

On John Klute  
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“Klute” is a 1971 film directed by Alan J. Pakula starring Jane Fonda and Donald Sutherland. Set in contemporary New York City, it tells the story of a call girl Bree Daniels (Fonda), who assists an out-of-town policeman working freelance, John Klute (Sutherland), on a missing person case. Along the way, it becomes clear that someone is trying to kill Bree. “Klute” was a critical and commercial success and won an Academy Award for Jane Fonda. I saw it in a theater when it first came out.

I saw “Klute” this week on the Criterion Channel, a streaming service that specializes in old classic films. Watching it again after almost a half century, I was very much taken with its overall excellence—screenplay, sets, costumes, direction, cinematography, editing, acting. I wasn’t impressed (or unimpressed, for that matter) back then; it was just another movie that took up a couple hours of my time that I was very willing to waste. This second viewing, the thriller aspects of the story, which as I remember was what the film was about for me when I first saw it, seemed contrived and fell flat. It was the relationship between Bree and John, a love story really, watching it unfold, that I found compelling. I recommend the film highly to you.

Along with the film, the Criterion Channel offered five features that enhanced my experience of “Klute”: a “making of” documentary; “Pakula,” recent interviews with filmmakers and scholars about his work in “Klute,” prominent among them, Annette Insdorf, who teaches at Columbia University; a consideration of the look and style of the film by journalist Amy Fine Collins; Pakula’s 1978 appearance on the “Dick Cavett Show” (he died in a car accident in 1998); and a superb 2019 interview of Jane Fonda by the actress Illeana Douglas. If you are a film buff, I suggest you check into the Criterion Channel.

Something that particularly struck me about the features is that not once did they explore Sutherland's character, John Klute. "Klute" is essentially what is called a two-hander, where there are two main characters given roughly equal screen time. Still, only one of the "hands" got any attention. It was 100% percent about who Bree Daniels was and what was going on with her.

After watching "Klute" this time and going through the features, I went online and read a number of reviews and analyses of the film over the years since its 1971 release. Again, it was as if the Sutherland character didn't exist. It was all about the Fonda character. It hits me how when dealing with gender, the public discourse over the span of my adult life—which has basically been from the initial release of "Klute" to now—has come down to the question, How are women doing? and from a left-of-center feminist perspective. I think of the end of the 2019 Jane Fonda interview, where she says, despairingly (my flip paraphrase), "At the end of the film, Bree goes off with a *man*—boo!"

I'm going to talk (or write, you know) here about the John Klute character and from a particular angle—his attractiveness to women--and I'm not a committed feminist. Bree Daniels—who despite her occupation is a bright, talented, strong, capable woman--comes to respect, depend upon, be attracted to, have gratifying sex with, and leave New York City to go away with John Klute. What was it about him that so appealed to her?

I'll start in a negative way, with some things John Klute *wasn't*. I hear women say, "I want a man with a sense of humor." And they say, "I want someone I can talk to." I'm sure they are sincere when they say that, but is that truly what they want? John Klute, who turned out to be so attractive to Bree Daniels, displayed no sense of humor at all. He wasn't a funny guy; he wasn't a performer. And he wasn't a conversationalist. He was clipped, terse. He wasn't unfriendly or disinterested in Bree, but at the same time, he wasn't up for long talks and sharing his feelings with her.

If Klute wasn't that, what *was* he?

He was on a mission, he had a project, he had work he cared about accomplishing—solving the missing person case. He was on his way to somewhere, to something, that mattered greatly to him. It was his top priority, not Bree.

He was calm, confident, and in charge of what was in his world.

He possessed a quiet dignity and pride and sense of honor. No self-effacement, no self-deprecation.

He was capable. He got things done.

He could be trusted.

He was protective.

He was kind.

He was decent.

John Klute was no Brad Pitt, but he was respectable looking and in trim physical shape without coming off as a peacock obsessed about his appearance. He was the type who would hunt and fish and hike, not keep up a gym membership. Conventional clothes, conventional haircut, clean shaven, well-groomed. Nothing flashy or trendy. A solid, no nonsense look about him.

He didn't pursue sex with Bree, but when it happened in the normal course of their relationship, he was good at lovemaking (in contrast to mere sex).

He was autonomous and self-reliant. He didn't chase after Bree, invade her space, fawn over her, subordinate himself to her, give his power to her. He wasn't needy: he didn't demand attention, nurturance, or propping up.

He was mentally stable. He wasn't a case. He didn't come on about his troubled childhood, ex-wife, or his relationship with his therapist.

If something lasting was to result from their connection, Bree would have to come to John's life, to his place (and I mean geographically); he wouldn't go to her. She'd have to join him, come with him, on his journey. He wouldn't center his life around hers.

Bottom line, and in our time, I know how sexist this sounds, John Klute was a strong and good man who could be counted on to look out for Bree and the children.

And Bree fell for him, and in the end, left New York City to be with him. And Jane Fonda can't, for the life of her, figure out why she would have wanted to do that.

I speculate that "Klute," this superbly crafted popular film, is an instance of the arts pointing the way to important truths about our lives: in this case, what women really want and need and find attractive in a man. And I suggest that we would do well to be paying attention.