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## Snake attack: 'Escape from New York' hero back with a vengeance

By **Mark Rahner**  
Seattle Times staff reporter

It's shaping up to be the Year of the Snake. But drop the Chinese calendar and turn around slowly. That's Snake *Plissken*.

The eye-patched anti-hero of director John Carpenter's 1981 "Escape from New York" is back in an impressive special-edition DVD (Fox, R) today. But don't move a muscle: There's also a comic book and the requisite action figure, and in development, a novel series, a video game, and a feature-length anime from the makers of the landmark "Ghost in the Shell," due next summer. Why is there suddenly no escape from this guy, more than two decades later?

"It's the eye patch," deadpans Seattle expert Robert Cumbow, author of "Order in the Universe: The Films of John Carpenter" (Scarecrow Press, \$25).

"The character of Snake Plissken appeals to people because he's the ultimate individual," says comic-book scribe William O'Neill of "John Carpenter's Snake Plissken Chronicles." "He's not controlled by any other forces than what he decides."

Whatever the reason, Carpenter says by phone from his Hollywood pad, "I think it's fabulous. It's great." He, producer Debra Hill and actor Kurt Russell are capitalizing on Snake's enduring popularity by "branding" him like James Bond. They own the character and consult on all his incarnations.

Over time, the low-budget futuristic action yarn has emerged as cult classic. It takes place in the far-flung year 1997, when Manhattan has been turned into a prison where criminals of every stripe are left to fend for themselves. They've done better than that: They've brought down Air Force One and have taken the president (Donald Pleasance) hostage. War-hero-turned-convicted-criminal Plissken (stubby Russell, channeling Clint Eastwood) gets volunteered for the rescue, with 24 hours to succeed before a bomb in his neck goes off.

Fans finally get to see the deleted 10-minute bank-robbery scene originally meant to open the film, as a DVD extra. Snake has a chance to escape the cops, but gets caught when he turns back to help his wounded partner. Carpenter says he has no regrets that it didn't make the final cut. For one thing, the scene humanizes Snake too much. And besides, "It took too long. People said, 'You know, I didn't know what was going on until we get to the prison.' I think it's just fine without it."

Incidentally, hardly any of "Escape from New York" was shot in New York. Carpenter lucked out with a section of St. Louis that had been wiped out in a fire. Officials there were pleased to give the movie crew the run of the ruins.

Carpenter, 56, had written the story while he was trying to break into the business in 1974, before he hauled off and redefined the suspense genre with "Halloween" in 1978.

He made Snake his alter ego and based him on a guy he knew in high school, someone who "had absolute freedom and lived by a very strong code, but not God or country or family or anything. I don't want to hurt you and I don't want to help you. I just want to move on."

Did he ever tell the guy from school? Yeah. His response: "Who, me? Are you kidding?"

Studio suits thought Carpenter was kidding about Russell — known for such Disney teen fare as "The Computer Wore Tennis Shoes" — as an action hero. Carpenter says Charles Bronson wanted the part. But after directing Russell in his 1978 "Elvis" TV movie, Carpenter says, "I thought he could play anything."

When the subject turns to the more blatantly satirical 1996 sequel, "Escape from L.A.," Carpenter is as laconic as his alter ego.

It wasn't as well-liked. "That's right."

Why? "I don't really know."

He seemed to approach it differently. "I did?"

The sequel's tone is a little campier. "It might have been. It might have been."

The question is: With all this new Snake-handling, will there be a third film?

"Never say never. We'll see," Carpenter says. "I know Kurt will say he feels like he's getting a little old to play an anti-hero."

But Russell will lend his voice to the animated film and video game.

While Carpenter has long complained that foreigners appreciate his work but he's treated like a bum in the States, scholar Cumbow points out that fans who grew up loving his work now make films and write criticism — and make video games.

The Solid Snake character of the "Metal Gear" series is a Carpenter reference, and Carpenter turns up as a character in the video game based on his no-holds-barred 1982 remake of "The Thing."



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