Staging and Performance in Sidney Lumet's *Deathtrap*

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Abstract: This article provides a stylistic analysis of Sidney Lumet's thriller *Deathtrap* (1982), analysing how its strategies of staging and performance generate narrational effects of suspense and surprise. It argues that Lumet anchors these performative strategies to a broad authorial program grounded in expressive subtlety; as such, Lumet's film reminds us of a waning tradition of American filmmaking in which stylistic ingenuity resides at the denotative and expressive (rather than the decorative or parametric) levels of stylistic discourse. The article treats Lumet's stylistic choices as creative solutions to a distinctive set of aesthetic problems. It canvasses – and identifies the functions of – the motivic staging schemas patterned throughout *Deathtrap*; and it illuminates how these schemas, actuated by star players, shape the viewer's cognitive uptake in substantive ways.

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Staging and Performance in Sidney Lumet's *Deathtrap*

It is fair to say that *Deathtrap* (1982) is one of Sidney Lumet's least-discussed films. Omitted from or slighted by major studies of the director,[1] it has been eclipsed by Lumet's official masterworks – *Network* (1976), *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975), *Serpico* (1973), *12 Angry Men* (1957), *The Verdict* (1982) – and even by succès d'estime such as *Prince of the City* (1981) and *Daniel* (1983). Against such socially conscious, searingly trenchant dramas, *Deathtrap* – a light comedy-thriller adapted from Ira Levin's stage play – is apt to look superficial, frivolous, perfunctory. Yet Lumet claimed to regard *Deathtrap* and other such films (including *Murder on the Orient Express* [1974]) as posing fresh technical problems, the uptake of which enabled the sharpening and refinement of filmic expression. "For me, these films are like the parallel bars in gymnastics," he would say in 1982. "They are for practicing and maintaining your technique" (Rapf 2006: 101). Rather than dismiss Lumet's "minor works" as waystations to his canonized movies, we do better to treat them as problem-solving exercises, productive efforts to probe the dramatic and expressive possibilities of the medium.

In this article I examine Lumet's solutions to the key problems posed by *Deathtrap* (both Levin's source play and Jay Presson Allen's largely faithful screenplay). The problems can be distilled as follows: Most broadly, how to elaborate, energize, and enrich the stage material? How to visually dynamize a predominantly one-set drama? And how to enhance Levin's intended effects of suspense and surprise? In finding solutions to these difficulties, Lumet harnesses a gamut of technical resources (editing, lighting, music, et al), but I wish to isolate two expressive devices as especially fertile: figure staging and actors' performance. In what follows, I seek to disclose the techniques of staging and performance by which *Deathtrap* generates suspense and surprise; I attempt to lay bare the actors' bodily cues –

including dexterous handplay, an overlooked Lumet signature – that, abetted and facilitated by Lumet's staging and framing principles, conjure crucial narrational effects; and I aim to illuminate how Lumet's motivic tactics of composition and choreography, animated by star performers, perform a host of storytelling functions: guiding attention, conveying and commenting upon the drama, and shaping the viewer's narrative uptake in purposeful ways.

Our two main parameters – figure staging and actors' performance – find sustenance in Lumet's background and work practices. A former theater director, Lumet developed a flair for staging. A former actor, he would achieve recognition as an "actor's director." He imported to cinema an insistence on preproduction rehearsal (*Deathtrap* was rehearsed for two weeks prior to shooting), during which he choreographed the action: "When I rehearse, it's not just going over the script and talking about character and so on. I actually stage it, like in the theater."[2] When it came to "blocking" a scene, he was a virtual puppeteer. According to Al Pacino, "Sidney has a way of directing you where he literally moves you around…He just staged it and all you have to do is follow his direction."[3] By the early 1980s Lumet had grown to increasingly rely on long shots and extended takes, the better to preserve the integrity of the profilmic event (viz. both his predetermined staging patterns and the actors' performance).[4] For some critics, this tableau aesthetic could be "somewhat static visually" – Frank R. Cunningham (1991: 4) cites as offending examples *The Verdict* and *Running on Empty* (1988) – but such claims ring hollow when one attends to the delicate, purposive choreography of figures within the frame. In *Deathtrap*, I aim to demonstrate, Lumet's staging patterns, actuated by a cadre of skilful film actors, comprise a vital solution to the cluster of problems outlined above.

In *Figures Traced in Light*, David Bordwell discriminates four broad functions of film style: denotative (e.g. explicitly designating the diegesis; steering attention), expressive (presenting "feelingful qualities" and eliciting emotion from the viewer), symbolic

(suggesting abstract meanings), and decorative (embroidering stylistic functions through abstract pattern-making) (Bordwell 2005: 33-34). Here and elsewhere,[5] Bordwell finds fascinating examples of decorative style, particularly among practitioners operating in Asian cinemas. Pointedly, mid-career Lumet embodies an aesthetic approach that is anathema to stylistic ornamentation. If his early film work exhibits, as Bordwell puts it, "heavy-handed showoffishness" (Bordwell 2011), his style evolved in the 1970s toward sobriety, subtlety, and "simplicity" (Kauffmann 2001: 218). Now he fitted style to story, and he subordinated stylistic discourse to the requirements of narrative. Among his contemporaries in low-key visual design were Alan J. Pakula, Mike Nichols, Clint Eastwood, and Sydney Pollack; all the same, Lumet embraced more fully than these bedfellows a staging-based approach to storytelling.

