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On May 25th 2020, George Floyd took nine minutes to die in Minneapolis, every second of it caught on camera. After that, cities burned.

When the crowd torched a police precinct building in Minneapolis, I thought about John Carpenter's 1976 film, *Assault on Precinct 13*. You were meant to identify in that film with the cops under siege from the gangs outside, but you never did, quite. That's what was so funny about that bewildered line: 'Why would anybody want to shoot at a police station?'

Four days after Floyd died, the rapper Killer Mike of Run the Jewels stepped up to the podium in Atlanta. He was wearing a 'Kill Your Masters' T-shirt, but his speech was all about containing violence, re-directing it into focused civil action. 'I woke up wanting to see the world burn', he said, wiping away tears. 'So, I'm duty bound to be here to simply say that it is your duty not to burn your own house down for anger with an enemy. It is your duty to fortify your own house so that you may be a house of refuge in times of organisation.'

Around the world, the Black Lives Matter protests chanted '*NO JUSTICE, NO PEACE*'. And the images of burning cities and a panicked president using that old racist line from the 67 riots 'when the looting starts the shooting starts', reminded me of another John Carpenter film, this time from 1981, *Escape from New York*.

The premise of Carpenter's 1981 science fiction-horror-western B-movie hybrid was that in 1988 the island of Manhattan was simply surrounded by a wall and turned into an open-air prison camp, a place of permanent internal exile. The military patrolled the wall and the waters: criminals, low-lives and undesirables were escorted onto the island then left to fend for themselves. Then Air Force One crashes on Manhattan, and the only person who can get the President out alive is the war-hero-turned-maverick Snake Plissken, played by Kurt Russell channelling the vocal delivery of Clint Eastwood and the swagger of John Wayne. This mission is Plissken's ticket out of lifelong incarceration.

With its wrecked streets, derelict buildings and constant threat of violent death from roving gangs, Carpenter's hellish New York was of course an exaggerated version of how the rest of America saw this city of Dis (the name of the city in the sixth circle of hell and also the desolate planet in the loose source novel for Carpenter, Harry Harrison's *Planet of the Damned*). When Carpenter shot the film in 1980, New York was a bankrupted city, ravaged by crack addiction that motored spiralling crime and murder rates. Punk and New Wave spilled out of the lofts of the lower East Side, and transgressive art spaces grew up in Hell's Kitchen and the meatpacking district, long before both areas got their billion-dollar makeovers. A new killer disease, initially called GRID but soon to be known as AIDS, had just begun to pick off drug-users, gay men and vulnerable black and immigrant communities of New York City.

There are some uncanny elements about Carpenter's vision of New York. There's the fact that it suggests that 1988 was the year it was cut off from the rest of America as a cesspit of crime, the same year that Donald Trump bought the yacht from the James Bond film *Never Say Never*

Again, renamed it 'The Trump Princess', hosted a Mike Tyson fight in one of his brash new hotels, and declared on the *Oprah* show that he would probably not run for president, but if he did he would kick some ass. The preposterous idea of a wall to rescue middle America from 'bad *hombres*' is part of what got Trump elected in 2016. He has still only largely replaced the 618 miles of wall put up during Obama's administration.

And then there is the constant presence of the darkened silhouette of the abandoned twin towers of the World Trade Center in downtown Manhattan. This is Plissken's route into the city at the beginning of the film. A lot of action takes place in its lobby and stairwells. Remember that in 1983, the feminist radicals led by a young Kathryn Bigelow in the sci-fi film *Born in Flames* would blow these towers up. The catastrophe of 9/11, as everyone from wacky nihilist Jean Baudrillard down said at the time, was reality catching up with the movies.

What followed after September 2001 was America's militarized vision of extra-judicial justice. Drones delivered summary execution from above. The prison island has been used around the world for centuries, from the remote St. Helena where Napoleon spent the last 5 years of his life under English house arrest, to the freezing Solovetsky islands used by the Tsars and the Soviets, to Robben Island off Cape Town in South Africa, where Nelson Mandela was imprisoned. The War on Terror revived the island prison of Guantanamo Bay, that extra-territorial enclave where the Geneva Convention and all legal protections of international law were suspended for its carefully defined 'enemy combatants.' Why shouldn't New York just extend the prison facility on Rikers Island to encompass the whole of Manhattan?

What seems most portentous about *Escape from New York* these days is the understanding that the logic of the prison camp has been extended everywhere, into every texture of the city. I don't mean just the 'rings of steel' and surveillance networks constructed around financial centres like the City of London. The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben has talked about a new kind of biopolitics in which we are reduced to *bare life*, the 'state of exception' that was once typical of prisons, asylums, or detention camps now extended to become a neoliberal norm. Shockingly, Agamben suggests that this was trialled in the concentration camps, first used by the Spanish in Cuba and the British in the Boer War, before being scaled up by the Nazis. The state of exception typical of the camp is 'the hidden matrix of the politics in which we are still living', Agamben writes in *Homo Sacer*.

Plissken's cynical nihilism that it doesn't really matter much whether you are inside or outside the wall can be taken for the kind of hawkish libertarianism espoused by gun-toting Kurt Russell in real life. The moral equivalence of a President and the 'Duke of New York' (played by Isaac Hayes) can only be resisted by the private code of honour that Snake Plissken borrows from Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlow. Only an individual's code can succeed in this corrupted world.

But it is also possible to see in *Escape from New York* a kind of awakening similar to the scales falling from the eyes in Carpenter's later film *They Live*, when donning a pair of cool shades with special lenses reveals the true state of violence and coercion in glossy po-mo America. The

'American carnage' evoked in Trump's inauguration speech, and longed for by the disaster nationalists of Trump's camp followers, is plain to see in embryo in *Escape from New York*, but so is the critique. Carpenter might exploit some clichés of New York in 1980 in his portrayal of his urban tribes emerging in the wreckage of the city, but you can also imagine that they might very well join the urgent chants of the new ghettos forty years later: *NO JUSTICE, NO PEACE*.

Roger Luckhurst