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Escape from New York: Special Edition

The Rotten Apple gets a polished DVD.

by [Andy Patrizio](#)

November 24, 2003 - New York in the 1970s was an abysmal place. It earned the nickname "the rotten apple" and was becoming the epitome of urban blight. This meant life sucked for the residents of the five boroughs at the time, but it also seems to have inspired more than a few creative folks. It was this blight that spawned The Ramones, Blondie and the whole New York punk scene.

It was also the inspiration, I suspect, for John Carpenter's 1981 flick *Escape From New York*. While Carpenter doesn't say explicitly that this was the case, it seems pretty obvious. This is one bleak flick. First written in 1974, the movie is an even darker view of the future than *Blade Runner* or other dystopian films from that time period.

The Movie

It's 1997 and Manhattan has been converted into a maximum security prison. The whole area is blocked off and any attempts to swim to freedom are stopped by patrols along the Hudson and East Rivers. Do a crime and you get dumped off in here and left on your own. They never do explain how the residents get food, and I doubt the supermarkets are open.

Considering that some bozos started an online petition to demand Peter Jackson rename *The Two Towers*, I'm glad MGM had the cajones to release this movie as is. The opening consists of the Air Force One pilots being killed, a political radical flying the plane into a New York high rise, and the World Trade Center buildings are prominently featured.

The President (Donald Pleasance) escapes by hiding in an escape pod, but that now means the President is alone in the world's largest prison and all of his Secret Service agents are dead. A rescue attempt is launched, but the commander, Bob Hauk (Lee Van Cleef) is informed that he and his men best leave or the President is a dead man.

Hauk comes up with a brainstorm. He makes an offer to newly-arrested criminal Snake Plissken (Kurt Russell); find and rescue the President in 24 hours and he's a free man. Then Hauk sweetens the deal by implanting a bio-time bomb in his neck. If Snake doesn't find the President in 24 hours, he's a dead man.

- MGM Home Entertainment

The Escape from New York: SE DVD Menu.

Snake enters New York by landing a glider on the top of a World Trade Center tower and begins his search. With the help of Cabbie (Ernest Borgnine), Brain (Harry Dean Stanton) and Maggie (Adrienne Barbeau), Snake learns that the President is being held hostage by The Duke of New York. No, not George Steinbrenner, but Issac "Chef" Hayes.

Not having seen this film in years, watching it again proved unintentionally hilarious because it's so cheesy, especially the beginning. It's always funny to see how wrong Hollywood was about the future. I loved all those "computers" that were nothing more than flashing rows of lights.

- MGM Home Entertainment

In the future, computers will look like a Lightbrite.

Seeing The Duke in that old Caddy, with chandeliers on the front bumpers and a disco ball hanging from the review view window was just priceless. It's just a shame that The Duke didn't have much to do. He and Snake don't mix it up until the very end.

As corny as it is, not to mention unrealistic, it's still a big change from the over-the-top excesses of Jerry Bruckheimer's movies. After too many of those movies, this was like a walk in the park. There's nowhere near as much gunplay, fighting, stunts or action sequences. It's as much a reflection of early 1980s filmmaking as Carpenter's limited budget.

For a B movie, it gets an A-.

Score: 8 out of 10

- MGM Home Entertainment

The Duke had the ultimate bling bling.

The Video

The movie is presented in 2.35:1 anamorphic widescreen format, with a brand spankin' new transfer that does its best to overcome the limitations of the old, low-end film stock. There is some inevitable grain from the cheap film stock that no amount of restoration can fix. Making it tougher is the very dark film, shot mostly at night and without much lighting.

That said, they still made this look pretty good. Black levels are pretty solid, if a bit murky. Grain is reduced to almost nil, and color separation is excellent for such an old print. They really did a good job restoring this print.

Edge enhancement is pretty much non-existent, as are ghosting and halos. In the few brightly-lit spots, there are no chroma or moray errors causing shimmer in the whites.

Nice work, MGM.

Score: 8 out of 10

- MGM Home Entertainment

Be careful when departing the plane, that first step is a doozy.

Languages and Audio

The movie is presented in English Dolby Digital 5.1 surround and French mono audio, with subtitles in English, French and Spanish.

Since the movie predates the advent of Dolby Digital by a decade, some work had to be done to remix the audio in surround sound, and they did a very fine job. There's a lot of use of positional audio, which had me jumping more than once.

I found the audio to be a little on the muted side, but that's more to the age of the film and the technology Carpenter had at his disposal than the mix. They did clean it up by removing any distortion or hiss, so you can crank it nicely.

Score: 8 out of 10

- MGM Home Entertainment

So what didn't you like about my Chocolate Salty Balls?

Packaging and Extras

Escape from New York: Special Edition comes in a very nice two-disc digipak with a comic book featuring Snake. Disc one has two commentary tracks, one with Carpenter and Russell together, and one featuring producer Debra Hill and production designer Joe Alves.

Hill and Alves do offer a lot of insight and detail on the shoot, and on its own would be a good track. But Russell and Carpenter have a ball and steal the show. These two have worked together in several films and they have a ball reminiscing about the shoot. They lend plenty of insight into the shoot but it's their joking around that makes it entertaining.

The rest of the extras are on disc two. It kicks off with the 24-minute *Return to Escape from New York*. They got the whole crew, too: Carpenter, Russell, Hill, co-writer Nick Castle, director of photography Dean Cundey, production designer Joe Alves and most of the main cast, including Adrienne Barbeau, Harry Dean Stanton and Isaac Hayes.

- MGM Home Entertainment

Saruman's early attempts to create orcs didn't go very well.

They talk about everything, from the fact that most of the movie was shot in St. Louis to trying to make an anti-hero like Plissken a hero. I'm surprised there are no on-set shots, bloopers, behind-the-scenes shots, etc. They show scenes from the movie but not its making. In the commentary, Russell jokes about a camera dolly breaking and having to use a baby carriage. Man, I would have loved to see that.

While the menu item says *Deleted Scenes*, it's actually a full reel. It's an 11-minute opening sequence where Snake robs a batch of futuristic credit cards and escapes with a never-before-seen partner on a subway that

supposedly ran under the length of the U.S. No kidding. They supposedly exited in San Francisco after committing the heist on the east coast.

They cut it because the feeling was it was a big distraction from the film and delayed the inevitable start. Also, it softened Snake too much because of his actions (I won't spoil it). It's worth a view. While widescreen, the video is in a very primitive, grainy state. Russell and Carpenter are again in great form. Russell has no memory of filming the whole sequence.

- MGM Home Entertainment
Little higher, Brain. Other side.

The Making of The Snake Plissken Chronicles Comic Book is a bunch of stills looking at the making of Snake Plissken comics, and is rather self-serving. There's also a hefty gallery of photos with some behind the scenes shots. Then there's the *Snake Bites* trailer montage is just a bunch of Snake scenes from the film.

On the inside of the gatefold digipak is a short letter from Carpenter, and tucked into the sleeve is a Snake Plissken comic book. There are no DVD-ROM features.

Score: 8 out of 10

The Escape from New York: SE Bonus DVD Menu.

IGN's Ratings for Escape From New York (Special Edition)

Rating Description

out of 10 [click here for ratings guide](#) [Get Ratings Information](#)

8 The Movie

A cheeseball classic, a fun and funny action B movie.

8 The Video

A very nice restoration that makes the most of the limited stock.

8 The Audio

They did a good job extracting a surround mix from a non Dolby Digital mix.

8 The Extras

Commentaries are a hoot, the lost reel is a treasure. The making-of is kind of short.

8 OVERALL

(out of 10 / not an average)

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