I take Bordwell's typology as a point of departure.[6] By surveying the dramatic and expressive functions to which Lumet ascribes staging, my analysis of *Deathtrap* aims to demonstrate the richness of a stylistic program operating chiefly at the denotative and expressive levels. < Callout 1 about here> I try to illuminate the ways that staging and performance shape the spectator's experience. And I attempt to fill a lacuna in Lumet scholarship, not only by subjecting *Deathtrap* to detailed stylistic analysis, but also by demonstrating how it elaborates authorial traits present in Lumet's acknowledged classics.

Since my analysis of *Deathtrap* will hopscotch through the plot achronologically – and since that plot is laden with shocks, surprises, feints, volte-faces, and *deus ex machinas* – a synopsis is in order. The plot can be parsed into four large-scale parts or "acts."[7] Act One: On the latest in a string of calamitous opening nights, Sidney Bruhl (Michael Caine), a once-successful writer of Broadway thrillers, receives from his former student Clifford Anderson (Christopher Reeve) an ingenious manuscript for a new thriller – "Deathtrap." Hankering for a hit play, Sidney elects to kill Clifford and claim the manuscript as his own. His frail wife,

Myra (Dyan Cannon), hopes to dissuade him, but Sidney coaxes his young protégé to the Bruhls' lavish East Hampton windmill manor, throttles him, and buries him in the garden. Act Two: Later that night, the Bruhls are visited by a neighboring Dutch psychic, Helga Ten Dorp (Irene Worth), who forewarns of danger. After she leaves, the couple repairs to the bedroom. Clifford, bloodied and bedraggled, explodes through the bedroom window, bludgeons Sidney, and stalks toward Myra, who suffers a fatal heart attack. Sidney and Clifford, it emerges, are lovers, their brutal duels mere play-acting intended to spur Myra's heart failure. Act Three: Several weeks later, Clifford is ensconced in the Bruhl house as Sidney's secretary. A visit from Sidney's lawyer, Porter Milgrim (Henry Jones), casts suspicion upon Clifford; the owlish Porter has noticed the young writer furtively locking a manuscript in his desk drawer. Sidney gains possession of the document. He is appalled to discover that it comprises a theatrical roman à clef, a barely disguised account of Myra's demise entitled "Deathtrap." Under pressure of blackmail, however, he reluctantly agrees to help Clifford finish the play. Act Four: Sidney plots to kill Clifford, but his scheme is anticipated by the neophyte writer, who restrains him in shackles. Sidney escapes his bonds and shoots a crossbow into his lover's back. Now Helga reappears, compelled by psychic foreboding. A skirmish between Sidney and Helga is abruptly curtailed as Clifford, reviving, rears up behind Sidney and aims a battle-axe at him. An ellipsis transports us to a theater stage, upon which the climactic scuffle between Sidney, Clifford, and Helga appears to be re-enacted by players performing for a rapt audience. Offstage, Helga is feted for authoring "Deathtrap," a box-office smash.

Staging Schemas, Functions, and Intrinsic Norms

As per Levin's *Deathtrap*, Lumet primarily confines the drama to the Bruhls' bourgeois homestead. "I opened up *Deathtrap* very, very little," he remarked, "because it would have let the tension out" (Chanko 1984: 455).[8] He sustains interest in this locale by multiplying setups: except for shot/reverse-shot passages, almost none of the film's 315 setups are repeated. He also provides spatial exposition only gradually, teasing us with an incremental revelation of the geography of the house. And across the film he varies the décor: after Myra's demise, for instance, the homicidal lovers install a partner's desk (a double entendre derived from Levin), refreshing a living space we have come to know well. Gradually a topography coalesces. There is the parlor, furnished with chairs, sofa, and chaise lounge, and bifurcated by a brick fireplace. French doors open out onto a patio, overlooking the manse's vast environs. Adjacent to the parlor is the kitchen; upstairs is the bedroom. Contiguous to the parlor is the study, its panelled walls festooned with theatrical ephemera: framed posters advertising Sidney's hit plays; and an artfully arrayed congeries of weapons. This region of the main floor achieves a kind of ubiquity even when it is offscreen; a dramatically charged area, it vibrates with the promise of deadly conflict. Through this entire scenographic space move the principal players, tracing out patterns and functions devised by Lumet during preproduction rehearsal.

To what functions does Lumet harness figure staging? At times he recruits staging to primarily formal ends, assisting his overarching goal of structural unity. Rhyming physical actions, for instance, may be deployed as a local cohesion device, supplying a lynchpin between scenes. A concise instance occurs during Helga's first visit to the Bruhl residence. From the parlor, Sidney and Myra lead Helga to the front door. Upon Helga's departure, Sidney pushes the door shut. Cut to Myra, dressed in a nightgown, closing the bedroom door. The cut signals an ellipsis, but the abrupt jump forward in story action is less jarring than we might expect thanks to the rhyming door action – a schema recycled, with minute variation,

from *A Deadly Affair* (1966) and *Network* (1976). Here the simple staging of rhyming actions serves not to imply character affinities, nor to mark similarities between locales, nor to carry thematic meaning, but rather to buttress formal unity, endowing a disjunctive scene transition with seamless continuity.

