

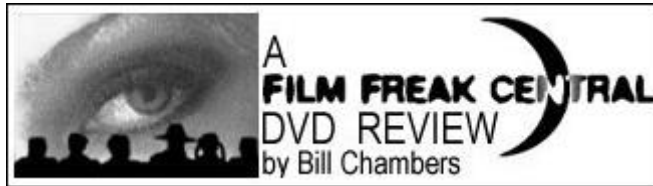
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**ESCAPE FROM NEW YORK (1981)**

***1/2 (out of four)

starring **Kurt Russell, Lee Van Cleef, Ernest Borgnine, Donald Pleasence**
 screenplay by **John Carpenter & Nick Castle**
 directed by **John Carpenter**

Is there a person alive who can hear the opening theme from John Carpenter's *Escape from New York* and resist the urge to tap the keys of an invisible synthesizer? Composed by the director himself (who knows how to write memorable bad music, as much an asset as the ability to write good music), the Mike Post-in-spurs riff is a fitting anthem for The Apocalypse, and a textbook example of how to draw, nay, ease the audience into a film that will feel the whole time like you're staring through a prism at other films, chiefly those belonging to the western, vigilante, and zombie genres. The gift for acclimatizing an audience to his idiosyncratic vision through a simple, melodic overture is one that Carpenter shares with idol Sergio Leone; another is an affinity for the 2.35:1 aspect ratio, although he steers clear of the extreme close-up (Leone's signature), probably half out of plagiarism-worry and half because he's not a sensualist. Carpenter barely even bothered to exploit cheesecake-ready Adrienne Barbeau the two times he directed her--even if she was his wife back then, that takes indifference. I think that men love John Carpenter movies, especially his early shoot-'em-ups, because Carpenter's action figures are so chaste as to evoke the sexless joy of boyhood roughhousing.

Granted, that sometimes means the well-crafted *Escape from New York* rises below adolescence, to paraphrase Mel Brooks--there's a rape-in-progress near the beginning of the picture that's always caused a bit of controversy, preamble as it is to an off-colour rimshot. Here's the set-up: eyepatch'd malcontent Snake Plissken (Kurt Russell) has just docked inside the penal colony/war zone of Manhattan Island circa, obviously, the future, but you'll laugh when the year is identified as 1997. Air Force One was hijacked and the President (Carpenter mainstay Donald Pleasence) managed to escape in a pod that crash-landed in New York City, where he was promptly abducted by ne'er-do-wells called the Crazies (their name and 'tude owing a pronounced debt to George Romero's hostile mutants of the same appellation, though Carpenter--a rebel spirit but not the Sid Vicious kind--seems to attribute their aggression to the spread of punk rather than to a viral contagion). Convicted felon Plissken, whose rap sheet is long and tantalizing to presidential aides looking for a resilient,



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DVD GRADES:
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 99 minutes
MPAA
 R
Aspect Ratio(s)
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 16x9-enhanced
Languages
 English DD 5.1,
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CC
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Subtitles
 English, French, Spanish
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 Region One
 MGM



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expendable courier, is injected with a microscopic bomb that gives him a twenty-two hour deadline to recover the Chief of Staff. Prematurely declaring the mission hopeless after spotting the President's tracking device on the wrist of a homeless person, Plissken radios in to Hauk (Lee Van Cleef, a veteran of Leone's "Dollars" trilogy), the embittered head of a paramilitary police force, requesting permission to quit. Hauk threatens violence if he tries to return; "A little human compassion," Snake mutters in reply, and the tongue-in-cheek Kurt Russell antihero is born--but you have to admit, it's a sticky comeback in the context of Snake having just turned a blind eye to a woman being violated.

The problem with much of Carpenter's work is that it's sort of irresponsible like that. He's left us suspended in mid-air at the end of a number of pictures as a way of distancing himself from intentionality; the "point," he's said of *The Thing*'s cliff-hanger finish, is "you have to use your imagination"--and I've never been able to stomach how morally evasive that is. Spielberg has spoken of his own apprehensiveness about intellectualizing the images he arrives at instinctively, and Carpenter has such an aptitude for filmmaking that rationalizing a creative decision probably feels to him like looking a gift horse in the mouth. Fear of personal retrospection dooms many prodigious artists to repetition (and certainly Carpenter's an artist, and certainly he's repeated himself), though, since part of progress is looking back to see if you've made some.

