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Case Number 18857



Escape From L.A. (Blu-Ray)

Paramount // 1996 // 100 Minutes // Rated R
Reviewed by Judge Bill Gibron // May 7th, 2010

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Scales of Justice

Video:	92
Audio:	94
Extras:	10
Acting:	80
Story:	60
Judgment:	72

Perp Profile

Studio: [Paramount](#)
Video Formats:
 • 2.35:1 Non-Anamorphic (1080p)
Audio Formats:
 • DTS HD 5.1 Master Audio (English)
 • Dolby Digital 5.1 Surround (French)
 • Dolby Digital 5.1 Surround (Spanish)
Subtitles:
 • English (SDH)
 • French
 • Spanish
Running Time: 100 Minutes
Release Year: 1996
MPAA Rating: Rated R
Genres:
 • [Action](#)
 • [Adventure](#)
 • [Blu-ray](#)
 • [Science Fiction](#)
 • [Thriller](#)

Distinguishing Marks

- Theatrical Trailer

Accomplices

- [IMDb](#)
- [John Carpenter's Official Site](#)

All Rise...

Call me Snake? Judge Bill Gibron says "call me bored."



The Charge

Screw this—I Want **Escape from CLEVELAND!**

Opening Statement

When John Carpenter unveiled his sci-fi action epic [Escape from New York](#) in 1981, it was startling. Not just because it announced a new direction for the horror maestro (coming off his one-two punch of [Halloween](#) and [The Fog](#)) or that it gave former child star Kurt Russell a ripe adult role to wrap his pythons around. Like his love for Hitchcock, Dario Argento and all things suspense; it suggested that Carpenter had a frame of reference beyond simple shocks and shivers. Reminiscence of cheese-ball efforts from the drive-in dynamic of the '70s, but wrapped in ideas that seemed shocking at the time, the film has since become a fan favorite; with everything from Russell's Clint Eastwood-lite accent to the use of such old school stalwarts as Lee Van Cleef, Ernest Borgnine, and Harry Dean Stanton earning acclaim. So naturally, a sequel was in order, with scripts for same sitting around since 1985. But it took a personal plea from Russell, and a shoestring budget for a fallen out of favor Carpenter to get the eventual update off the ground. In some ways, they shouldn't have bothered.

Facts of the Case

It is 2013, and the United States is run by a despotic theocratic President for Life (Cliff Robertson, [Charly](#)) who believes in *The Bible* and severe punishment for moral crimes. Using a desolate Los Angeles (now surrounded by water as the result of a devastating earthquake in the year 2000) as a place of exile, he deports all undesirables to the island metropolis. When the Commander in Chief's daughter Utopia (A.J. Langer, [The People Under the Stairs](#)) steals the celebrated "Black Box," hijacks Air Force Three and flies the device to her "virtual reality" lover, terrorist revolutionary Cuervo Jones (Georges Corraface, **Not Without My Daughter**), the country is in grave peril. Luckily, loner/rebel Snake Plissken (Kurt Russell, *Grindhouse*) has just been captured. Once again, officials will make a deal with our angry anti-hero, asking him to infiltrate L.A. and bring back the box before all Armageddon breaks loose.

The Evidence

Here's the problem with **Escape from L.A.**—it doesn't really know what it wants to be. Is it a homage to the original [Escape from New York](#) or a quirky social commentary with La-La Land and the long defunct Moral Majority as its subjects? Is it an action film, or a comedy? Are we supposed to take any of it seriously, and if so, how do you moderate the message with concepts like the self-imposed suicide electric chairs? Maybe it was nothing more than a chance for Kurt Russell to revisit a character he loves to play, or for John Carpenter to overload the cast with actors and friends who, until that point, hadn't found much favor in mid '90s Tinseltown. After all, we have a pre-**Ulee's Gold** Peter Fonda and a pre-**Jackie Brown** Pam Grier in significant roles. Add in the requisite industry eccentric (Steve Buscemi), a complete unknown (Corraface) and some off the radar (Langer, Valeria Golina) eye candy, and

you've got one confused film—frequently fun, but baffling in its overall dynamic.