Typically, Lumet harnesses staging to storytelling functions. On not a few occasions he puts staging in conversation with set design, tacitly steering the viewer's hypotheses and advancing subtle commentary upon the action. The framed posters lining the walls of the study – each advertising a Sidney Bruhl thriller – become active features of the décor when placed in proximity to narrative agents. During the Bruhls' first encounter with Helga, the psychic forewarns Sidney that an unidentified man in boots will assault him. Later in the plot, when Helga is introduced to Clifford, she clocks his mountain boots with alarm. Her startled reaction cues a reverse shot of Clifford, behind whom hangs a poster bearing the title "Flicker of Doubt" – a pithy phrase capturing Helga's sudden twinge of distrust.

Without being heavy-handed, Lumet's juxtaposition of staging and background elements conjures up wry commentary, hinting at a narrational playfulness wholly germane to Levin's source text. It also gives the lie to Pauline Kael's charge that Lumet's "backgrounds are always just an empty space" (Kael 2009a: 83). Lumet had made ironic use of posters in earlier work: in *Just Tell Me What You Want* (1980), a movie producer's office displays a framed poster for *…One Third of a Nation…* (1939), a social-problem drama starring Sylvia Sidney and Lumet himself, then a fledgling actor. The poster device in *Deathtrap* thus springs from Lumet's authorial toolbox, but now it is intricately yoked to figure blocking, plot action, and character subjectivity. It also operates less flagrantly than in *Just Tell Me What You Want*, which thrusts its one-sheet self-consciously into the visual foreground. In *Deathtrap*, moreover, the posters serve to shape the viewer's uptake in particular ways. Consider the prelude to Sidney's faux murder of Clifford. Lumet has staged

much of the foregoing action in the parlor, but now he moves Sidney and Clifford into the

dramatically charged study, shifting the tension into higher gear. As Sidney coaxes his quarry

into Houdini's handcuffs, Lumet positions the men face-to-face and frames them in profile.

At the rear of the shot – tucked into the sliver of space between the two protagonists – is a

pair of posters whose titles read "A Hint of Murder" and "The Murder Game." The study's

posters offer apt comment upon the dramatic situation, but they also prime the attentive

viewer for imminent wrongdoing. Alongside the colorful array of weapons dotted across the

walls, and in conjunction with Lumet's precise blocking of protagonists *relative to* the scenic

space, these portentous posters ratchet suspense and sharpen our anticipation of impending

conflict.[9]

This last example points to another characteristic function of Lumet's staging:

narrative foreshadowing. Across his oeuvre, Lumet utilizes staging as a long-range

storytelling device. Take, as just one example, an extended shot from *Running on Empty*.

Teenager Danny Pope (River Phoenix) has invited his new schoolmate Lorna (Martha

Plimpton) to a modest family celebration at his home. The spectator knows, as Lorna does

not, that Danny's parents are former radical activists on the run. Relentlessly pursued by the

FBI, the family routinely hopscotches from one American state to another. The shot begins

with five characters – Danny, his father Arthur (Judd Hirsch), his mother Annie (Christine

Lahti), his kid brother Harry (Jonas Abry), and Lorna – gathered around a dining table. Their

appetites sated, Arthur, Harry, and Lorna rise from their seats and clear dishes from the table.

Lumet funnels the threesome into an adjacent kitchen upstage, the camera tracking with them

as Danny and Annie, still seated at the dining table at the right of the playing space, briefly

drift out of view. Buoyed by a folk tune on the radio, Arthur and Lorna launch into a

spontaneous jig and shimmy back into the dining room. Lumet's camera gently retreats. Now

the group in toto begins carousing, bundled together at the center of the frame. As Lorna pulls

Danny into a romantic clinch, the couple peels away from the pack, drifting rightward into the area previously occupied by Danny and Annie; at the same instant, Lumet lets the other revellers slide unselfconsciously into a vacant zone on the left. The scene's explicit action stresses familial bonding: Lorna has been accepted into the Popes' insular unit. But Lumet's staging operates contrapuntally, implying a domestic schism and prefiguring familial estrangement. At the film's climax, the Popes resume their life on the lam, but Danny – riven by conflicting loyalties and desires – gains reprieve from the family's transient existence. Now he will embrace an independent, socially conformist lifestyle with Lorna, who promises Danny the kind of nurturing stability that his guilt-stricken mother (whom Lorna spatially displaces in our extended shot) has found impossible to provide.

In *Deathtrap*, too, Lumet conceives staging effects that reverberate across the film. In the opening reel, Sidney deposits Clifford's manuscript in a wooden chair situated in the study. Clifford will occupy this very chair at the film's midpoint, when he is "garrotted" by Sidney in an ambush ostensibly initiated around Clifford's manuscript. Another instance of prescient staging occurs upon Clifford's first arrival at the Bruhl residence. Inspecting the theatrical mementos that adorn the study, Clifford removes an antique prop gun from the wall and points it casually into space. In the film's final phase, he will dislodge a loaded firearm from the same wall, turning it on Sidney. None of this echoic staging is extant in Levin's play. Indeed, herein lies one means by which Lumet's *Deathtrap* enriches its progenitor. Onto Levin's rigorous plotting Lumet grafts a staging design bristling with macrostructural echoes, symmetries, and motifs. The result is an internally coherent visual scheme ideally matched to Levin's finely tuned plot construction. <Callout 2 about here>

