

Seminar Paper

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Illustration 1: Escape from New York. John Carpenter, US 1981. TC: 00:17:01

CRITICISM OF SOCIETY AND POLITICS PORTRAYED IN ESCAPE FROM NEW YORK

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1. Introduction

Growing up I was always aware of my father's devotion to Kurt Russell and his worship for the movie *Escape from New York*. It would be an understatement to say that my dad is simply a fan of this actor and the movies he stars. A stranger walking into our house might be disturbed not seeing the walls covered with family pictures but coming across posters showing Kurt Russell. Apart from his addiction to silly merchandise I have always wondered about my father's obsession with this movie. But as I got older, developing a sensibility and understanding for social contents, iniquities and mechanisms in our world, the idea at the center of the movie began to captivate me. Being confronted with topics of ethnic and social marginalization and controversial political issues during my exchange year in the United States made me reflect even more on *Escape from New York* and how it portrays the US with a whole different perspective.

Nowadays the city of New York is considered to be one of the safest major capitals in the world, thus it is inconceivable for many young people that the famous metropolis used to be known as the "Fear City" in the 1970s. From 1960 to 1970 homicide rates increased by a hundred per cent as a result of a municipal financial crisis with severe cuts of the law enforcement which as a consequence lead to more criminal activity on the streets. In comparison to 2016, where New York's estimated homicide rate per capita was 4.09, the numbers in the 1970s were close to being five times higher than that, with a maximum of 21.96 in 1979. (Cf. Sawe 2018)

These shocking numbers most likely inspired director John Carpenter to create his dystopia *Escape from New York*. The movie was released in 1981 towards the very end of the New Hollywood era, a genre typically focusing on real-life issues of everyday people: In *Escape from New York*, Manhattan is depicted as a maximum security prison. The fictional city is overrun with poverty, crime, and corruption magnifying the very real fears, concerns, and problems of the time the film was created in.

John Carpenter illustrates and criticizes multiple issues in his movie. Therefore, my work will be dedicated to examine and analyze the movie and shine a light the techniques the director uses in order to express his social and political criticism. In order to do so, the first part of the paper will provide a short summary of the movie's content, as well as enlightening background information about how the director John Carpenter influenced the film industry and researching typical elements of the New Hollywood era the movie includes. Secondly, research on the movie's historical context will be provided in order to be as precise as possible.

Furthermore, I will analyze some preselected scenes to demonstrate how criticism of both society and politics is being expressed. My analysis will consist of two parts, the first one dealing with social issues depicted in the film, such as the prison system in the US, the class-based society in general and finally humanity's general tendency to moral decay in a world without social or jurisdictional restrictions. The second part of my analysis will shed a light on the film's criticism at current politics starting with its general criticism at the governmental system and its leaders, before showing Carpenter's cinematic means to portray fascism's role in violence and terror. Of course, it should not remain unmentioned that there are countless other scenes and topics worth analysing under various points of view but this would simply go beyond the scope of this paper.

2. Criticism of Society and Politics Portrayed in *Escape from New York*

2.1 Summary of the Film's Content

Set in the not-too distant future (1997) – in relation to its publication –, *Escape from New York* portrays the nearly destroyed Manhattan that has been turned into a massive maximum security prison inhabited by over three million convicted criminals. Every bridge is mined and walled, the surrounding waters are filled with deadly electricity and the famous Statue of Liberty, symbolizing freedom and independence in the past times has been transformed into another guard tower, making an escape impossible.

It all begins when Air Force One – the plane carrying the president of the United States to a global summit – is hijacked and crash-lands in New York City. He is carrying a tape that is crucial to the survival of the country, but now is being held for ransom by the most powerful street gang in the city, the Indians. Led by a vicious man calling himself the Duke of New York, they demand amnesty for all inhabitants of the federal prison in return for the president's release. In order to retrieve the hostage, Federal authorities coerce the young criminal Snake Plissken who is about to serve a life sentence for a gold heist. Plissken is offered a deal, he is promised his freedom if he is able to rescue the president within the next 24 hours. To prevent Snake from abandoning his mission without fulfilling his part of the deal, two microscopic explosives are implanted in his neck that will go off at the end of his 24-hour lapse and can only be neutralized by federal doctors on the outside.

