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Snake 94

"I don't give a fuck about your war or your President..."

13 years on, ESCAPE FROM NEW YORK continues to thrill, entertain and fascinate the Science Fiction community. Besides bearing a title that most residents of New York eventually fantasize about, ESCAPE touches us deep inside, taps things that we all feel. Almost a score after it's release, Snake fandom has never been higher: (thanks in part to the remake ESCAPE FROM L.A.), bolstering fan fiction magazines (SNAKE BIT and DARK PARADISE), several fan sites, and even a comic.

To explore the universe that John Carpenter, Nick Castle and Kurt Russell created, it's good to start with John himself.

"It's both our fears and what we would like to have happen." - Director John Carpenter (from the Escape From New York Director's Edition interview).

Police states are a scary thing. A society this close to a dictatorship. Marshal law is enforced, and NO ONE is safe in the ESCAPE universe. America is bound by Army-like U.S.P.F. (made up of veterans from the ongoing World War). The crime rate has quadrupled. In order to cope with this problem, Manhattan Island (decimated by bomb raids early on in the War) has been turned into the country's maximum security penal colony. The prisoners live by their own brutal codes, kill or be killed. Answer to the Duke or die. Territories are staked out, and outsiders terminated. The chaos that has overrun the island is not unlike the gangs of America's inner cities.

In a twist that echoes reality, politics are dished out by power-hungry officials who don't care about integrity and the loss of innocent life. This is addressed in the President Harker character. We learn he's only out to save his own skin; who cares if Russia and China destroy themselves, as long as he stays ahead. And does he care that several people died in NY Max while he made it out. His character makes me think of the government fiasco behind Vietnam. A lot of young men were sent to their deaths and our government knew this but did nothing to prevent so much

loss. In ESCAPE's President we again feel betrayed. Echoes of Watergate, Irancontra and Clinton's hot pants...the authorities have spit on us again...

"What we would like to have happen..." -more from John's EFNY Director's Edition interview.

So what does Carpenter mean by that? Everyone-at one time or another-has wanted to flip the bird at authority much the way ESCAPE's anti-hero Snake Plissken does in the ESCAPE films. Not only at the ragweed of a President he almost lost life rescuing from NY Max, but too, at Police Commissioner Bob Hauk who had his own demise for the young ex-soldier already in motion.

Even though Plissken's a bad ass and essentially one nasty hombre, you wind up cheering when he gets his revenge.

Kurt and John wisely modeled their reptile after Clint Eastwood and Lee Van Cleef's (who played Hauk in NY) brutal gunslingers. He's mysterious, he's the best at his occupation (be it war or thievery) and he takes no shit. Snake is his own man and then some, and everyone envies him for that. Plissken however, doesn't give a shit about the world. He just wants to get on with his business and walk away.

Authorities have failed us. Yet these same authorities expect us to all comply even when they have wronged us. Snake does unto others as they've done unto him.

Seeing that the world at large is beyond redemption, and not caring for the careers of gangsters like the Duke or politico jerks like the President, he destroys the tape that could end the War. Essentially destroying any hope for the planet...a little extreme perhaps, but gratifying to this fan none the less. For he gets revenge on those who harmed him both outside and in.

"Good Science Fiction has to have an element of truth, there's something about it you have to believe..." -John Carpenter from the EFNY Director's Edition.

ESCAPE FROM NEW YORK is full of believable premise, possibly one of the reasons why people still adore the film. Go into any inner city torn apart by gang strife and you'll see the downward spiral of humanity that permeates the film. The world has become an increasing violent society, and this film mirrors that fact. Warring street gangs (made up all ethnic types and subcultures: white, black, red, yellow, punks, thugs, aging hippies, druggies, young, old, male, female etc.), we see rape, no compassion for those without. It's a real smack in the face.

Many people already view the city of New York as a prison because of the conditions and crime under which one must endure to live there. Granted it's not all thorns, but there are areas where you can almost sense the crazies waiting to take over the night. Is it so far fetched an idea that it can't (or hasn't already) happened. A lot of people think the current NY mayor is almost running a police state. Will Manhattan one day really be dubbed NY Max?

Through our tour guide Cabbie, we find the good and bad parts of the city. The Bowery still is one of worst areas to be in, at night. And Fifth Avenue (where you'll find the Public Library) is far better, except when you go shopping then it's hellacious! Anyway, it's fun to have this jolly cab driver around to watch out for you, especially since very few of the cab drivers in NYC these days haven't the slightest clue as to where they are going. So follow old Ernest Borgnine through NY and you'll be just fine.

Can you say rip off, or what's wrong with this picture?

Strangely enough, John's landmark look at the future has never been hailed as the classic BLADE RUNNER became. EFNY had the same look, danger, tension and compelling characters a year prior to BR's release.

Look at any action movie from 1982 onward and you'll see an anti-hero not unlike Snake Plissken. Sci-Fi prison films are still the rage. RUNNING MAN, FORTRESS and the oh so bad NO ESCAPE are just a few of the films that have ripped off Carpenter's classic.

Need proof: okay, fine character actor Kevin J. O'Connor has almost identical EFNY boots line to bad boy wannabe Ray Liotta in NO ESCAPE which goes something like this: "Those are great boots. Can I have them when your dead." In RUNNING MAN (Like JOHNNY MNEMONIC which ripped this next point off even further) the prisoners have collars around their necks that will blow up their heads if they go beyond a certain point in the penal compound. JOHNNY MNEMONIC meanwhile, had Keanu Reeves download information into a harddrive in his head which was leaking information. If not fixed within yes, 24 hours, Keanu's head would explode...(I kind think it already has...but that's another story dude).

In closing, when it comes down to it, most people love these films for Snake Plissken. Kurt Russell took a wonderfully crafted character and made him larger than life. Someone we'd all like to be even just for a day...

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