



## Kinski is slinky in cagey *Cat People*

**Ian Bailey**

From its opening credits in the sands of a distant, eerie desert, to its conclusion in the Louisiana Bayou, Paul Schrader's *Cat People* is a very strange but effective film.

*Cat People* is a horror story rooted in human sexuality and passion. A remake of the 1942 Val Lewton and Jacques Tourneur film, it follows its predecessor in using, to its fullest extent, that old horror film 'MacGuffin': the ancient family curse. It is a movie that whispers its chills in style to its audience as opposed to shouting them in a visual sense. Though imbued with several extremely gory scenes these are overshadowed by the unsettling comments made about sex and the human condition.

The story revolves around young Irena Gallier (Natassia Kinski), an orphan, who arrives in New Orleans to meet her long lost brother Paul (Malcolm McDowell), a Pentecostal minister. The opening visit serves only to bring to light a myriad of questions. What is the real reason behind the unsettling affection that Paul shows towards his sister? Where does he vanish to for days on end and what is the link between him and the murderous black leopard that suddenly stalks the streets of New Orleans? What is the reason behind Paul's rage over Irena's sudden romance with Oliver Yates (John Heard), the zoologist who hunts the leopard? Most importantly, what is the secret that Irena, herself, is trying to hide? The film answers the questions with a jarring dose of the supernatural. It is a horror story on one level and a twisted love story on another.

As a remake, this film maintains many of the classic elements that marked its predecessor, which was considered one of the most skillfully made horror films of all time. There is a tangible bloodthirsty beast on the loose, a hero in love, a beautiful girl, and extravagantly intense characters. However, unlike its predecessor Schrader's version chooses to more bluntly and graphically depict and explore the issues that the original could only imply. This film dives right into the sexual connotations of the story, a move aimed at the "sexually aware" audience that it addresses in 1982.

### More horrific than *Alien*

*Cat People* is a stylish production under the clever direction of Schrader and the artistic photography of Director of Photography, John Bailey. Schrader is on record as referring to the film as a "dream", and the rich cinematography, packed with visual elements serves to augment the film's nightmarish quality. As a nightmare *Cat People* displays a great deal of violence including one bloodcurdling scene where a singing zoologist has his arm torn off by an enraged leopard. The scene is far more graphic and disturbing than the famous "chest-bursting" scene in *Alien*. There is also a great deal of sex and nudity, and all of the elements are wrapped with a pulsing, haunting musical score by Oscar-winning composer, Giorgio Moroder (*Midnight Express*).

The nightmarish emotional aspects of the story are emphasized by the enigmatic stars of the film. Natassia Kinski, with her European urbanity and remote beauty, and Malcolm McDowell, with his shifty intense manner are well cast as the doomed siblings. John Heard (*Cutter's Way*) is effective as the likable but obsessed Oliver who is drawn to Irena's very dangerous sexuality like a moth to a flame.

What is most powerful in *Cat People* is the parallel nature of reality and the surreal. Horror is created by the overlaying of the banal with the magic and it is a technique that has been used in such great films as *Invasion of the Bodysnatchers* and *The Exorcist*. For that, *Cat People* is the essence of horror and one of the best and the most emotionally jarring supernatural films in the last few years.

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