Still Lumet has not exhausted the functions of staging. Throughout *Deathtrap*, he puts mobile staging in service of character revelation, revealing interior states through figure choreography. In the film's opening phase, Sidney half-jokingly floats the prospect of

murdering Clifford and purloining his play. Myra is unnerved: is Sidney capable of murder? Sidney lures Clifford to the Bruhl ménage. As the conditions for murder grow propitious – Clifford, the Bruhls learn, has penned his play in private; he carries on his person the only existing copies of the manuscript – Myra's agitation increases. True to Levin's play, screenwriter Jay Presson Allen assigns Myra a stretch of dialogue the entirety of which is addressed to Clifford. ("Mr. Anderson, Sidney is simply bursting with creative ideas about your play! I've never seen him so enthusiastic.") Taking his cue from these lines, Lumet maneuvers Myra across the parlor toward Clifford, her utterances directed at the young playwright. But midway through the speech, Lumet – *pace* Levin – swivels Myra around and launches her on a trajectory across the parlor toward Sidney, so that Myra's lines, spoken *about* Sidney, are now addressed directly *at* him: "I know he could improve your play tremendously. He could turn it into a hit that would run for years and years and make more than enough money for everyone concerned!" Here Lumet furnishes another display of what I call contrapuntal staging. His figure blocking runs counter to the scripted action – not to augur upcoming events as in *Running on Empty*, but to disclose a protagonist's interior motivation. Staging here illuminates subtext: it reminds us that, throughout this prolonged scene, Myra harbors an unspoken objective – namely, to discreetly deter her husband from bumping off their houseguest. In Lumet's hands, Myra's speech becomes an entreaty to Sidney, a coded plea not to kill Clifford but to collaborate with him. In concert with shot framing and Dyan Cannon's high-strung performance, Lumet's unfussy choreography of bodies adroitly reveals Myra's subjective state. As so often, Lumet extends and elaborates on the scripted text through subtly expressive mobile staging. To both play and screenplay he supplies an eloquent visual texture rich in narrative implication.

Another function of staging crystallizes in this sequence. In close accord with plot developments, Lumet arrays characters in ways that underscore their fluctuating

relationships. Once Clifford enters the drama, Lumet mobilizes an extrinsic norm of theatrical staging based on the spatial triangulation of characters.[10] Distinctively, he probes every permutation of the trilateral formation, shuffling Clifford, Myra, and Sidney around its vertices in ways that accord with the unfolding story. In the early phase of action, Sidney and Clifford increasingly share the same visual plane, with Myra stationed at the apex of the imaginary triangle. Her spatial remoteness dovetails with the drama – the two dramatists are anxious to talk shop, but, as Sidney points out, Myra is a trade outsider: "Darling, this is Clifford's first play and I am its first reader. I wonder if he wouldn't rather this discussion was just between us two hacks." Clifford insists that Myra poses no distraction: she can stay. Yet still Lumet's staging aligns Clifford and Sidney on identical planes of depth, casting Myra into deeper niches of space. Framing and cutting reinforce Myra's estrangement, juxtaposing two-shots of the dramaturges against singles of her. Only in retrospect do we realize that this spatial configuration articulates a love triangle and hints at the scheming playwrights' secret complicity.

Once Lumet has established triangulation as an intrinsic norm, he can subject it to dramatically motivated variation. As the first act unfolds, the Bruhls' fraught, erratic behavior perturbs Clifford. Myra, in a disguised bid to avert Clifford's death, implores him to collaborate with her husband. But Clifford mistakes her pleas for avarice ("Deathtrap" carries lucrative potential), angles to make an exit, and sidles upstage toward the front door, pausing beside Sidney. Lumet furnishes a high-angled long shot delineating the spatial layout: Myra dorsally seated in the foreground, Clifford and Sidney frontally positioned at the rear. Suddenly Sidney hollers, "Don't, Myra! Don't beg!" and bounds into the foreground. Now Clifford becomes the pinnacle of a freshly-laid triangular layout, one that pits him against the rebuffed spouses in a kind of power contest. Lumet's spatial reconfiguration is dramatically apposite: Clifford, by prevaricating on Myra's proposition, unintentionally stings his

mentor's professional pride. Here again Lumet's staging avoids overtness. The triangular formation does not linger sufficiently to achieve self-consciousness – it will soon be dissolved by the movement of all three characters. But it has performed a vivid function, underlining a decisive, fateful shift in the protagonists' relationship. Now, with Clifford poised to depart the Bruhl homestead, and the possibility of collaboration all but vanquished, Sidney will entice his protégé into the study, his mind firmly fixed on murder.

Consistent with his principles of unity, Lumet employs triangulation and other blocking schemas in systematic fashion. If triangulation constitutes the reigning staging principle during the Bruhls' encounter with Clifford, it is supplanted thereafter by a blocking schema that strings figures along diagonals. Lumet treats these staging schemas as an occasion for permutational play. Across or within scenes, he ricochets characters around a triangle or a diagonal, yielding relational dynamics that chime with the ongoing action. Both schemas let Lumet exploit the depth of the capacious cottage set (which practically invites recessional staging). And both function as leitmotifs: for instance, Lumet reserves the diagonal layout for scenes involving the psychic Helga. Diagonal staging creates long-range echoes too. After Clifford is "garrotted," Helga enters the drama, and her extrasensory vibrations compel her to scrutinize the study. Lumet settles Helga (in a three-quarter dorsal view, stationed in the foreground), Sidney (frontally placed at the center mid-ground), and Myra (frontally positioned behind him) along a rough diagonal. Lifting a dagger from the wall, Helga issues a dire prediction (in thickly accented English): "Another woman uses this knife." Sidney glances gingerly over his shoulder. Does Myra intend to harm him? Lumet mirrors this diagonal array at the climax: here again Helga assumes a three-quarter dorsal position in the foremost plane, and Sidney, facing her, retains his notch in the center mid-ground. Sidney holds Helga at gunpoint, but Clifford – mortally wounded by his lover's crossbow – spontaneously revives, rears up behind Sidney, and plunges a battle-axe into his