Once inside the prison, Snake is experiencing encounters with the roving street gangs of violent criminals and the "Crazies" – the criminally insane – who inhabit the sewerage system and abandoned subway stations attacking whoever they can. With the support of an untypically helpful cab driver named Cabbie, Brian – who operates as the Duke's chief

demolition expert – and his mistress Maggie, Plissken finally manages to locate the Duke. In his headquarter, he is not only stripped of his guns, shot in the leg and savagely beaten, the Duke's gang also sends him into a blood stained boxing ring despite his weakened condition. Fighting in a gladiator type of contest using nail filled baseball bats as weapons, Snake succeeds and is able to kill his opponent. While thousands of bloodthirsty spectators celebrate his triumph the protagonist is able to slip through the crowds, away from the Duke and, finally, carries out the rescue of the president. While crossing the George Washington Bridge, the two men are both chased by the Duke himself and are confronted with exploding mines. Just as the president and Snake are hauled over the wall surrounding the prison by outside police forces, the Duke pulls him back down. The two criminals are fighting a fierce hand to hand battle to the death. Plissken is about to lose the race against time if he is unable to reach the doctor soon enough to have the detonating devices in his neck neutralized.

Making it at the last second, the explosives are removed and thus, Snake has successfully completed his mission. As the president prepares for a televised speech to the leaders at the summit meeting, he thanks Plissken for rescuing him and promises him anything he wants. All Snake wants to know are his feelings about the people who died saving him though, but the president only offers half-hearted regret. Snake walks away in disgust and it is then revealed that he destroyed the all-important cassette tape the president was carrying on his way to the summit in the end.

2.2 Short Introduction of Director John Carpenter

2.2.1 John Carpenter's Influence on the Film Industry

Even though he might not be considered the most influential, successful or even acclaimed filmmaker in terms of American filmmaking history, John Carpenter indeed still fascinates film directors today. Especially his unique work during his career peak in the 1970s and 1980s still influences movie producing nowadays and traces of his legacy can be detected in several well-known movies, such as *The Purge* (2013) or *The Hateful Eight* (2016). But why indeed does John Carpenter still hold this kind of appeal to nowadays' directors? In the following, some his directing techniques that make John Carpenter movies as particular as they come will be explored.

Firstly, most of his movies follow a clear structure. The beginning contains an insertion of place and the point in time the story is occurring with the intention of clarifying the conditions (cf. Schelle 1991, 16). Furthermore, the director oftentimes makes use of long takes when geography needs to be established. An example of such a shot can be found in his horror movie

Halloween where a long opening take is used to introduce the setting, creating an immense amount of suspense, a sense of impending violence and foreboding (cf. Schnelle 1991, 12). This method tool is often used until today, especially in horror movies.

Another element typical for John Carpenter's directing consists in the fact, that he withholds blood as well as outright violence in order to increase suspense even more. Current horror movies such as the *Conjuring* (2013) series utilized this approach, depicting only several drops of blood and no major acts of violence, adding to the audience's uncertainty about the killer's whereabouts and thus augmenting their state of apprehension. Yet another strategy in his movies that impresses and inspires directors today may be found in John Carpenter's way of creating paranoia in combination with electronic soundtracks. While it was mainly due to economic reasons that Carpenter created his own music for his early movies turning out as simple rhythms of his electronic scores, Quentin Tarantino said of Carpenter's science fiction horror film *The Thing* (1982): "The paranoia among the characters was so strong, trapped in that enclosure for so long, that it just bounced off all the walls until it had nowhere to go but out into the audience. That is what I was trying to achieve with *The Hateful Eight*." (Lambie 2018).

Apart from long takes in combination with the absence of outright violence and blood resulting in the audience's existential panic and paranoia augmented by monotonous electric sounds another novelty in John Carpenter's movies were his usage of cynicism and humor providing the valve of release for the tension after a horrifying scene. In his movie *The Thing* the audience listens to the character Palmer saying "You gotta be fuckin' kidding" (Lambie 2018) as a creature sprouts eyes and legs. Creating new types of characters also including blue-collar heroes such as Snake Plissken in *Escape from New York* – portraying the perhaps most cynical anti-hero in the 80s cinema – might be the reason for controversial superheroes in today's cinema.

To sum up, even though John Carpenter didn't focus on enormous settings or equipment, the relative small group of characters, his claustrophobic locations, direct storytelling and his special usage of the camera, still manage to create an enormous suspense and, thus, he had quite an obvious impact on the film industry and other film directors.

2.1.2 Elements of New Hollywood in the Movie

Happening between the 1960s to the early 1980s the New Hollywood era was shaped by a generation of young filmmakers who explored unconventional storytelling techniques and examined risky subjects. Released in 1981, *Escape from New York* didn't come out during the

peak of that time period but elements of New Hollywood still had an influence on John Carpenter and his production. In the following, examples will be provided on characteristics of that time that can be found in the movie.

A fundamental aspect that has changed during this turnover to a new age of cinema is location shooting being preferred over the studio (cf. King 2002, 6). Not only was this technique very lucrative but it was cheaper, providing an advantage for low-budget films. In this matter, *Escape from New York* wasn't produced in a studio setting but in certain locations. The movie was made almost entirely in St Louis, Missouri, and around Los Angeles (cf. Plummer 2014). Even though the setting appears to take place in New York, the darkened streets of Manhattan were filmed in an area of St. Louis that had been severely damaged during a massive urban fire in 1976.

