried to film CBGB's exterior and had their vehicle attacked.

Two years later, AF delivered their second LP, *Cause for Alarm*, with a new, heavy-metal sound and a new lyrical slant. In 1984, the band had used the word "minority" to describe themselves—their band, friends, and audience—as a precarious subculture that needed to stick together. On this new album, the word popped up in a more familiar context: "How come it's minorities/Who cry things are too tough/On TV with their gold chains/Claim they don't have enough." The next track celebrated Bernie Goetz. It was as if the hard-hat silent majority had adopted the most berserk counterculture they could find. Phil Donahue called the lyrics racist, and NYHC had an ideology.

Cause for Alarm is a disappointing flop mostly because of its fantastic art. In the mid-80s, illustrator Sean Taggart was unofficial house artist for several local bands, and his cover for this record is a cartoony Hieronymus Bosch meltdown: screaming punks, screaming skinhead demon, flames, a mugger, a junkie, a blob in a business suit eating more screaming figures. It's New York as hellscape, far meaner than Scorsese's *Mean Streets*. The songs inside can't compete. It's a New York record without New York music.

The missing music arrived this same year. 1986's *The Age of Quarrel*, the debut album of New York's Cro-Mags, offered another recipe of heavy metal and hardcore punk, only with radically different chemistry. It's a small irony that the album was received with suspicion by the NYHC community. Most of the 15 songs had been reworked from an earlier Cro-Mags demo, and although the vocals were recorded in one day, they're far more polished than anything the band had done before. Released on Profile Records, a label best known for breaking Queens's Run-DMC, the record shines precisely because of its overproduction. Several British bands had already made inroads into this specific hybrid subgenre—Discharge came closest—but no American group had blended metal and hardcore so organically or in the service of such a terrifying worldview. The overall effect referenced another bit of British culture: the 16-ton weight of Monty Python skits.

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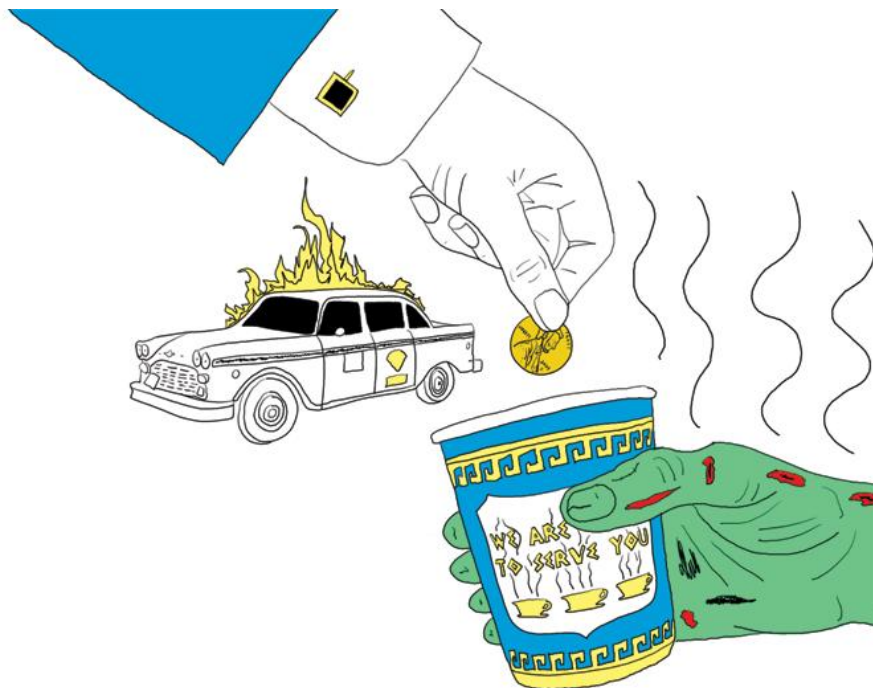
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SURVIVAL OF THE STREETS

Snake Plissken, the Cro-Mags, and the Persistence of Megatoilet Nostalgia

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The Age of Quarrel documents a city whose brutality has no beginning and no foreseeable end, New York under eternal siege, the Tribute in Light memorial as massive anti-aircraft searchlights. At one point, someone counts off a song in shrieks of German—it sounds scary even today. Los Angeles glam-metal band Mötley Crüe modeled their costumes (and, in 1983, a stage set) on *Escape From New York*. The Cro-Mags sounded like *Escape From New York*, the perfect soundtrack for a city that has been flushed “right down the fuckin’ toilet.” After 20 years, the Bad Apple of films finally found its voice.