back. As before, the presumed threat to Sidney emanates from the figure placed behind him, occupying the farthest node on the diagonal. Not for the first time, however, the narration sends our gender-based assumptions awry: the lethal threat to Sidney comes not from Myra or "another woman," but from his male co-conspirator. In all, Lumet's diagonal staging generates echoes, supplies cohesion, and acquires fresh permutations across the film's unfolding.[11] By the climax it will contribute to surprise (Clifford's sudden revival crystallizes a diagonal figuration) and dramatic irony (Sidney is oblivious to the axe-toting menace advancing from behind).

Triangular and diagonal staging techniques are hardly novel or unique to Lumet. They exist among a suite of stage-based and filmic extrinsic norms (including lateral arrays, shallow staging, multiplanar arrangements, forward or backward movement, and other blocking schemas) from which Lumet selects, adopting and refining them for formal and dramatic purpose. What is noteworthy is that in *Deathtrap* he adopts both triangular and diagonal schemas as unifying strategies, yoking them to particular characters and phases of action. His blocking schemas consolidate as intrinsic norms to be revised, refreshed, and subtly modulated to shifts in the drama. Elaborating and enriching the source text, these schemas uncover nuances of characterization and plot action absent from Levin's play. They also draw out (and, as we'll see, oftentimes invent) parallel actions that unite discrete chunks of action. What emerges is a choreographic macrostructure – a totalizing vision of cinematic staging – that teems with forward-pointing motifs, rhyming actions, and echoic symmetries. <Callout 3 about here> Further, Lumet finds in triangular and diagonal blocking a graphic simplicity wholly befitting his mid-career stylistic program. At this period an advocate of invisible style, Lumet favors staging patterns that yield clean lines, fluid movement, and crisp, pictorially legible compositions. In short, as Bordwell (2011) contends, Lumet gravitated toward classicism at a period of Hollywood cinema recently governed by high-

concept visual hijinks. No less than *The Verdict* or *Network*, *Deathtrap* is a classicist exercise *par excellence*.

One more staging norm deserves attention. *Deathtrap* exhibits what might be called seesaw staging. Here Lumet creates a dynamic, rhythmic flow of action by alternating sitting and standing figure movement. As one figure traces a descent, another starts to rise. This schema reaches back to Lumet's first film, *12 Angry Men* (1957), in which seesaw staging yields multiple zones of interest within cramped, densely populated compositions. Pictorially, the device can vary and refresh the visual field – it can, for instance, motivate contrasting high and low camera angles, while varying the axis of actors' gaze direction, in shot/reverse-shot passages. It can direct the viewer's attention to varying loci of interest. And it can shift saliency between or among characters as they trace out patterns of mobility and stasis.

As with triangulation and diagonal staging, Lumet enlists the seesaw schema not only to shape attention but also to italicize character traits and interpersonal dynamics. An illustrative moment comes in *Before the Devil Knows You're Dead* (2007). Brothers Andy (Philip Seymour Hoffman) and Hank (Ethan Hawke) have orchestrated a robbery gone awry. Now they rendezvous in an apartment lounge, tensely puzzling out their next move. Framed in profile, the siblings sit facing each other at opposite sides of the room. The long shot framing is canted slightly, marginally elevating Andy on the right frame edge: before a word is uttered, Hank – browbeaten and skittish – seems already to be dwarfed by his domineering elder brother. Andy asserts control: "You're gonna have to follow my lead. No questions, no hesitations." Uncharacteristically, Hank musters some backbone: "I've done that before," he yells, rising from his seat, "And that's how come I'm here with my life going down the toilet." In riposte, Andy need not even raise his voice – the slightest reprimand is enough to make Hank plop back down on the sofa, instantly apologetic. Now comes a very precise seesawing effect: As Hank sinks down, Andy stands up. Lumet's undulating choreography

not only shifts the point of emphasis in ways that guide the viewer's eye; it also confirms the sibling hierarchy: Hank's feeble attempt to literally stand up to Andy is both fleeting and spineless, demonstrating a pathetic, abject failure of nerve.

In *Deathtrap*, Lumet squeezes humor out of the seesaw schema. After Myra's death, Sidney discovers Clifford's covertly authored manuscript, the contents of which daringly replicate the lovers' conspiracy to bump off Myra. (In private, Sidney refers to his lover as "Cliff" – an apt ascription for one attracted to life on the edge.) The ensuing action stresses Sidney's stupefaction. Accosting Clifford over so reckless a scheme, Sidney rises from his chair in the parlor and stalks to the threshold of the study. Clifford, seated in the parlor, pivots in his chair to face Sidney. A long shot encompasses both figures: Sidney at the center midground, and Clifford, in three-quarter dorsal view, at the right foreground. Springing up from his seat, the novice playwright defends his actions: "I've got the same wish you have, Sidney – a success wish." Exasperated, Sidney advances into the parlor and roars, "Clifford, I hate to ask this, but could you give me your own special definition of success? Being gangbanged in a shower in the state penitentiary?" Now Clifford sinks despondently into his chair: "Oh jeez, I knew you were gonna have reservations about it." Clifford's voice conveys deflation, echoed and enhanced by the sinking motion – a comic reaction of understatement in reply to Sidney's barnstorming fit of rage. The rest of the scene will extend the seesaw schema as each man jockeys for dominance.

