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Case Number 19443



Escape From New York (Blu-Ray)

MGM // 1981 // 99 Minutes // Rated R
Reviewed by Judge Dan Mancini // August 9th, 2010

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Scales of Justice

Video:	85
Audio:	88
Extras:	0
Acting:	90
Story:	90
Judgment:	90

Perp Profile

Studio: MGM
Video Formats:
 • 2.35:1 Non-Anamorphic (1080p)
Audio Formats:
 • DTS HD 5.1 Master Audio (English)
 • Dolby Digital 5.1 Surround (English)
 • Dolby Digital 5.1 Surround (French)
Subtitles:
 • English (SDH)
 • Spanish
Running Time: 99 Minutes
Release Year: 1981
MPAA Rating: Rated R
Genres:
 • [Action](#)
 • [Adventure](#)
 • [Blu-ray](#)
 • [Science Fiction](#)
 • [Thriller](#)

Distinguishing Marks

- DVD Version

Accomplices

- [IMDb](#)

All Rise...

Judge Dan Mancini doesn't give a *&@% about your war...or your president.

Editor's Note

Our reviews of [Escape From New York](#) (published December 4th, 2000) and [Escape From New York: Special Edition](#) (published June 14th, 2004) are also available.

The Charge

"Wow, Snake Plissken. All right! What are you doing in here with a gun, Snake?"—*Girl in Chock Full o' Nuts*

Opening Statement

I wasn't able to see **Escape from New York** during its original theatrical run. I entered my teens a couple of years after it was released, just in time for the advent of pay cable television channels and consumer grade VCRs (complete with simulated wood veneer cases). I was around 12 when I taped a Showtime airing of the movie. I watched that cassette until it disintegrated. It's possible that my friends and I spent a full third of our pre-driving teen years watching it—and loving it. I wouldn't say that it's the John Carpenter movie I most admire (that would be [The Thing](#), followed closely by [Big Trouble in Little China](#)), but just thinking about Snake Plissken, Bob Hauk, Brain, Cabbie, the Duke of New York, America's most craven president, and Adrienne Barbeau in that red dress warms the cockles of my heart. I love **Escape from New York** the way some people love [The Goonies](#) or [The Monster Squad](#): It is an instant trip back in time to the simple, carefree days of my youth. It's also completely badass.

It's about time it was released on Blu-ray.

Facts of the Case

1988. The crime rate in America rises 400 percent. To stem the tide of violence and mayhem, the government walls off Manhattan, turning it into a maximum security prison. Bridges and waterways are mined. The United States Police Force is set up along the 50-foot high wall enclosing the island, ready to machine gun anyone who tries to escape. There are no guards inside the prison, only prisoners and the world they create. There is only one rule: once you go in, you don't come out.

1997. Still entangled in World War III, America is awash in turmoil. A member of the anarchist National Liberation Front of America hijacks Air Force One and crashes it on Manhattan. The president (Donald Pleasence, [Halloween](#)) survives in an escape pod, but is taken hostage by the Duke of New York (Isaac Hayes, [South Park](#)), the most powerful inmate in the prison (he's A number one). The president carries a cassette tape with information that must be delivered at an international summit scheduled to begin in 24 hours. The fate of the world rests on the presentation of that tape. Desperate to rescue the president, US Police Force Commissioner Bob Hauk (Lee Van Cleef, [The Good, the Bad and the Ugly](#)) forcibly enlists the help of one-time Special Forces soldier S.D. "Snake" Plissken

(Kurt Russell, [The Thing](#)). Convicted of robbing the Federal Reserve Depository, Snake is on a one-way trip to Manhattan anyway. Hauk offers him a full pardon if he can rescue the president before the summit begins. As an insurance policy, Hauk's people inject two micro-explosives into Plissken's carotid arteries. If he brings the president out in time, the charges can be neutralized. If not, Snake's a dead man. Plissken couldn't care less about the president or the summit, but pilots a glider into Manhattan in order to save his own neck by saving the president. Once inside, he teams with former colleague Brain (Harry Dean Stanton, [Paris, Texas](#)), Brain's squeeze Maggie (Adrienne Barbeau, [The Fog](#)), and eccentric Cabbie (Ernest Borgnine, [The Wild Bunch](#)) to wrest the president (and the tape) from the Duke and get the hell out of New York.