To present its story, New Hollywood cinema often used a clear linear narrative in order to increase the audience's understanding of the content. John Carpenter applied this three act structure to his movie by splitting it into an introduction, rising action and resolution. In the beginning of *Escape from New York*, the main characters – especially Snake Plissken – are being presented and it is shown how they fit into the world they live in. Plissken in that matter is being instructed about his mission and about the consequences of misbehavior, success or failure. Following the introduction, the rising action consists of the main character trying to resolve situation but is unable to do so, ending up in the first turning point of the movie. In *Escape from New York*, this “act” includes all of Snake's experiences in Manhattan attempting to find and save the president. The story resolves when Snake Plissken manages to escape and rescue the hostage. Geoff King states that the narratives of New Hollywood are “usually characterized as quite tightly organized sequences governed by rules of cause-and-effect” (King 2002, 4) which Carpenter applied in his movie by showing the consequences of, for example, Snake's behavior.

In comparison to Old Hollywood where the characters were portrayed with a lot of filters due to the Production Code imposing some sort of a moral codex on Hollywood movies (cf. King 2002, 8, 32), the new generation of filmmakers focused on illustrating realism. Thus, not many effects were applied and the character's personalities were oftentimes uncensored. “I don't give a fuck about your war or your president” (*Escape from New York*. John Carpenter, US 1981. TC: 00:16:03–00:16:07) – a statement from Snake Plissken during a conversation with Hawk – boldly portrays his hatred and disgust for the political system, not withholding vulgarity in order to show the rare truth.

On top of that, movies from that era often featured political themes. Speaking up and addressing issues was essential for the producers. Oftentimes they “explore[d] or manifest[ed] elements of a darker mood in which alienation leads towards fear and disillusion” (King 2002, 18). Thus, it is no surprise that *Escape from New York* confronts the viewer with a dystopia of a corrupt prison and law enforcement system that will be examined further later in the seminary paper.

2.3 Social and Political Criticism in the Movie

2.3.1 Research on the Movie’s Historical Context

In their podcast series *The Making of a Nation* Rich Kleinfeldt and Ray Freeman characterize the 1970s and 1980s as a “period of change in American society” (Kleinfeldt and Freeman 2007). In some ways, the 70s are considered to be a continuation of the 1960s, however, in other ways, the decade identifies as a repudiation of the previous one. Native Americans, women, African Americans, homosexuals and other marginalized people proceeded to fight for equality and the protest against the ongoing war in Vietnam gained many members. On the other hand, a “New Right”-movement mobilized in defense of traditional family roles and political conservatism.

Feeling slighted by the turbulences of the late 1960s – urban riots, antiwar protests – many working and middle class Americans embraced a new kind of conservative populism. This group of individuals were called “the silent majority” and caused the election success of Richard Nixon as the President of the United States in 1968 (cf. Schulman 2001, 35–42). His policies especially favored the interests of middle class people, dismantling the welfare state and abolishing many parts of President Lyndon B. Johnson’s War on Poverty. Helping to shape a new political movement – known as the “New Right” – these individuals lamented the decline of traditional social roles and values, celebrated the free market, developing the idea of anti-taxism (cf. Schulman 2001, 205–212).

In opposition to this tendency, 1960s liberalism continued to flourish. Protecting the environment from all sorts of dangers became the center of interest for many people. On top of that, several groups of Americans proceeded to fight for expanded social and political rights. Indications of success were the approval of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) in 1972 to the constitution, guaranteeing equal legal rights for all American citizens regardless of their sex. Even though it appeared that the Amendment would pass easily, many conservative activists were alarmed, fearing it would undermine traditional gender roles. Mobilizing against it, these traditionalist activists managed to defeat the reform in the late 70s causing it to not be

incorporated in the constitution as a law (cf. Schulman 2001, 168–171). As a result, many disappointed women’s rights activists turned away from politics and began to build feminist organizations and communities of their own (cf. Schulman 2001, 171–176). Another current arising from political protest was the antiwar movement. Disapproval of Nixon’s approach during the Vietnam war resulted in thousands of protesters demonstrating on the streets and college campuses being shut down.