The Cro-Mags were also the first NY Hardcore band to embrace Hare Krishna. Throughout the album, religious conviction is used as both a framework for apocalypse and an apology for violence. In “World Peace,” a warning to “hippies,” we learn “things are gettin’ hectic/It’s all gonna end/You don’t know what’s waitin’/Up around the bend/Open your eyes/Perhaps you’ll realize/If AIDS don’t get ya then the warheads will.” “Survival of the Streets” is all about “Livin’ in burnt-out buildings/Livin’ in the streets.” Then there’s the existential beatdown of “Life of My Own”: “You come into this world/With nothing except yourself/You, you leave this world/With nothing except yourself.”



Not giving a shit about how you look can be a bummer, but spending every waking moment on things like what pant leg goes where and how many pounds of hat you can fit on your head makes you look like Jay McCarroll at a Thinking-Too-Hard Festival.

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Forget about protests and signing petitions and marching on Washington. If you really want to take a stand against this fucked up capitalist society we’re forced to endure every day of our lives, you need to throw a spanner in the works from *inside* the system.

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The original album art reworked this philosophy into a trickier conservatism than Agnostic Front's blue-collar grumbling. Inside a mushroom cloud doubling as a crystal ball, the cover drawing revealed a mix of evils from the Krishna perspective: a slaughterhouse, dogfighting, drug abuse, abortion doctors chucking a fetus, two gay men strolling arm in arm. Profile nixed this art, and the band instead chose a photograph of a real mushroom cloud—the 1954 Castle Romeo test—in what has to stand as one of the all-time classics of truth in advertising.

The back-cover photo was just as important as the front. In a small group shot, the Cro-Mags stand posed in a sinister, graffiti-covered doorway. Four of these five men meet the viewer's gaze with the weary self-assurance of native New Yorkers. In the front, bassist Harley Flanagan stands next to vocalist John "Bloodclot" Joseph. Flanagan, the former child drummer from the Stimulators, leans into a wall, bald and impassive. Joseph, an AWOL navy fugitive, holds a balled fist and seems to be suppressing a slight sneer. Both men are covered in tattoos and seem made out of pure muscle. And by the time of this photo, both men had already lived entire lives of impossible brutality and squalor, living in burned-out buildings and in the street. *The Warriors* was based loosely on Xenophon's *Anabasis*; the Cro-Mags personnel looked and acted like characters out of Greek mythology. They also saw themselves as products of a failed New York. In Joseph's autobiography(!), he describes standing by the side of the Queensboro Bridge watching the Manhattan silhouette during the 1977 blackout. Writing from the 21st century, he can only compare the scene to something out of *Escape From New York* (in the mid-80s, the band opened at least one CBGB set with the garish and creepy theme from *A Clockwork Orange* blaring through the speakers).

The year after my brief visit to Harlem, I worked at a health-food store on First Avenue, just below St. Marks. Joseph had worked there years earlier, and he or Flanagan shopped there, at different times, every month or so. All the employees were familiar with their music and their reputation, and even though both men were always polite to all of us, a strange hush of terror would settle over the store whenever they shopped. It reminded me of a different Monty Python sketch: the Piranha Brothers, twin brutes so terrifying "grown men would pull their heads off" rather than face them.

One afternoon I was working registers when Joseph came in and asked for a dollar's worth of bee pollen. We sold this, as a nutritional supplement, for \$20 a pound. There's no way to perfectly measure out that small an amount on the scale. My hands were shaky because I was simultaneously elated and petrified to be interacting with the singer of the Cro-Mags, and I couldn't get the scale to hit exactly one dollar. "One dollar three cents," I said weakly.

He gave me a look—the kind of look Zeus might give a mortal before erasing them with a thunderbolt.

"Naw, man... I said a dollar."

I heard my voice squeak up into a weird cartoony register.

"Yes sir, one dollar, yessir!" As soon as he left, everyone in the store laughed at me, including all the other customers.

In 1987, the Cro-Mags were approached to perform in *The Beat*, a feisty teen drama for which they'd already been written into the script as the Iron Skulls. According to the lore of 80s New York, the band only agreed to the film after they found out the producer was Julia Phillips. In her autobiography, Phillips writes, "They love me once they find out I produced *Taxi Driver*... Is it Travis or the sax solo?" Later, she describes an accident that occurs during the shooting of their concert scene. Pushing through the crowd, she comes upon a badly injured Travis Bickle look-alike sprawled on the dance floor, blood trickling out of his eyes (severed spine: a \$3 million settlement).

The Beat is an uncommonly squirm-inducing film. Set in the fictional outer-borough neighborhood of Hellesbay, its disaffected teens speak in the disjointed tempo of actors' improv workshops. There are several long stretches where characters stand together, peer off-screen, and describe what they're looking at. At its best, *The Beat* could be called a frank look at urban racism, if that's the right name for a movie where someone can and does run on-screen and say, "My man Cheese Pie, he just got shot by some niggers!" The Iron Skulls are at the center of this story, first as their tickets threaten to sell out, then through the inspiration left in the wake of their concert. It's kind of fun trying to picture what the Cro-Mags must have thought of this movie, but still a lot less fun than watching a decent movie.