Lumet develops a variant of seesaw staging, and this variant itself comes forth as an intrinsic norm. This revised schema positions two characters frontally, one seated in the foreground, the other standing close behind them. Invariably, the two figures share physical contact. Out of this two-shot motif flows one more function of Lumet's staging: the impelling and intensification of surprise or suspense. Lumet applies the device promiscuously; he regards this schema as yet another opportunity to interchange the three principal players.

Hence varying combinations surface across the film – Sidney seated/Myra standing; Myra seated/Sidney standing; Sidney seated/Clifford standing; and so forth, each permutation tethered to narrative meanings and effects. The schema also permits Lumet to vary the locus of communicativeness. At times the seated foreground figure embodies narrational omniscience; alternatively, information is funneled through the standing background figure. In every case, the frontal two-shot staging cues us to detect and interpret juxtaposed facial cues and behavioral signals – to notice, in short, a disparity of knowledge between the figures in the frame.

An early instance occurs as Sidney, seated in the study, reaches the end of Clifford's manuscript, declaring it "flawless." Here, for the first time, he posits the idea of killing Clifford and taking credit for his work. Myra laughs dismissively, strides up behind him, drapes a consoling arm over his shoulder, and kisses his forehead (Figure 1). Sidney's facial expression – brooding, contemplative, subtly malevolent – conveys to us what Myra, stationed at his back, can neither see nor suspect: that Sidney's allusion to murder is not meant in jest.[12] A gradual dolly-in frames Sidney in medium shot, italicizing the intensity of his countenance.

Now that Lumet has introduced this schema, he can recast it in ways congenial to surprise and suspense. It will recur, again in the study, during Clifford's simulated murder. An arcing camera frames the playwright, seated, as he strives to unlock Houdini's restraints. Advancing from behind, Sidney produces the garrotte, and, winding its chain around Clifford's neck, yanks him to the floor. The attack elicits from us a jolt of surprise: repressive staging has obscured our view of the weapon, and recent events have sought to defuse our sense of immediate peril. Notably, Lumet has adapted the schema from its previous iteration. Now the locus of information derives not from the foremost figure but from the agent placed farther back. (And, thanks to the suppressive narration, our knowledge is only fractionally

ahead of Clifford's – hence the triggering of surprise.) Moreover, the staging schema now substitutes physical barbarity for physical affection. Hereafter, revivals of this schema are rife with ambivalence. Barbaric or benevolent: which variant will be played out next?

Later in the plot, Lumet tweaks the template again. Feuding over Clifford's riskily autobiographical play, the two lovers settle into the now-familiar positions – Sidney seated, Clifford standing behind him – only now Lumet frames the pair not frontally but in profile (Figure 2). This shift toward obliqueness, denying us the legibility of frontal faces, augments the ambiguity of the scene's action. Clifford places his arm across Sidney's chest – a putatively affectionate embrace that recalls Myra's earlier consoling gesture. The dialogue, too, is prima facie romantic, almost to the point of cliché. (Clifford: "I need you." Sidney: "Would you count the ways?") But as often in *Deathtrap*, staging and performance operate contrapuntally, undermining the scripted text. <Callout 4 about here> Clifford's clinging embrace harbors latent aggression – purely graphically, it almost resembles a stranglehold – thus evoking the foregoing scene in which Clifford is "throttled." Michael Caine, moreover, adopts a line delivery that is less romantic than caustic. The protagonists' charged, equivocal gestures and sardonic utterances generate a stab of suspense: will Clifford choke Sidney? In this thinly veiled power contest, which man holds the advantage?

The scene's climax seemingly supplies an answer. Sidney accedes to Clifford's proposition, consenting to collaborate on his play. Both men raise a toast to their new creative venture – "Deathtrap." Elated, Clifford sits down at his typewriter. Now Lumet reverses the preceding iteration of our staging schema. Sidney casually takes up a standing position behind Clifford, confidently rests a hand on the young man's shoulder, and lightly squeezes it (Figure 3). Like Clifford's embrace, it is but a superficially tender gesture. Wearing a debauched smile, Sidney utters a double-barreled remark: "You go on drafting Act One, Clifford, and let *me* do the thinking about Act Two." As Clifford cheerfully begins typing,

Lumet's communicative staging and framing permit us to witness Sidney's façade drop, his gleeful joviality displaced by a baleful, heavy-lidded stare. The implication is clear: Sidney has no intention of allowing the self-incriminating play to proceed. *Deathtrap* performs some deft trickery here. Lumet's staging schema promotes the impression of narrational omniscience – it cues us to infer that Sidney now conspires against Clifford, a fact of which the latter is *visibly* unaware – thus coaxing us to believe that the tit-for-tat advantage lies with Sidney. In fact, the scene has executed a cunning bit of misdirection: Clifford, the plot will later reveal, has been manipulating Sidney from the start. Lumet caps the present scene with a dolly-in that frames Sidney in medium shot – a stylistic gesture that recalls us to the schema's first iteration. In this respect, Lumet ascribes a recurring staging schema – a repeated and revised intrinsic norm – a kind of unobtrusive, formally unifying symmetry.