Another mentionable event dominating the headlines from 1972 until 1974 was the Watergate scandal (cf. Schulman 2001, 42–48). In 1972, the country was deeply divided politically and Richard Nixon was running for reelection with the US still being embroiled in the Vietnam war. Nixon grew increasingly paranoid and defensive. He feared not to win the upcoming election and thus resorted to illegal espionage techniques. As evidence would later confirm, representatives of Nixon’s Committee to Re-Elect the President (CREEP) broke into the Democratic National Committee’s headquarters in the Watergate building in Washington D.C. stealing copies of top secret documents and attempting to bug the office’s phones. After being exposed as one of the main perpetrators, president Nixon himself demanded that the FBI stop investigating the break-in and reached out to his aides to cover up the crime. After Nixon’s involvement in the scandal was unambiguously proven, the Congressional Committee approved three articles of impeachment: obstruction of justice, misuse of federal agencies and defying the authority of Congress. As a consequence, Richard Nixon resigned before Congress was able to impeach him. As a result of this affair, many people withdrew from politics altogether. By the end of the 1970s, many young people used their hard-fought freedom to do what they pleased, creating a spirit of liberation. The conservative revolution during the Reagan Era in the beginning of the 80s politically split the American society even more causing multiple liberals to go on the streets and demonstrate.

2.3.2 Depiction of Social Criticism in Preselected Scenes

2.3.2.1 Criticism of the Prison System in the USA

In order to demonstrate how the prison system is being criticized in *Escape from New York*, it is mandatory to shed a light on two different scenes. The first scene to be analyzed in that matter is Snake Plissken’s arrival at the transport zone in the very beginning of the movie (cf. *Escape from New York*. John Carpenter, US 1981. TC: 00:05:07–00:06:40). Carpenter uses an establishing shot to give the viewer an impression of the helicopter landing site on the deck of the facility the main character is about to arrive at. The scene takes place during a rainy night,

thus the atmosphere seems very cold and dark. Mentionable in that shot is the colorful flag of the United States of America in the background standing for freedom and equality, thus allegorizing an ironic contrast between its inherent symbolism and the military prison ambience on the surface. As the bus – carrying the criminals – arrives on site, the emblem on its front is put in the center of the screen and as such drawn to the viewer's attention. The United States Police Forces (USPF) badge strongly resembles a military emblem suggesting a very martial organization. Being escorted by heavily armed guards, Plissken enters the building. In order to include the audience in the process and to facilitate their identification with the main character the camera adopts Plissken's perspective by establishing a point-of-view shot. From his viewpoint the audience is introduced to the facility, which is being portrayed as a very functional complex with a color scheme including shades of merely grey and black. As he is walking down the hallway, a reverse tracking shot is used to shed a light on Snake and the guards, once again emphasizing their weaponry equipment. Switching back to the point-of-view shot, the policemen Snake is passing by are being shown from his perspective. While an announcement on the loudspeaker states "You now have the option to terminate and be cremated on the premises" (Escape from New York. John Carpenter, US 1981. TC: 00:06:26–00:06:30), they are smirking, thus indicating cold-hearted, emotionless characters with sadistic traits.

The second scene to be analyzed in order to display how the prison system is portrayed in the movie takes place in Manhattan. After the presidential aircraft has crashed, police commissioner Hawk enters the penitentiary to look for the head of state (cf. Escape from New York. John Carpenter, US 1981. TC: 00:10:24–00:13:17). In the beginning of this sequence, the helicopters flying over the prison walls are filmed from a low angle shot demonstrating the inferiority of the prisoners towards the police forces. To give the audience an impression of the surroundings inside the walls a crane shot moves parallel to the landing aircrafts. Once they reach the ground, director John Carpenter shifts to a long shot presenting the whole setting when the guards begin to spread out. The prison is portrayed as being very dark, the viewer is confronted with burning streets, chaos and the buildings in a state of severe dilapidation, even ruins. The police forces are heavily armed and prepared to defend themselves which illustrates that the prison system is shaped by extreme violence. Carpenter now makes use of the focus to depict police commissioner Hawk's first personal interaction with a prisoner: Starting with a medium shot, the focus completely lays on him while the background is blurred. To increase suspense diegetic sounds of footsteps and an unknown psychopath's laughter are inserted and the focus shifts to the background drawing the viewer's attention to the prisoner walking

towards the camera. The criminal – who is later identified as Romero – is portrayed with an over-the-shoulder shot with the camera being set behind Hawk giving the reader the impression of being involved in the dialogue between the two men. But Romero does not only appear to be mentally ill. From his unkempt outer appearance, the viewer can derive that all prisoners in Manhattan – exemplifying Carpenter’s criticism of the US prison system at that time – are abandoned with only small food rations, and without medical care whatsoever and hence left to their own devices in the most brutal kind of way. To shed a further light on the level of violence ruling the prisons, the detainee pulls out a severed finger belonging to the president. This act of brutality is intensified by the camera’s zooming in and the director’s use of a close-up shot on the extremity. All in all, the scene functions to not only portray the inmate’s brutal confinement but also their neglect by the outside police forces.

To sum up, Carpenter wants to raise awareness to the violence and brutality occurring in US prisons and voices his criticism on cold-hearted leadership inside of such institutions.

