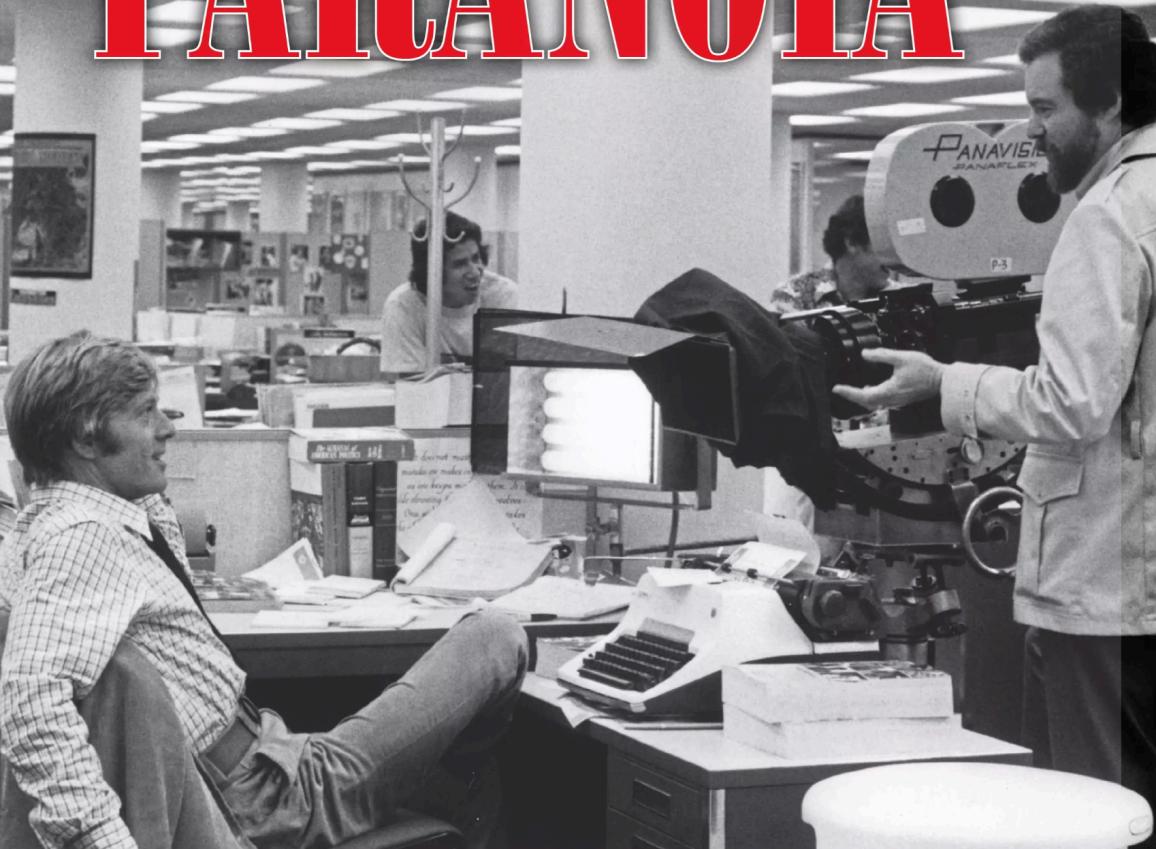


# Master of PARANOIA

Alan J Pakula was responsible for three of the Seventies' most critically acclaimed films. Steve O'Brien remembers the career of one of Hollywood's most thought-provoking directors



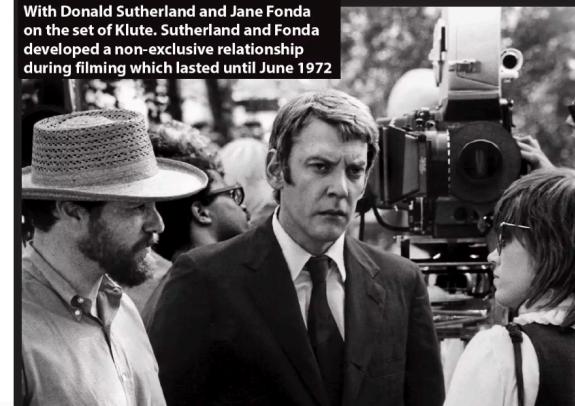
**I**n the dim, rain-soaked streets of Seventies New York, a private detective navigates a web of suspicion and surveillance, his every step watched by unseen forces. This is the world of *Klute*, the 1971 film that marked director Alan J Pakula's first foray into the shadows, where nothing is quite as it seems.