Scenes conjoined by rhyming actions, posters forecasting imminent threats, figure movement adumbrating upcoming events, spatial layouts evoking character traits and interrelationships, the motivic patterning of triangulation, diagonal staging, and seesaw choreography – all these strategies function as intrinsic norms, rigorously fastened to *Deathtrap*'s intended narrational effects (surprise, suspense, curiosity, dread), burnishing Levin's original play, and materializing a shrewdly constructed, largely understated compositional design. Granted, *Deathtrap* displays the occasional stylistic flourish – as when a 360-degree arcing camera encircles Sidney when he telephones Clifford – but such isolated and infrequent moments gain their force by virtue of being set against a more encompassing visual sobriety. What emerges, I suggest, is a delicately calibrated pictorial style at odds with contemporary trends. Not for Lumet the fashionable norms of 1980s cinema. In *Deathtrap*, he disdains optical point-of-view (POV) shots entirely. He minimizes most of the techniques of "intensified continuity"[13] – despite copious depth staging, he avails himself of rack focusing but once; his shot scales favor gradations of long and medium shot framings; and he deploys

close-ups and rapid cutting strategically, reserving them for dramatic fillips and crescendos.
The film's infrequent bursts of editing skew its average shot length (ASL), which clocks in at
12.7 seconds – sluggish by the standards of 1980s Hollywood cinema, which averaged an
ASL of 5-7 seconds per shot.[14] *Deathtrap* exhibits numerous scenes built out of extended
takes, the longest running 3.2 minutes. Needless to say, this tendency toward a tableau
aesthetic is a precondition of a staging-based mode of storytelling. Long shots and unbroken
takes enable Lumet to construct full-figure staging, and to launch and weave blocking
patterns across a real-time duration.[15]

If *Deathtrap* downgrades certain options of intensified continuity, it nonetheless
promotes mobile camerawork to a major device. It is worth briefly alighting on the film's
interplay of camera movement and staging. Here again Lumet's approach is resolutely
classical. For the most part, he employs figure and camera movement symbiotically. When
Clifford rises from an armchair, for instance, the camera booms up with him, achieving a
seamless synchronicity. This long-established device forms an axiom of invisible style. By
coordinating blocking with camera movement, Lumet (like his classical forbears) prevents
either parameter from becoming conspicuous. Expressively, moreover, the film's many
Steadicam tracking shots – smoothly gliding through the dramatic milieu – perfectly
complement the graceful fluidity of Lumet's figure choreography.

Camera movement motivated by figures in motion: here is another of Lumet's
staging-based norms that will be violated for strategic effect. As Patrick Keating notes,
"[Classical] Hollywood filmmakers were perfectly willing to use 'unmotivated' (i.e.
nonfollowing) camera movements as long as they performed a dramatic function, such as
revealing what a character does not know…or emphasizing what a character does know"
(Keating 2019: 246-7). Likewise, when Lumet disrupts the intrinsic norm of synchronized
motion, he does so to amplify the drama's in-built effects. In *Deathtrap*, he assigns the free-

roaming camera to situations of suspense. Take the following instance. Near the finale, Sidney – determined to thwart Clifford's effort to consummate "Deathtrap" – scampers across the parlor to the fireplace mantel, and secretes a loaded pistol behind an ornament. Clifford enters the scene. On the pretext of rehearsing ("physicalizing") an action from their play, Sidney maneuvers Clifford into the study. Now the camera traces a very gradual retreat. The camera's deliberateness, I surmise, rescues its motion from obtrusiveness. Nevertheless, the protagonists are riveted in place – so what motivates the camera's backward trajectory? Gradually all becomes clear: the receding camera, passing back through the parlor, discreetly admits – in the bottom left corner of the rising frame – the fireplace (Figure 4). Almost imperceptibly, and solely by visual means, Lumet reminds us about the gun. Narrative suspense is thus rekindled: will Sidney shoot Clifford? But the image also generates a more precise form of anticipation. Since the long shot framing encompasses both the fireplace (in the foreground) and the two protagonists (positioned in depth), we can perceive that Clifford is in no *immediate* danger. Consequently, Lumet's staging and framing set up a kind of *spatial suspense*: how will Sidney orchestrate his "rehearsal" in a way that enables him to cross the parlor to the hearth, claim the pistol, and turn the weapon on Clifford? This single shot demonstrates, yet again, how Lumet exploits intrinsic norms of staging in ways that ratchet suspense and deepen the scripted action, while dynamizing the visual field with both economy and restraint.

The Lumet Touch

Staging schemas are embodied by actors and, in *Deathtrap* at least, they are sharpened by the players' faces, gestures, stances, and gaits. How do Lumet's actors enrich his blocking patterns? What is their capacity to facilitate the director's aesthetic goals of suspense,

surprise, and formal unity? Under Lumet's aegis, I contend, the principal players – Michael

Caine, Christopher Reeve, Dyan Cannon – develop physical traits that will be braided

through the film in motivic fashion, undergirding the dramatic whole. Facial cues provide a

gateway to suspense, but Lumet's penchant for long- and medium-shot framings permit other

bodily signifiers, as well, to wield expressive and dramatic force. Not least, a motivic

approach to hand behavior – a neglected Lumet signature – combines with figure staging to

strikingly cohesive and communicative effect.