The Evidence

John Carpenter made **Escape from New York** after the surprise success of [Halloween](#) and the disappointing failure of his ghost story [The Fog](#). It was, in many ways, a return to his exploitation roots. **Escape from New York** has much in common with Carpenter's second feature, [Assault on Precinct 13](#), a low-budget, violent exploitation homage to Howard Hawks' [Rio Bravo](#). Both movies borrow from Hawks a fascination with men who are the best at what they do—professionals surrounded by amateurs. In **Escape from New York**, Plissken is a pro. He's former Special Forces and a complete hard-ass. None of the other characters (with the possible exception of Bob Hauk) stands a chance against Plissken's seasoned, pragmatic professionalism. As Snake prepares to go after the president, much is made of the fact that the mission is similar to one he carried out in Leningrad. In fact, Snake Plissken is so accomplished at this sort of badassery that nearly everyone inside and outside of the prison has heard of him and recognizes him by appearance. Like a classic Hawksian hero, Snake Plissken is a man's man and a pro who doesn't suffer fools or their incompetence. And because Carpenter's dystopian vision of the future is a world ruled by fools and defined by incompetence, Plissken has made the leap from war hero to high-profile criminal. **Escape from New York** is Howard Hawks filtered through the violence of exploitation cinema and the pessimism of post-Vietnam/post-Watergate America. It's as bleak and sardonic as it is action-packed.

If **Escape from New York** is more memorable than **Assault on Precinct 13**, it's mostly because Snake Plissken is a more colorful sardonic anti-hero than **Assault's** Napoleon Wilson. Plissken is cut from the same cloth as Wilson, but benefits not only from an eye patch and camouflage pants but also from Kurt Russell. Darwin Joston was fine as Wilson, but didn't fully inhabit the character like Russell does Plissken. Russell plays Snake with a perfect mix of tough-guy bravado and weary apathy—he's all hard-assed business with just a touch of self-pity and exasperated resignation. The rest of the cast is also amazing, considering **Escape from New York's** feet are firmly planted in B-movie land. Lee Van Cleef, Harry Dean Stanton, Donald Pleasence, Ernest Borgnine, Isaac Hayes, and Adrienne Barbeau are so good in their respective roles that they give **Escape from New York** an irresistibly fun texture and detail that allows the flick to hold up on multiple viewings despite absurdities like timed micro-explosives injected into Snake's jugular, no one in the White House or State Department having had the good sense to make a copy of the president's world-saving cassette tape, or the very idea of people ceding one of the most valuable pieces of property in America to the government so that it could be turned into a maximum security prison. Sure, **Escape from New York** is absurd as hell when you stop and think about it, but the cast is so uniformly awesome that they fully convince you that you don't want to stop and think about it—and isn't that part of every actor's job?

On top of the enjoyable performances, **Escape from New York** is beautifully constructed. Carpenter and cinematographer Dean Cundey ([Jurassic Park](#)) shot it in Carpenter's preferred aspect ratio of 2.35:1—highly unusual for a low-budgeter. As always, the director makes full use of the wide frame, and demonstrates a knack for elegant and precise camera movement. Being hampered by a minuscule special effects budget didn't stop Carpenter and his crew from tastefully melding matte paintings (some of them by James Cameron, [Terminator 2: Judgment Day](#)), practical sets, and a few choice locations in New York (including on Liberty Island), St. Louis, Los Angeles, and Atlanta into a bleak, post-apocalyptic cityscape that's never really been matched in terms of grit and believability. With **Escape from New York**, John Carpenter put on a clinic in what a filmmaker can do with a little bit of money and a lot of ingenuity. Compared to modern cinema, where so much can be accomplished with a computer, there's something at once quaint and supremely impressive about the science fiction dystopian vision Carpenter was able to create with little more than his wits, an exemplary cast, and a paltry (for the movie business) six million dollars.

