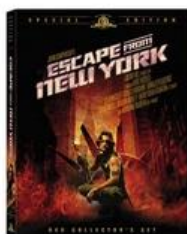




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Case Number 04602



Escape From New York: Special Edition

MGM // 1981 // 99 Minutes // Rated R
Reviewed by Judge Bill Treadway (Retired) // June 14th, 2004

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Scales of Justice

Video:	99
Audio:	100
Extras:	78
Acting:	100
Story:	100
Judgment:	99

Special Commendations

- [Top 100 Films: #78](#)

Perp Profile

- Studio:** MGM
Video Formats:
 • 2.35:1 Anamorphic
Audio Formats:
 • Dolby Digital 5.1 Surround (English)
 • Dolby Digital 2.0 Mono (French)
Subtitles:
 • English
 • French
 • Spanish
Running Time: 99 Minutes
Release Year: 1981
MPAA Rating: Rated R
Genres:
 • [Action](#)
 • [Science Fiction](#)

Distinguishing Marks

- Commentary by Director John Carpenter and Actor Kurt Russell
- Commentary by Producer Debra Hill and Production Designer Joe Alves
- Deleted Scene: Original First Reel
- "Return to **Escape from New York**" Featurette
- Making of *Snake Plissken*
- *Chronicles* Comic Book Gallery
- Photo Gallery
- Theatrical Trailers

Accomplices

- [IMDb](#)

All Rise...

Ever since reviewing this special edition, Judge Bill Treadway has been demanding that everyone address him as "Snake" and claiming to have an explosive device implanted in his skull. Later, Chief Justice Mike Jackson was seen disposing of a syringe and scalpel.

Editor's Note

Our reviews of [Escape From New York](#) (published December 4th, 2000) and [Escape From New York \(Blu-Ray\)](#) (published August 9th, 2010) are also available.

The Charge

1997. New York City is now a maximum-security prison. Breaking out is impossible. Breaking in is insane.

Opening Statement

By 1981, John Carpenter was riding high. Now that he had a series of successful films under his belt, Avco Embassy asked Carpenter to make a film out of a novel they had acquired. When he got stuck in his effort to adapt *The Philadelphia Experiment*, Carpenter proposed a screenplay he originally wrote in 1973. Avco Embassy liked the proposal and greenlit the project, soon to be called **Escape from New York**.

After several editions of varying quality, MGM has finally given the deluxe treatment to one of the most important films of the 1980s.

Facts of the Case

In 1988, crime became so rampant that drastic measures were taken. New York City was walled up and transformed into the ultimate maximum-security prison. The worst of the very worst criminals would now be exiled into a state that was once proud.

Nine years later, Air Force One is the victim of a hijacking. The president (Donald Pleasence, [Halloween](#)) manages to escape, but he crash-lands in the middle of New York. Soon he is captured by the Duke (Isaac Hayes, [Truck Turner](#)), the "leader" of New York.

Police commissioner Bob Hauk (Lee Van Cleef, [The Good, The Bad and the Ugly](#)) decides to send a man inside the prison to save the president. But who can he send? Enter Snake Plissken (Kurt Russell, [The Thing](#)), a criminal on the point of serving serious time for robbery. Hauk has explosive devices implanted into Plissken that will detonate after twenty-two hours. There are reasons for a prompt, swift mission: The fate of the world depends on it.

The Evidence

Before I go any further, I'd to say right now that this will not be the type of review I usually write. Much has already been said about **Escape from New York**, and to merely repeat it would be cheating. Instead, look at this review as a supplement to retired Judge Harold Gervais's review of the 2000 MGM single-disc release. The meat of this review is about the disc itself, with some random thoughts of my own.

Much has been made of the popular notion that **Escape from New York** is a cult classic and a "junk" movie. I do not agree with that perception. A cult classic is defined as a movie that slowly finds an audience despite unusual subject matter and middling box office, and **Escape from New York** does not conform to that definition. The six-million-dollar film was a big hit in 1981, grossing four times its cost. The subject matter isn't all that unusual, either: While it has futuristic elements, the plot is far from extraordinary. So what exactly is **Escape from New York**? I like to think of it as a highly personal action film that is smarter than the usual kind spewed out by Hollywood.

Avco Embassy originally wanted Tommy Lee Jones to play Snake Plissken. While that would have made an interesting film, I like the fact that Carpenter cast Kurt Russell in the lead. After years of starring in innocuous Disney films, Russell clearly has a ball playing the definitive antihero Snake Plissken. Here is a ruthless, hardened man who is the complete antithesis of Dexter Riley (**The Computer Who Wore Tennis Shoes**) and the cookie-cutter Disney roles he had been accustomed to. In the commentary, Russell remarks that his inspiration for the role was The Man with No Name, antihero of the classic "Dollars" trilogy directed by Sergio Leone. Plissken exhibits many of the same qualities that Eastwood did in those films. He is just as amoral as the people he's hunting down, which is why **Escape from New York** is a great deal more interesting than most standard action flicks.