2.3.2.2 Disapproval of Class Society

The portrait of the American class system in the Nixon era is another major theme in *Escape from New York*. By presenting a prison society divided into different tiers and demonstrating their inequalities and disadvantages, Carpenter puts emphasis on how class society invariably leads to the destruction of harmonious coexistence and increased violence. Before analyzing two key scenes, it is mandatory to enlighten some background information about the various groups of prison population that have been introduced in the course of the movie so far. The viewer becomes acquainted with fringe groups such as the Skulls and the Turks as well as the Crazies, who represent the very bottom of society. In strong contrast to them stands the Duke and his group called the Indians, who are controlling Manhattan. The last group introduced are the Duke’s opponents, a group composed of those who revolt against his position of power.

The first scene to be examined will thus concentrate on how the Duke and his retinue are portrayed. Taking place shortly after Snake Plissken’s first interaction with Brian, who operates as the Duke’s chief demolition expert, and his mistress Maggie, the three hide behind a wall observing the Duke’s convoy passing by (cf. *Escape from New York*. John Carpenter, US 1981. TC: 00:47:35–00:48:35). To introduce the viewer to the scenery, Carpenter uses a full shot to completely capture the car caravan from a front angle perspective. As a result of the setting still being at night the lighting is very dark. In strong contrast to the colorless background stands the convoy with the leading vehicle carrying the Duke: The car is light blue and sumptuously decorated with two diamond chandeliers on the hood and headlights turned on

throwing a light into the black streets of New York. With the intention of drawing the audience's attention closer to the Duke himself, the director now utilizes a close-up shot following the car with a pan showing his side profile. His outer appearance implies the possession of a fortune, since he is dressed very regally – wearing a hat and sunglasses on top of that as if it were a crown. John Carpenter emphasizes the inequalities as a result of class society in this scene introducing the Duke. While several prisoners – for example the Crazies – barely have enough supplies to survive, the Duke and his retinue are privileged enough to be the only group possessing cars, magnificent decorations and luxurious clothing resembling Ancient Rome's plebeians and patricians.

The second scene to be analyzed in order to show class society in *Escape from New York* concentrates the Duke's counterparts and focuses on violence as a result of a population divided in classes. Shortly after the Duke's convoy passes Snake, the protagonist steals one of the cars in his endeavor to find the president in time (cf. *Escape from New York*. John Carpenter, US 1981. TC: 00:50:10–00:51:11) As they come closer to the street ruled by the Duke's opponents the camera pans right filming the moving vehicle. Even though the viewer can't really see what's happening in the street yet the diegetic sound of rioting masses creates a lot of suspense and prepares the audience for the following occurrences. Just as the car is about to exit the background and blurred out the camera focuses on a severed head on a stick put up at the side of the road (cf. Illustr.2).



Illustration 2: Escape from New York. John Carpenter, US 1981. TC: 00:50:16

Using such a shocking symbol, director John Carpenter draws the viewer's attention to violence as a result of class society to an extreme. Different groups carry such great amounts of hatred

and jealousy for each other that brutal rituals seem to be of the essence. In the following sequences Carpenter switches between point-of-view shots from Snake's perspective inside the car and full shots from the vehicle's side with a pan. By using two different movements the audience's impression of the whole riot and its participants is once more increased. Since the people belonging to this class dress less well but still adequately, it can be assumed that they belong to some kind of middle class. By throwing rocks and other items against the passing car, the rioting mass shows their protest against being treated unfairly. Compared to the Duke they obviously have much less opportunities and material benefits.

In conclusion, Carpenter wants to raise the audience's awareness to inequalities resulting of a society divided into classes and to the violence this society will subsequently be prone to where the one's on top – represented by the Duke and his entourage in this example – take advantage of their power with the intention of keeping their position without considering how this may affect others. In this class based culture, Carpenter sheds a light on how everybody is only fighting for themselves but in the end everybody ends up losing. By presenting a divided society and its consequences, the director wants to draw the viewer's attention to the split between Democrats and Conservatives at that time and calls the audience upon reflecting their behavior within their "class".

2.3.2.3 Moral Development of Humans in a Society without Restrictions and Rules

The moral philosopher Bernhard Gert defines morality in the normative sense as "refer[ring] to a code of conduct that would be accepted by anyone who meets certain intellectual and volitional conditions, almost always including the condition of being rational" (Gert 2016). But how do individuals develop traits of morality and rationality in a society lacking collective rules and restrictions? In order to examine this question, the following analysis will focus on a group of prison inmates in *Escape from New York: The Crazies*. As has already been established previously, this fringe group is at the lowest level of the prison's social hierarchy.