Of course, when that classic thriller debuted, the 43-year-old film maker had no idea of the scandal that was about to engulf the country, one that brought the very subjects of surveillance and paranoia to the front pages of the nation's newspapers.

The train of events that would become known as Watergate began in June 1972, when five men broke into the offices of the Democratic National Committee headquarters in Washington DC. At first, it didn't seem that big a deal, as evidence grew of the burglars' connections to Richard Nixon's White House, it became obvious this was a crime that went straight to the heart of government, sparking a scandal that would climax with the President's shock resignation on 8 August 1974.

Faith in America's institutions had been shattered and, over the next few years Hollywood would both reflect and explore this new-found sense of anxiety and distrust. And it was Alan J Pakula who articulated the country's

**With Donald Sutherland and Jane Fonda on the set of *Klute*. Sutherland and Fonda developed a non-exclusive relationship during filming which lasted until June 1972**



## DID YOU KNOW?

Pakula was working on the screenplay for a film titled *No Ordinary Time*, based on the Pulitzer Prize-winning book by Doris Kearns Goodwin.

psychological state better than any of his contemporaries.

The Bronx-born director was a consummate storyteller who, in his 28-year career, made head-spinningly complex conspiracy thrillers. It was he who masterminded the definitive big-screen dramatisation of the Watergate scandal, with the acclaimed *All the President's Men* (1976), while 1974's *The Parallax View* is a stark, cynical hair-raiser starring Warren Beatty as a journalist uncovering a shadowy assassination network.

### TRUST NO-ONE

In many ways, then, Pakula was ahead of the game when he made *Klute*. It hadn't been his first movie as director – that was 1969's *The Sterile Cuckoo*, a quirky rom-com about as different to his following film as it's possible to get. Although well-received at the time, it's clear in hindsight that Pakula hadn't yet found his voice.

Before he made *The Sterile Cuckoo*, Pakula had been a producer. In that role, he'd helped shepherd Harper Lee's literary favourite *To Kill a Mockingbird* to the big screen and, though it was directed by Robert Mulligan, it could easily be a Pakula-helmed film. A character-driven drama with a strong moral code, the 1962 movie has much in common with the director's socially and politically engaged Seventies films,

albeit not in the thriller genre. He worked with Mulligan on a number of celebrated movies in the Sixties, including *Love with the Proper Stranger* (1963), *Up the Down Staircase* (1967) and *The Stalking Moon* (1968), but was becoming increasingly drawn to directing.

The *Sterile Cuckoo* performed well, even earning an Academy Award nod for its star Liza Minnelli, but it was *Klute* that really bowled over critics. Today, that film is bracketed with *The Parallax View* and *All the President's Men* as Pakula's 'paranoia trilogy'. The story of a New York City sex worker (Jane Fonda) who believes she's being followed and a private detective, played by Donald Sutherland, who enlists her help in solving a missing-person case, Pakula's second movie uses tape surveillance as its motif, two years before America learned that their President had effectively bugged himself (it was Nixon's hidden Oval Office recording system that led to his downfall). 'Klute,' asserts film historian Mark Harris, 'has a lot to say about the way technology can fuel paranoia.'

The *Parallax View*, released in 1974, was based on a 1970 book by novelist Loren Singer. He had been inspired to write it after the spate of assassinations in the previous decade, including those of John F Kennedy, Martin Luther King and Robert F Kennedy. Singer's ➤



book explored the idea that it was a single organisation behind the killings of progressive public figures, with Warren Beatty's reporter Joseph Frady dodging various attempts on his life to expose the truth. It ends bleakly with Frady trying to save the life of a US Senator, before the politician is gunned down by an unseen assailant. Six months later, we're told, and Frady has become a patsy, as the official investigation concludes that Frady was a lone gunman who shot the politician out of a misguided sense of patriotism. As per many Seventies dramas, good does not prevail.

#### A MASTERPIECE

There's an oppressive sense of anxiety and dread in *The Parallax View* bolstered by regular collaborator Gordon Willis's noir-like cinematography (it's not for nothing Willis was nicknamed 'the Prince of Darkness'), shrouding this world of subterfuge and secrecy quite literally in shadows.

