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On Screen

May 13, 2011

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Call Me Snake – The Future Noir Of Escape From New York





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“Down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid.. he must be the best man in his world.” Raymond Chandler’s words on noir detectives apply as much to Snake Plissken, who, according to writer/ director John Carpenter, is the one man with honour in a world gone mad. And what meaner streets than those of Manhattan Island prison?

Escape From New York is ostensibly an action film in a dystopian setting. America and Russia are still engaged in WWII, while domestically crime has risen 400%. It is implied that the population is gradually going crazy, due to various nerve agents used in the war. To cope with all the crazies, weirdos and violent criminals, Manhattan Island has been turned into one giant prison. Why a prime piece of real estate should be used like this is not made clear, but as a killer concept, it is great. Once in, you don’t come out. The bridges have been mined (although why not blow them up?) and a giant containment wall has been built around it. Wardens monitor from Liberty island.





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The idea of a criminal underclass being hived off to a ghetto has a parallel with *The Wire* creator David Simon's caustic theory on the failure of America's war on drugs. In a recent interview with Bill Moyers he said "Economically, we don't need these people, the American economy doesn't need them. So long as they stay in their ghettos and only kill each other, we're willing to pay for a police presence to keep them out of our America." Do you think he's a fan of the film?

Not only is Manhattan a prison, it is a symptom of the morally bankrupt system outside. America has become a virtual police state. Kicking against the country that betrayed him is our anti-hero Snake Plissken (Kurt Russell). We first meet him being processed as a new prisoner on Liberty Island (the irony!), sentenced to life for robbing the federal reserve. In a deleted scene, we see the robbery, and the violent shooting of his accomplice Taylor by the trigger happy United States Police Force. Taylor was possibly his last link to normal human contact. Snake trusts him to divvy up the proceeds; to him, the robbery was more a means of sticking it to "the man". From now on Snake's only interest (or so he keeps telling himself) is in self-preservation.

From his meeting with USPF Commissioner Bob Hawk (the great Lee Van Cleef), we find out that Snake is a decorated special forces veteran, who obviously became disgusted by the war and his country. Hawk needs a man like him to retrieve the U.S. President (Donald Pleasence), who has crashed in New York with vital information after Air Force One was hijacked. Snake tells Hawk "I don't give a fuck about your war, or your President." He perks up when told he'll get a full amnesty for rescuing the President, plus the tape on a viable means of nuclear fusion he's carrying in a secure briefcase. The nuclear angle can be seen as a reference to the Mike Hammer noir film *Kiss Me Deadly*, in which various parties vie for possession of the deadly radioactive case.

The scene between Hawk and Snake is similar to a specially filmed intro made for the first U.S television screening of *A Fistful Of Dollars*. The network was nervous about the nihilistic nature of the man with no name, so filmed a special scene where an imprisoned no name / Joe (played by an obvious Clint stand in) is briefed by the Governor (Harry Dean Stanton, who plays Brain in *EFNY*). The Governor tells him he'll get a pardon in return for eliminating the two feuding gangs smuggling guns across the Mexican border. Certainly Russell channels Eastwood's machismo and raspy voice, and Carpenter is a big western fan, so he was delighted to get Van Cleef. The two actors gel together beautifully. In another western nod, the running gag where people say to Snake "I thought you were dead" is a reference to John Wayne's *Big Jake*.

Hawk tells Snake "You flew the Gullfire over Leningrad. You know how to go in quiet. You're all I've got." This throwaway reference, and Hawk's ingenious means of ensuring Snake's co-operation, were big influences on William Gibson's influential cyber-punk novel *Neuromancer*, another form of future noir. Fooling Snake

into thinking he is being inoculated, Hawk has him injected with micro-bombs into his carotid arteries. He has 24 hours to achieve his objective and disarm the bombs, or he'll have a terminally sore throat. This idea echoes noir thriller *D.O.A.*, in which Edmund O'Brien staggers into a police station to report his own murder, before tracking down who fatally poisoned him. It immediately gives a sense of urgency to Snake's task.

"You mean I can't count on you?" Snake asks Hawk as he prepares to fly the Gullfire glider into New York. "Good." As noir expert Robert G Porfirio has stated, "To a large degree every noir hero is an alienated man...the noir hero is most often "a stranger in a hostile world." Noirish dialogue peppers Snake's encounters with the inmates of Manhattan's mad menagerie. Introduced to Brain, who he previously knew as Harold, when he left Snake for dead four years earlier, he tells him "A man should remember his past."



Now go get your shine box!

The film even has a femme fatale in Maggie (Adrienne Barbeau), Brain's girlfriend / bodyguard, supplied by the self proclaimed Duke Of New York (Isaac Hayes) to keep Brain sweet and on his team. When they and Cabbie (Ernest Borgnine) realise they stand a better chance of getting out with Snake, she proves a tough ally. Cabbie supplies the role of the noir hero's eyes and ears on the street.

And what could be more noirish than the rain slicked, nighttime city streets? Shot for a modest \$7 million, Carpenter's most expensive film up to that point delivers on atmosphere. A pre-fame James Cameron worked on the matte shots, including the city approach and World Trade Center landing site for Plissken's glider. The film-makers found an area of St Louis that had suffered a major fire. It was perfect for destroyed New York urban neighbourhoods. As much of the film's exterior shooting took place at night and the prison had its power cut off, Carpenter persuaded the authorities to let him shut off the electricity for up to ten blocks each night while shooting.

EFNY is very, very good at delivering on mood, atmosphere and character, with a great story. However, as a thrill ride, it has to be said, it is lacking. Compare it to *Die Hard*, similarly with a hero in a (much smaller) confined arena, racing against time to stop the bad guys. Made only eight years later, it is light years ahead in terms of pacing and action. Snake Plissken, however, is one of cinema's all time great anti-heros,

delivering a nice “fuck you” to the Prez and the other corrupt authority figures after his narrow escape. When Hawk says “I thought you were going to kill me?” and Snake rasps “I’m tired. Maybe later”, and limps away, you’re not sure if or when he’ll ever make good on that promise.

About the Author



Tim Pelan

I was born in 1968, the year of 2001: A Space Odyssey (Possibly my favourite film) , Planet of The Apes, The Night Of The Living Dead, and Barbarella. That also made me the perfect age for when Star Wars came out. Some would say this explains a lot.

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