The scene to be analyzed is taking place shortly after Plissken's failed first attempt to locate the president and describes his first interaction with the Crazies as they rise from the underground intending to hunt for other inmates to feed off (cf. *Escape from New York*. John Carpenter, US 1981. TC: 00:33:21–00:34:50). The scene is introduced with a close-up shot of Snake's face, illuminating his desperation at being unable to find the president. The background is blurred at that particular moment but the audience can observe some movement resembling a figure flitting through the streets. In her book *Temporality and Film Analysis*, the author Matilda Mroz describes that "the process of relativizing in depth [...] urge[s] the audience to

think about the relationship between foreground and background, presenting the possibility of glimpsed and impenetrable and thus unknown spaces” (Mroz 2012, 54). In *Escape from New York*, this effect creates suspense and uncertainty by leaving the viewer in the dark about the person in the unexplored background. But just as the diegetic sound, suggesting some kind of metallic beating, can be heard, the focus shifts to Plissken turning his head towards the sound and, thus, the background is clearly recognizable. Switching the focus signals the audience that the action in the background now becomes the center of attention. Carpenter then utilizes a cut as a transition to a full shot of the person and, on that account gives a closer impression of the character. By his outer appearance, it can be assumed that he is a member of the Crazies: Dressed in torn rags with a face that is both dirty and bloody, he looks malnourished and his movements and facial expression seem paranoid. The camera settings now shift to a long shot drawing the audience’s attention to the Crazies’ ritual of knocking on the drains. A close-up shot of the exit of such a drain is now applied to highlight the eerie process of the top being lifted and hands coming out from underneath. A non-diegetic – high pitched – sound is inserted to create a chilly, uncanny atmosphere, evoking fear and a feeling of uncertainty about what will happen next. To eliminate this ambiguity, a long shot of the street follows, showing the Crazies crawling out of said drains and running down the street. This camera movement emphasizes the way these figures move. Preparing to hunt other inmates, the Crazies’ movements resemble those of animals. By portraying them as mentally ill and animal-like, Carpenter wants to stress that they are completely devoid of any ideas of human morality and, as such, are merely conducted by egoistic survival instincts. Their rising from the sewage system creates an axiomatic analogy to rats, an aspect that further illuminates their dehumanization. The atrocity of eating their fellow men out of desperation is underlined with disturbing high pitched sounds throughout the scene.

To sum up, Carpenter demonstrates – using the Crazies as an example – that the lack of formal restrictions will result in a complete loss of all senses of morality in people including even their deprivation of human behavior and outward human traits.

2.3.3 Depiction of Political Criticism in Preselected Scenes

2.3.3.1 Criticism of the Governmental System and its Leaders

The following analysis will substantiate the thesis that *Escape from New York* portrays criticism of the governmental system and its leaders in the aforementioned era. One scene particularly illuminating in that aspect takes place shortly after the police forces find out about the hijacked presidential plane, more precisely, when the terrorist gives a statement to the leaders of the

country and the people from inside the cockpit (cf. *Escape from New York*. John Carpenter, US 1981. TC: 00:07:55–00:16:07). With the intention of introducing the audience to the surroundings, Carpenter first utilizes a full shot of the technical control center inside the headquarter for prison affairs. As police commissioner Hauk and another police advisor listen to the rebel's radio message from the aircraft the camera position switches to a medium shot, drawing the viewer's attention to Hauk's reaction, who shows very little concern and understanding to what the woman is stating. Another element supporting this emphasis on his emotions is Carpenter's usage of light: The entire room is kept relatively dark, except for the two men's faces that are illuminated by the lights coming from the computer screens. Carpenter now builds up suspense by leaving the audience in the dark about the terrorist's outer appearance – putting them in the same position as Hauk – allowing only the voice to be heard. A female terrorist addresses them as “assholes” (*Escape from New York*. John Carpenter, US 1981. TC: 00:07:57) right away, demonstrating her deep disgust and hatred for the police forces. In the following, the aircraft is identified as the Air Force One and by using a non-diegetic sound of an alarming melody, the director emphasizes the threat this situation poses. Afterwards, an edited full shot of an airplane now shifts the focus on the aircraft and the terrorists aboard. An additional cut is used to switch to a medium shot showing the female rebel from the side. Even though the focus is on her and in spite of the image being blurred, the audience can identify a dead person – most likely the original pilot – in the foreground. This once again stresses the danger and the terrorist's willingness to use physical violence. The scene's atmosphere is emphasized with a red light from the aircraft's control center as the only source of light. The terrorist declares themselves as “soldiers of the national liberation front of America” (*Escape from New York*. John Carpenter, US 1981. TC: 00:08:28–00:08:31) which depicts a contradiction to the idea of terrorism today. In *Escape from New York* the rebels fight for their freedom in an “imperialist country” (*Escape from New York*. John Carpenter, US 1981. TC: 00:08:34), not for religious beliefs, but for the “workers and [...] oppressed” (*Escape from New York*. John Carpenter, US 1981. TC: 00:08:32–00:08:33) that are being neglected and excluded by the authoritarian police state. The end of her statement addresses racism and how the government engages in that. By calling the prison an “inhuman dungeon” (*Escape from New York*. John Carpenter, US 1981. TC: 00:08:43), she highlights the cruelty the government turns to in order to keep their power.