John Carpenter's screenplay, cowritten with friend Nick Castle (**The Boy Who Could Fly**), is remarkable in that it refuses to simply resort to standard clichés. Instead, Carpenter and Castle use a darkly comic touch to satirize these clichés. Standard characters such as the sidekick and false villain are turned upside down with wink-of-the-eye humor.

Escape from New York also contains perhaps the best hardcore wrestling sequence ever filmed. Carpenter cast a professional wrestler, Ox Baker, as Snake's opponent for the sequence, and the use of a real wrestler lends realism to a sequence that could have been farfetched. (On second thought, with the aftermath of Extreme Championship Wrestling, this match is child's play.)

Carpenter's use of widescreen is flawless. With so many directors thinking ahead to the pan-and-scan version, Carpenter is one of the few who uses the widescreen for maximum effect. The casting is also brilliant. Russell's laconic performance is the perfect match for Lee Van Cleef's hardboiled one as Hawk. Isaac Hayes gets to follow up his blaxploitation stardom with the meaty role of The Duke. I wonder if Donald Pleasence was grateful *not* to be chasing any serial killers around in this film, especially following two **Halloween** films and **Night Creature**. Ernest Borgnine is appropriately over the top as the cabbie, and Adrienne Barbeau makes a strong antiheroine as the tragic Maggie. Harry Dean Stanton is hilarious as Brain, who is anything but.

Escape from New York has been released on DVD before in a single disc from MGM that is still in print. That version was decent but needed improvement. Well, folks, that improvement has arrived. This version of **Escape from New York** outshines all previous editions quite easily. The brand-new 2.35:1 anamorphic widescreen transfer isn't simply a cleaned-up version of the earlier transfer. The previous DVD edition used the same 35mm dupe print as the 1994 Image laserdisc edition. That transfer had some problems with the image, particularly grain and tone. For this special edition, MGM managed to locate the original negative, long thought to be lost. The new transfer is, quite simply, beautiful. Colors are corrected to their original tones. No edge enhancement plagues the image, unlike the previous edition. The night scenes have always been a problem on home video, with the transfers always looking too dark, but those scenes have been restored to their original tones as well. Don't get me wrong; **Escape from New York** was always intended to be a dark film. However, watch this transfer and discover things you never could make out previously in other prints. The sole caveat is light grain, but since night shooting is always going to produce some grain, this is forgivable.

The previous edition used a mono mix that sounded flat and compressed. A Dolby Digital 5.1 Surround stereo mix fixes that problem. The improvement is breathtaking: John Carpenter's score is finally allowed to sing out over the speakers. This is unlike previous editions, in which it fought for space with the dialogue and sound effects. The 1981 Embassy VHS was a muddle in which dialogue often was unintelligible. Not so here. For once, I could clearly understand who was saying what and when. Amazing!

MGM has included a mixed bag when it comes to extra content. We get two commentary tracks, in contrast to the original disc's none. The first is the same John Carpenter/Kurt Russell commentary featured in the Image laserdisc. The second is a newly recorded track with producer Debra Hill and production designer Joe Alves. The Carpenter/Russell track is a real hoot. Whenever you put these two in the same room, the result is bound to be memorable. Lots of good information is shared as well as some memorable stories. They are so much fun to listen to that you will find yourself listening to this track again and again. However, once is more than enough for the second track. It is simply boring to listen to. Hill works well with Carpenter (their track for **The Fog** was superb), but without him it's another story. Alves exudes all the charisma of a cadaver. Lots of technical information shared here, but the dull delivery kills it. Perhaps it was a mistake to follow up Carpenter and Russell with this kind of track.

The true gem of this package is the opportunity to see the original first reel of **Escape from New York** in its entirety. Even better is that John Carpenter and Kurt Russell have reunited for a short commentary track. The reel is in very rough shape, presented in 1.85:1 anamorphic widescreen. I'm pleased that MGM resisted the temptation of offering the option of splicing this reel into the final film, since aside from the poor visual and aural quality, the reel softens our antihero to a sickening degree.

A 25-minute documentary, "Return to **Escape from New York**," features recollections by both the cast and crew. While it is interesting to see the principals today as compared to the time the film was made (1980), this is far too



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short a documentary for such a classic film. Still, some good information absent from both commentaries makes this worthwhile.

Contrary to the description on the packaging, *The Making of "Snake Plissken's Adventures"* is not a featurette. Rather, it is a stills gallery showcasing the creation of a new comic book, the first issue of which is included within the package. As far as comics go, it's okay, with room for improvement.

The film's original theatrical trailer is supplemented with two teaser trailers. It's interesting to see a trailer actually preserve some surprises, unlike those produced by modern Hollywood marketing. A photo gallery concludes this impressive package.

Closing Statement

The single-disc release sells for \$9.99 or less in most stores. The two-disc special edition will set you back \$24.95 or less in the same stores. Don't let the price fool you: If you must own one version of **Escape from New York**, make sure it is the special edition.

Don't be misled by several other online critics who claim the transfer is a letdown. When you have seen as many prints of **Escape from New York** as I have, you can appreciate the vast improvements this special edition has to offer.

The Verdict

For once, I find myself at a loss for words. This special edition defines what "special" should be. Case dismissed!

You, The Jury...



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