This high definition release of **Escape from New York** represents a substantial A/V upgrade over MGM's Special Edition DVD, but not the sort that Blu-ray fans love to gush over. What you don't get here is radically improved detail. The hard truth is that Carpenter and Cundey opted to shoot the movie with extremely low levels of light using anamorphic lenses (a challenging double-whammy if ever there was one). In all likelihood, the movie can't be presented in sharp detail without a lot of digital tomfoolery during the mastering process. I owned the British Blu-ray release for a couple days before selling it in the used market. It had more detail than this North American release, but was so riddled with edge enhancement and other digital trickery (not to mention off-putting color timing) that it looked like Carpenter shot the movie on video. Not so this new Blu-ray. It may not wow you with sharp detail, but it's an impressive piece of work. What it reveals in no uncertain terms is just how weak the black levels were on the Special Edition DVD. Doing an A/B comparison of the shot in which Air Force One makes its final approach into Manhattan, you can practically see through the composited airliner on the DVD; on the Blu-ray, it is a solid looking (if delightfully low-budget) effect. More important, the inky black levels ensure that dilapidated Manhattan is draped in deep, impenetrable shadow, as it should be. Colors are also far more accurate. Flesh tones are spot on, while reds and oranges are both more vivid and more accurate than on the DVD. And don't get me wrong about the level of detail in the image. There is definitely more depth than in the standard definition release, and close-ups in the few brightly lit scenes set the many crags in Lee Van Cleef's face in sharp relief. Most important, the image looks a lot more like celluloid than any prior home video release. It's not the best looking high def transfer I've ever seen, but it looks solid considering the movie's age and its shoestring budget. It's possible, I suppose, that the transfer could be more impressive if MGM had sunk more cash into producing the master, but I still came away feeling like what I saw on Blu-ray is much closer to the theatrical experience than either of the previously released DVDs. The 1080p/AVC transfer presents the movie in its original 2.35:1 aspect ratio. Despite its age, the source print was either meticulously restored or nearly pristine to begin with—there are minor flaws here and there, but nothing that distracts.

The DTS-HD Master Audio mix of the movie's original audio track is even more impressive than the video transfer. Dialogue and effects are limited by the analog stereo source, but John Carpenter's atmospheric score comes across



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very well. The music is heavy with sustained bass pedal tones that lend the proceedings an ominous, almost oppressive vibe. The score is crisp and vibrant without drowning out the other elements of the track.

The Rebuttal Witnesses

In terms of supplements, this Blu-ray earns a hearty WTF. The Special Edition DVD was stacked with two commentaries (one by producer Debra Hill and set designer Joe Alves; the other by John Carpenter and Kurt Russell); a deleted scene; a making-of featurette; and a trailer. None of that made its way onto this release. Instead, the Blu-ray disc has no extras (unless you count "Smart Menu Technology" as an extra, which the back cover of the keeppcase apparently does). More perplexing, the included DVD isn't Disc One from the 2004 Special Edition, but the barebones (except for a trailer) flipper disc from 2000. Side One of the disc contains an anamorphic widescreen presentation of the movie, while Side Two offers it up in full frame pan-and-scan. It's as though MGM went out of its way to ensure that the Blu-ray had no supplemental content whatsoever. I don't get it. It's especially disappointing that, had they chosen to throw Disc One of the Special Edition in the case, we'd at least have gotten the two commentary tracks. Carpenter and Russell *always* deliver great talk tracks, and their recording for **Escape from New York** is one of their best, combining the duo's entertaining repartee with Carpenter's fascinating anecdotes about the various in-camera tricks he used to make the movie look a lot more visually elegant than flicks made on similarly small budgets usually do. The fact that MGM decided to toss out a barebones Blu-ray of one of John Carpenter's most beloved cult flicks is inexcusable.

Closing Statement

Given their current financial woes, I can understand why MGM wouldn't invest in the production of new BD-exclusive supplemental content for this release. I can't fathom why they didn't include the supplements they'd already paid for. This Blu-ray might easily have been the definitive home video release of **Escape from New York**. Instead, it's difficult to recommend to anyone but die-hard fans of the flick. The audio and video presentation definitely trumps either of the standard definition releases, but the difference isn't so eye-popping that a double-dip is warranted for everyone. If you love the flick like I do, by all means, grab the disc on the cheap, while hanging onto your Special Edition DVD for the extras. Everyone else is best served by taking a pass on the high definition upgrade and hanging onto your old DVDs.

The Verdict

Snake Plissken deserves a full pardon, but this Blu-ray is sentenced to life in New York for its total disregard for extras.

You, The Jury...



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