At least Russell is having fun here, putting Plissken in a place where nothing makes much sense. Unlike New York, which was a haven for criminals and other felonious reprobate, L.A. is viewed as the sum total of its sins. Therefore, we get murderous plastic surgery clinics in Beverly Hills (lead by an unrecognizable Bruce Campbell as "The Surgeon General"), under-aged Asian gangs with machine guns, and guerillas straight out of a South American swap meet. We get nods to the Universal Studios tour, the Capital Records building, maps to the stars' homes, and in one cleverly named cornerstone, Disney's Magic Kingdom. What's aggravating is how little is done with these elements. Most are tossed off like one-liners, jokes the audience is supposed to snicker over while waiting for the next car chase. As for the action, it's rather underwhelming. Instead of lots of bang for the buck, we get isolated pyrotechnics and some incredibly crappy CG stunts (riding a tsunami down an L.A. canal sounds cool, in theory...).

Even the message gets mired in a lost desire to keep the ADD-addled demographic happy. The notion of a power-hungry theocrat running the US into the ground is not so far fetched in 2010 (did someone say George W. Bush???) but then Robertson is given little to do with it. He doesn't chew the scenery so much as successfully merge into it. Secondly, the tame terrorism expressed by Jones is jellybeans compared to what the world has had to put up with in the last decade or so. Sure, he's leading an invasion of America and plotting to use the remote control device to subvert much of the nation's technology, but he's a passive despot. Let's face it—his big life and death stand-off with Snake involves...a game of basketball??? At least the President's pretty daughter has her philosophy screwed on straight. She wants a return to the Constitution and the inherent rights of the individual. All Jones seems to want is a typical bid for more power (Snore). Without a real threat—and we know Snake is capable of doing his own significant global damage—**Escape from L.A.** becomes a mission without a purpose. If the intent here was to have fun and let the audience in on the joke, it's a success. Anything else stretches cinematic credibility.

Released on a barebones Blu-ray from Paramount with only a theatrical trailer as added content, the look and sound of **Escape from L.A.** is definitely less than reference quality. The 2.35:1 1080p image is rife with issues, the primary one being the lame-ass special effects employed by Carpenter and company. CG hasn't been this obvious since Tron took on the Master Control Program. Many of the long shots look awful, bad matte paintings and computer generated junk taking up the screen. Sure, there are some effective shots (the Hollywood Hills on fire looks decent), but for the most part, the 1996 low budget version of the future looks a lot more dated than the original 1981 attempt. Even worse, when dealing with the prevalent night scenes, the high-def format renders things flat and lifeless. While there is ample detail, there is really no sense of depth—and, as usual, any greenscreen use is instantly recognizable and easily given away.

As for the audio, the TrueHD lossless mix is only meaningful in the action scenes. During the chases, noises in the back channels add a sense of space that the image can't compete with. Of course, you have to contend with a multichannel take on Carpenter's ersatz-electronica soundtrack (in collaboration with Shirley Walker), but at least the dialogue is presented in a clean and crisp manner. There are also French and Spanish standard Dolby Digital 5.1 offered, as well as subtitles in all three major languages as well as Portuguese.



Closing Statement

While not the worst movie in Carpenter's oeuvre (that distinction still rests with his take on [Village of the Damned](#)) **Escape from L.A.** is certainly the most brain dead. It strives for little more than a starring vehicle for a bunch of buddies and takes the reputation of Snake Plissken and screws with it substantially. Eleven years before, he was a battle-scarred vet who metered out justice the same way he spoke—slowly and sadistically. Now he's the punchline to a franchise that failed in only its second time out. One could easily see this character becoming a certified action icon the way of John McClane or Rambo. Instead, he's like Remo Williams, whose adventures stopped before they really got started. With a little more focus (and a lot less on-set shenanigans), this could have been good. As it stands, it's nothing more than a career curiosity for most involved.

The Verdict

Guilty of being a lame follow-up. Equally at fault for being a less than definitive high definition digital reproduction.

You, The Jury...



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