But then there are those three and a half minutes in the middle. The Iron Skulls' set starts in slurred slow motion, the aftermath of a battle or a terrorist attack. The screams speed closer to real time, and the stage looks a lot like the Riverside Park riot in *The Warriors*. The band plays the last half of "It's the Limit," then all of "Hard Times." John Joseph, shirtless and triumphant, dodges bodies with the choreography of a martial-arts movie. Several times the camera cuts to inside a mosh pit laced with howls and screams—the seventh circle of Hell. One shot shows the nebbishy protagonist, bruised and disoriented and buffeted by heaving bodies. It looks like the kind of place where someone could sever a spine.

Three months after *Escape From New York* opened, its nameless president, Donald Pleasence, hosted *Saturday Night Live*. It was the Halloween episode, featuring the star of *Halloween*, broadcast from the scariest city in America. I watched this show as a 12-year-old, but I don't remember any of the skits. What I do remember was the musical guest, LA punk band Fear. They performed to a crowd of authentic misfits bused in from various hardcore scenes, John Joseph and Harley Flanagan included. After an incident (the *New York Post* claimed thousands of dollars in damaged cameras, although accounts vary), the band was ejected from the building and the recording warehoused. NBC never re-aired the episode.

This brief convergence—characters from *Escape From New York* crossing paths with characters from the Cro-Mags—presented an afterimage of mayhem I had no way to process. People ran across the



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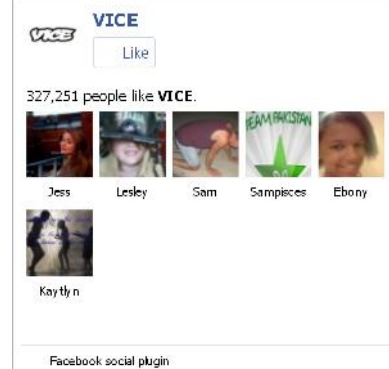


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stage in a blur, collided, and collapsed back into one another. The tiny imported crowd looked like the running anonymous assailants—faceless rabble—of every good John Carpenter film. It scared and fascinated me, and made me want to never visit New York again. Watching the Cro-Mags scene in *The Beat* now, I feel a slight twinge of this same confusion. For a moment, New York is not the awesomest city on earth—a fact that, in 2009, nobody living outside of NYC seriously disputes—but merely another lost pee-smelling woe zone, and a city I have no desire to live in again. It's a fleeting sensation, and by the time I stop my VCR, I've already forgotten what it felt like.

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Anonymous, on Aug 26, 2010 *wrote*:

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Anonymous, on Aug 26, 2010 *wrote*:

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Anonymous, on Oct 30, 2009 *wrote*:

The previous poster is a known sexual predator.

Anonymous, on Oct 10, 2009 *wrote*:

I am so very glad that someone like you doesn't ever want to live here again. Makes it nicer for us real New Yorkers.

Anonymous, on Oct 8, 2009 *wrote*:

someone needs to shut the fuck up and respect mr. sam mcpheters.

Anonymous, on Oct 7, 2009 *wrote*:

someone needs a better editor.

Anonymous, on Oct 6, 2009 *wrote*:

What no mention of the band Suicide! Otherwise great article.

Anonymous, on Oct 6, 2009 *wrote*:

i don't know if mcpheters and karacas is a match made in heaven or hell but i would like to see it again.



hi fructose, on Oct 6, 2009 *wrote*:

jesus... this is a novella. worth it though. great read. i shouldn't have been surprised. it's mcpheters, after all.



captain cheese puff, on Oct 6, 2009 *wrote*:

i had compeltely forgotten goldblum was in death wish!

Anonymous, on Oct 6, 2009 *wrote*:

is she fondling him?

Anonymous, on Oct 6, 2009 *wrote*:

you know what? if anyone can pull off the shutter shades, it's ms. statue of liberty.



Kirby Puckett, on Oct 6, 2009 *wrote*:

"going to have to revisit 'death wish.' i was blown away the first time and i went in thinking it would be good for only laughs. it was good for laughs, no doubt, but so much more. and i was surprised by the amount of violence shown for a 70s film. makes me wonder why folks like tarantino, etc. are given hell for their films when this was going on 20 years earlier."

If anything, this just shows you how underrated Death Wish was when it was released. I wasn't alive but I was under the impression it WAS controversial when it was released. Too bad it's been largely forgotten. Okay, that's an overstatement, but keeping with your Tarantino comparison, it is when put up again either Pulp Fiction or Reservoir Dogs.



anonymouse, on Oct 6, 2009 *wrote*:

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