To demonstrate the failures of the political system in the movie, Carpenter uses the character of a terrorist to portray the issue that your political voice being heard can oftentimes only be achieved through violence. Mentionable is that Carpenter doesn't approve of terrorism,

but uses this construct to create shock and terror and, thus, enables his message to be reflected by the audience. By establishing the strong mistrust of citizens in their government, the director demonstrates people turning away from conventional methods to voice their opinion and rely on radical actions only. This reminds of the Watergate Affair that led to increasing skepticism in the population towards politicians. On top of that, this scene raises the analogy to the organizations in the 1970s fighting for equal political rights and more political influence. For example, the “New Right”-movement during the 1970s and the conservative revolution during the Reagan Era caused multiple liberals to demonstrate and rebel.

2.3.3.2 Fascism and Violence

The first scene where violence and terror become imminent in the movie occurs at the beginning when an escape attempt by two prisoners is brutally prevented (cf. *Escape from New York*. John Carpenter, US 1981. TC: 00:03:25–00:04:35). With the intention of establishing the setting and giving the audience some orientation, a long shot introduces dark surroundings – the river separating the island with New York’s skyline in the background – and two men who are paddling on a self-made raft towards the walls of the prison. A cut shifts the focus towards a helicopter that is flying over the water. Its bright search lights contrast with the dark scenery, highlighting the importance of what follows as well as augmenting suspense. The camera draws the viewer’s attention to their distress. In order to enhance the audience’s identification with the inmates, Carpenter makes use of a low angle point-of-view shot from their perspective, stressing their vulnerability with regard to the forces pursuing them. In contrast to that a high angle shot follows, showing the men from the chopper’s perspective. The exploration of angles in this sequence visibly demonstrates the superiority of the leaders and the weakness and inferiority of the prisoners in this dictatorial system. Once the helicopter starts shooting, a full shot of the explosives striking the water and the men on the raft depicts their desperation. To further highlight the military methods used by the police force a short take shows the machine gun inside the chopper. The audience is thus reminded of the government’s unscrupulousness and the brutality it applies in order to keep their power. Towards the end of the scene bright sparks hint at an explosion indicating a hit, with the float not being shown afterwards. The fact that the outcome of the attack is left out illustrates the government’s estrangement from the people. Being portrayed as subjects – not as humans – that just disappear in this scene, the system’s carelessness for inmates becomes apparent. The scene ends with a reference to its beginning, once again using a long shot of the choppers turning and flying back over the wall, their mission being successfully accomplished. This once again emphasizes the depicted

political system's unscrupulousness and cold-heartedness giving the impression, that the deaths of inmates are meaningless to this reign of terror. In this short sequence, Carpenter once again makes use of symbols by using a low-angle shot with a horizontal pan to show the helicopter flying by the Statue of Liberty – formerly representing freedom and equality– that has been transformed into a guard tower of the prison. By including such a cynical element, the director intends to once again shed a light on the contrast between the values the Statue of Liberty stands for and the fact, that the inmates have no chance of ever leaving Manhattan Island.

The second scene to be analyzed concentrates on the portrait of the leaders in such an autocrat order. Shortly after Snake Plissken arrives at the transport zone, he is accompanied to the police commissioner's office (cf. *Escape from New York*. John Carpenter, US 1981. TC: 00:14:14–00:16:34). In the beginning of the scene a medium shot of Hawk introduces the commissioner to the audience. Illustrating his mistrust towards Snake, the viewer watches him load a small hand rifle. As Plissken enters the room the camera movement switches to a full shot with a horizontal pan to the right in order to establish the scenery. The fact that this sequence is essentially the only part of the scene where both men are displayed together is of utmost importance. Throughout the rest of the scene, after Snake sits down across from Hawk, the two men are almost always shown individually. This way of camera movement emphasizes their irreconcilable differences, ideals and opinions—they are virtually directly opposed to each other. Carpenter switches between medium shots of the two characters with the intention of stressing the content of the dialog and the men's respective reactions. It becomes apparent that Snake used to be part of this system as the police commissioner reads out his former titles and achievements: “[...] American Lieutenant. Special Forces Unit, Black Flight. Two Purple Hearts, Leningrad and Siberia. Youngest man to be decorated by the president” (*Escape from New York*. John Carpenter, US 1981. TC: 00:14:50–00:15:00). The camera shifts to show Snake's reaction, which is to look sideways, indicating that he turned away from this dictatorial system and doesn't want to be confronted with his former “merits” anymore. The following reveals his crime as Hawk accuses him of “robb[ing] the federal reserve depository” (*Escape from New York*. John Carpenter, US 1981. TC: 00:15:01–00:15:03) and reads out his sentence. The fact that life sentences are the only penalty for convicted people portrays the unfair and extremist methods the portrayed system uses to eliminate enemies of the state by all means. Their use of blackmail and threat is also emphasized when Hawk states he is “ready to kick [Snake's] ass out of the world” (*Escape from New York*. John Carpenter, US 1981. TC: 00:15:07–00:15:08). With the help of a medium shot the audience then witnesses Snake lighting a cigarette (cf. *Illustr.3*), stressing his detachment regarding the system by demonstrating that