Willis returned for Pakula's next film, *All the President's Men*. Based on the non-fiction book by Washington Post newsmen Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein (played here by Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman), it tells the story of the Watergate conspiracy from the first break-in to Nixon's resignation. What might have sounded dry on paper, however, would become a taut, paranoid thriller in Pakula's hands, with unseen forces continually thwarting the journalists' attempts to uncover the truth.



Talking about the difference between his previous film and this one, the director explained: 'The Parallax View represents my fear about what's happening in the world, and *All the President's Men* represents my hope. Like most of us I'm balanced between the two.'

The film – his masterpiece – would be nominated in multiple Oscar categories, including a Best Director nomination for Pakula, and a win for Jason Robards for Best Supporting Actor for his portrayal of Washington Post editor Ben Bradlee.

Pakula's next film took him away from the conspiracy genre, the Western *Comes a Horseman* (1978). Similarly, 1979's *Starting Over* showed he was as adept with character-focused dramas as he was thrillers, a talent that's most on show with *Sophie's Choice* (1982), based on the book by William Styron. A devastating Holocaust drama, it earned its star, Meryl Streep, her second Academy Award and won Pakula his best reviews in years.

For all his skills at relationship dramas, however, it's clear that the neo-noir thriller was his first

love. The final decade of his career is chock full of classics of the genre – *Presumed Innocent* (1990), *Consenting Adults* (1992) and *The Pelican Brief* (1993) among them. Sadly, *The Devil's Own* (1997), starring Brad Pitt as an IRA soldier and Harrison Ford as an Irish-American cop, would be the director's last.

#### TRUTH SEEKER

On 19 November 1998, Pakula was killed while driving on the Long Island Expressway in Melville, New York when a metal pipe smashed through the windshield of his Volvo station wagon. He was 70 years old.

Nearly three decades on, Pakula's name remains less well known than the movies he directed, something documentary filmmaker Matthew Miele wanted to address, with Alan Pakula: *Going for Truth* (2019), a feature-length portrait of one of American cinema's most unsung talents. 'Allowing the story to stand on its

own,' Miele explained, 'without the tricks and style carrying over from film to film is a testament to Alan's ability and confidence in just telling the story and the power within that on its own.'

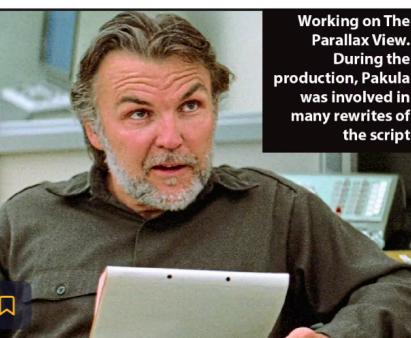
In the nearly 30 years since Pakula's death, there have been countless films and TV shows that have been influenced by his 'paranoia trilogy'. There's more than a hint of Pakula in conspiracy thrillers such as *Enemy of the State* (1998) and *Spotlight* (2015), while even the superhero genre has nodded towards the filmmaker's work, with 2014's *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* riffing on both *The Parallax View* and *All the President's Men*, even going as far as to cast Robert Redford.

Similarly there's definite Pakula DNA in TV shows like *24* (2001-10), *The X-Files* (1993-2018) and the USA Network series *Mr Robot* (2015-19), a debt that creator Sam Esmail has often acknowledged.

That Matthew Miele managed to assemble such an A-list-heavy cast of interviewees – Harrison Ford, Jane Fonda, Dustin Hoffman, Julia Roberts and Robert Redford included – for his documentary is testament to Pakula's standing in Hollywood and the personal regard his collaborators felt for him. 'He just wanted to tell an honest story, and to tell it clearly,' Meryl Streep says in the film. 'That's why he earned the respect of people that he worked with.'

As one of Hollywood's greatest truth seekers, it's fair to assume Alan J Pakula would have much to say about the world of 2026, yet at the same time, those three films of the Seventies very much speak to the politics of today. He may have died too soon, but Pakula's work continues to illuminate the present, just as it did the America of 50 years ago.

Pakula was married twice, first to the actress Hope Lange (1963-71) and second to author Hannah Boorstin (1973-98).



**DID YOU KNOW?**