

24th March 2014

Klute (X)

Director: **Alan J. Pakula**
USA 1971

Running time: 114 minutes

LEADING PLAYERS: **Jane Fonda** (Bree Daniels), **Donald Sutherland** (John Klute), **Charles Cioffi** (Peter Cable), **Roy Scheider** (Frank Ligourin).

SCRIPT: **Andy Lewis, David E. Lewis**. PHOTOGRAPHY: **Gordon Willis**. EDITING: **Carl Lerner**. MUSIC: **Michael Small**.

This review reveals some details of events later in the movie, though not the identity of the villain!

Klute sits in a body of work from the first half of the seventies that evinced a growing mistrust of government agencies, political institutions and the police force, such as Coppola's *The Conversation*, Lumet's *Serpico*, and Pakula's own other paranoid thrillers *The Parallax View* and *All the President's Men*. Thus the film's hero, John Klute, is a private detective, that cowboy figure of the urban crime world, and not a police officer.

The plot concerns the disappearance of a Pennsylvania executive and the discovery of an obscene letter to a prostitute discovered among his effects. The company hires Klute when the police draw a blank, and he journeys to New York City and begins tracking and tapping the prostitute, Bree Daniels. As we follow his surveillance and her own behaviour – visits to her analyst revealing her own insecurities about her life as an independent call girl – we can draw our own conclusions about Pakula and his writers' subtext.

Klute confronts Daniels and gradually a relationship develops, laying bare his own vulnerability in the process. He succeeds in flushing out the culprit behind the disappearance of the executive, Gruneman, as well as the beatings and deaths of other prostitutes, and, without revealing too much, that man too proves to be an adept of the surveillance culture, having recorded his activities on tape.

Pakula's (and Woody Allen's) preferred cinematographer, Gordon Willis, the man responsible for that wonderfully dark palette of the *Godfather* films and master of the closeted room, here contributes to the film's atmosphere of paranoia with his long-lensed follow-shots of Daniels, and a climactic warehouse scene in

which the audience's vision is constantly occluded by shallow depth of field and intervening objects.

Fonda, who had doubts whether she was right for the role, oddly, carried off the Academy Award for her performance. She is very good, but so is her co-star, who had done *M*A*S*H* and *Alex in Wonderland* already, but was about to embark on a spree of choice roles throughout the decade, about the only Hollywood period in which it was acceptable to look slightly 'oddball' (incidentally the name of his character in *Kelly's Heroes*)! This was about as close as he came to playing a conventional leading role, and it is an unfolding pleasure to observe how he makes it more interesting.

In its way *Klute* was a fresh tidemark in the gradual breakdown of pre-war censorship diktats. *Bonnie and Clyde* and *The Wild Bunch* had heralded an increased quotient of graphic violence, but about sex Hollywood remained somewhat coy. Here, though, above all in the dialogue, there was a new frankness about prostitution and its implications; suddenly, we were all supposed to understand what a 'john' (customer), or a 'trick' (assniation) were!

Certainly, watching the film, one can be forgiven for wondering how Pakula turned into the journeyman technician behind *Presumed Innocent* and *The Devil's Own*. For a while, back there in the seventies, he really had us sitting up and taking notice.

David Clare