Complacent Carpenter anticipates we'll do the heavy-lifting. His assertion that *Escape from New York* holds contemporaneous relevance to the Iran hostage crisis that climaxed with Reagan's ascent to power is convenient in that most pop is incidentally socio-politically resonant; and the analogy doesn't really hold up to any scrutiny, particularly if you factor in the film's nihilistic conclusion. At best as far as meaning goes, the picture conveys Carpenter's notorious apathy for the title city in reducing it to rubble. Lucky for him *Escape from New York* is overridingly cool, that three-and-a-half star rating for its brilliant façade (the cast; Dean Cundey's typically-brilliant cinematography; Joe Alves' dystopian sets; suddenly poignant shots of the World Trade Center; Carpenter's score; the charged, badass epilogue). I love this movie, yet I'm not sure if I respect it.

MGM presents *Escape from New York* on DVD in a new 2-disc Special Edition that purports to contain a HiDef remaster of the film. To my eyes, the 2.35:1 anamorphic widescreen transfer is indistinguishable from that of the studio's previous release. Both incarnations tone down the edge-enhancement of the sought-after LaserDisc and offer a more variegated palette. Contrast is inconsistent but often strong, and the source elements, a few stray pinholes aside, are in excellent condition. As for the Dolby Digital 5.1 remix, it's uneven erring on the side of engrossing: there's a constant intentional thrum served well by the subwoofer, while the rear channels are put to excellent use by ubiquitous helicopters and general anarchy. Voices are occasionally brittle, however, and the music responds somewhat poorly to amplification, getting buzzier instead of punchier.

Carpenter and Russell's LaserDisc commentary from 1995--their first yak-track together--is recycled here and deserves its legendary status, the only peril of the yakker's reuse that the boys refer us to supplementary material that's no longer on board. The two are not quite as tangential as we've come to expect, but if that leads to less laughter between the pair



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than is now the norm, it also means we get a solid document of the production, one with a hint of melancholy as the two men are confronted by ghosts of marriages past. (For Russell, bit player Season Hubley and producer Larry Franco, his sister's ex-husband.) Russell's hoarse cackling, of course, remains endearing and infectious. Alves and co-producer Debra Hill contribute an additional feature-length commentary that begins late (two minutes into the film) and overstays its welcome; an unenviable task to follow or precede the dynamic duo of Russell and Carpenter in any capacity, Hill and Alves don't exactly help their cause by rarely deviating from the monotonous topic of location scouting and the closely related subject of set dressing.



Russell and Carpenter return in a recently recorded optional commentary for the film's fabled "missing reel" (11 mins.). Cropped to 1.85:1 and in cruddy shape, this omitted prologue depicts Plissken's takedown after a credit-card heist. Understandably confusing to audiences (its aesthetic is weird but not explicitly futuristic) and a little too humanizing of Snake (as Russell observes), it's an opening sequence that would've at least provided an arc for Snake

in the final cut (in addition to a mirror action for Barbeau's last stand) and is nice to have for posterity. Ditto Michael Gillis' "Return to *Escape from New York*" (23 mins.), despite its utter shortage of fresh insights--Isaac Hayes remembering Donald Pleasence as the man who cracked him up is priceless, as is Harry Dean Stanton, lit cigarette in hand, recalling that he agreed to do the picture once Carpenter granted him permission to improvise. ("Just don't mess with my plot," Carpenter amended.) "The Making of 'John Carpenter's Snake Plissken Chronicles'" is a text-based piece (albeit one strangely labelled "featurette") that explains each stage in the process of realizing an issue of the "Snake Plissken Chronicles" with excessive brevity, but the sample half-size comic jammed into the gatefold of the DVD package (above left) is a swell purchase incentive. A three-tier photo gallery plus trailers for *Escape from New York* (theatrical and two teasers), "Jeremiah: The Complete First Season", *The Terminator*, and *The Fog* round out the not-quite-powerhouse collectible. -**Bill Chambers**

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