he won't be intimidated by Hawk's warnings. Another symbol Carpenter includes in this scene is the US flag. Highlighted due to its red and blue colors the flag contrasts with the office's brown interior fittings. Even though Hawk represents the leaders of the country, the director does not put the flag close to him but behind Snake Plissken (cf. Illustr.3).



Illustration 3: Escape from New York. John Carpenter, US 1981. TC: 00:15:33

Thus, it can be assumed that the fascist state doesn't stand for the values of the flag including innocence, vigilance, perseverance, and justice but Snake embodies the ideals of the old America as he revolts against the current system. The fact that Hawk has the authority to present a deal granting Snake full pardon shows his influence and the lack of separation of powers: All decisions lay in the hands of the executive leaders bearing no judicial authority, and not even needing it. After Hawk explains the president's kidnapping, Snake replies: "President of what?" (Escape from New York. John Carpenter, US 1981. TC: 00:15:45–00:15:46) indicating his disgust for this man who in his opinion doesn't embody the leader of a democratic country and even negating the existence of the United States as such. Plissken's hatred emerges in another statement as well: "I don't give a fuck about your war or your president" (Escape from New York. John Carpenter, US 1981. TC: 00:16:03–00:16:07). With the use of vulgar language Snake shows his antipathy and that he won't be overawed in the least by the authoritarian government.

To sum up, Carpenter demonstrates his criticism of fascism by displaying the brutal and violent methods the dictatorial government uses to remain in power and to eliminate any form of opposition as well as by illustrating the leaders' abuse of power and a general lack of

democratic institutions within the political system that can only be sustained with military means.

3. Conclusion

American society and politics went through a time of turmoil and change during the 1970s. John Carpenter portrays both in his movie *Escape from New York*. Being published towards a turnover to a new era, at the end of the New Hollywood movement, the film still includes several elements of this era. Apart from location shooting, *Escape from New York* illustrates realism and features political themes with the intention of addressing multiple issues that have been examined throughout this paper. Diverging from traditional characters, Carpenter introduced a cynical anti-hero: Snake Plissken. As a director, he used the cinematic novelties of this period, but impacted the movie industry with his work even further. Concentrating on a relatively small group of characters, shooting at claustrophobic locations, his direct storytelling on top of the well thought-out usage of the camera still inspire directors today.

Historical occurrences such as the Watergate scandal caused many Americans to mistrust their political leaders and to fight for their social and political rights by themselves. It was this mentality emerging in the 1970s that influenced Carpenter in the making of *Escape from New York*. Especially the flourishing liberalism as a contrary to the growth of conservative movements becomes apparent throughout the movie. John Carpenter used this mindset to create a movie filled with political and social criticism and stressed this by certain novel cinematic techniques.

To voice his criticism of society, he sheds a light on the violence inside of the United States' prisons during that specific era and draws attention to the cruel leadership of those institutions. By critically displaying a violent class civilization Carpenter refers to the increasing split between sections of society – meaning, but not naming, Republicans and Democrats – during the 1970s. He then proceeds to illustrate how a lack of rules and restrictions result in humans becoming incapable to act in a morally adequate way culminating in the total loss of human traits.

The second part of the analysis established John Carpenter's political criticism. By portraying a corrupt political system and a neglected society where the people mistrust their leaders and government, he shows the what happens when people are exclusively able to voice their political opinion through violence. This refers to political turmoils and organizations fighting for equal political rights in the 70s. Lastly the movie demonstrates how fascism results in only violence and terror by portraying the brutal methods applied by the government in order

to remain in power. In that aspect he also displays how fascist systems lack democratic institutions and result in the power-abusive behavior of their leaders.

All in all, John Carpenter intends to raise the audience's awareness to multiple issues and to inspire them to develop a more reflected view on social and political subjects.

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5. Statement of Non-Plagiarism

I declare that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, this seminar paper is my own work, all sources have been properly acknowledged, and the paper contains no plagiarism.

München, den 5.11.2019