As a point of departure, we can observe that Lumet's casting of actors is strategically

intertextual. Later in his career, he would claim to cast roles according to the characters'

eventual qualities – when a character traces an arc from vice to virtue, Lumet advocated

casting an actor that radiates virtue.[16] *Deathtrap* purposively flouts this principle. Instead,

Lumet's casting approach is oriented to first impressions, the better to occlude a pivotal *deus*

ex machina, namely, the midpoint revelation of Sidney and Clifford's homosexual affair.

<Callout 5 about here> Shrewdly, Lumet's cast selection piggybacks on pre-existing star

personas. By casting Reeve – most recently an embodiment of idealized masculinity in

Superman (1978) and *Superman II* (1980) – Lumet confers upon Clifford a kind of default

heterosexuality. (He also taps the innate virtuousness that clung to Reeve's star image

following *Superman*, here again misdirecting the viewer's initial moral judgment of Clifford.)

And though Caine had recently flirted with sexual ambiguity in *California Suite* (1978) and

Dressed to Kill (1980), his on- and offscreen persona remained essentially bound to roguish

heterosexual virility, as evinced in *Alfie* (1966), *Sleuth* (1972), and *The Man Who Would Be*

King (1975). Lumet's intertextual casting, then, paves the way for narrational surprise. Our

prefilmic assumption about the stars' heterosexuality permeates the primacy effect, propels us

down false inferential alleyways, and thereby preserves the plot twist's efficacy.[17]

All three principal players deepen characterization in judicious ways. To Sidney, Caine brings a facile craftiness. The burnt-out playwright harbors deadly secrets, the discovery of which prompts him to deflect, bluff, evade, and cajole. Caine implies Sidney's quick-wittedness by means of facial micro-expressions – or what Paul Ekman and Wallace Friesen (1969) call "leakage" – conveying varying degrees of disquiet or panic. (As Pauline Kael remarks, "Caine is a virtuoso at letting us know what his character is thinking" [2009b: 327].) Most virtuosic, perhaps, is a long take in which Sidney – fresh from presiding over Myra's death – kisses Clifford full on the mouth, and only then telephones for an ambulance. Into the receiver Sidney sobs violently, but as he hangs up the phone his affect turns chipper, his bout of grief nothing but a shameless put on. This longish take (1.2 minutes) showcases Caine's virtuosity – he segues effortlessly from ardor to despair to sprightliness – but it also conveys Sidney's utter lack of remorse for Myra's demise. Later in the film, Sidney will brand Clifford a "sociopath," an individual "who has no sense of moral obligation whatsoever." But the sociopathic tendencies he ascribes to Clifford are, in fact, equally immanent within himself. Accordingly, Caine offsets Sidney's affability with simmering ruthlessness. His performance reminds us that staging isn't only about movement: by occasionally *refusing* movement, Caine radiates a menacing intensity, conjured chiefly by taut posture, an implacable stare, and absolute, seething stillness.

Mercuriality is a keynote of Reeve's performance too. Murray Pomerance has praised this turn for its "stunning virtuosity" (2019: 281), part of which, I suggest, springs from the protean nature of Reeve's characterization. When Clifford first enters the Bruhl domicile, he emits adolescent awe at his host's gallery of theatrical props. Reeve accentuates Clifford's excitable outbursts ("Oh boy!"; "Wow!"; "Oh my God!") by means of boyish mannerisms, as when he punctuates such dialogue with an exuberant whistle (a savvy carryover from his Clark Kent portrayal). Easy-going and guileless, Clifford provides a peppy foil to Sidney's

jaded cynicism. Reeve adopts a habitual, charismatic smile and open posture – his hands

stuffed into the back pockets of his jeans – that conspire with costume and makeup (shaggy

hairstyle; chunky cable-knit cardigan) to soften his appearance: Clifford, it seems, is

unequivocally nonthreatening. Once the plot discredits this benevolent persona, however,

Reeve alters his physiognomy and physique. Now his soft facial features become coarsened,

the wholesome, self-effacing smile liable to corkscrew into a smirk or grimace. When

Clifford explodes with anger, Lumet provides tight facial close-ups that render him as a

grotesque.[18] The actor's chiseled visage acquires a sinister, gaunt angularity (amplified by a

cropped hairstyle), while his lean physique (now emphasized by a close-fitting sweater)

manifests harsh angles and sharp planes (Figure 5). Indeed, Reeve's facial expressions and

bodily postures – crooked smirk or narrow pout; jutting jaw; cocked elbows – suggest a man

of jagged edges, like one of Sidney's bladed weapons; a physical emblem of latent violence.

Lumet reifies Clifford's schizoid duplicity, and, moreover, contrasts the three

protagonists' romantic partnerships, through variegated forms of tactility. Upon unearthing

Clifford's furtive manuscript, Sidney erupts into throes of passion. The young writer clasps

him in an embrace. Repeatedly throughout the scene, Clifford seeks to mollify Sidney by

patting his back, stroking his shoulder, tousling his hair, and so on – a set of ostensibly

affectionate but tacitly coercive gestures designed to win Sidney to his view ("Come on,

don't be such an old nelly…["Deathtrap"] will make a terrific thriller"). Lumet and Reeve,

then, nuance the source text through nonverbal movement and action. For Clifford, tactility is

a prime method of manipulation. His ambivalently intimate gestures, curdling devotion with

danger, remind us that he can turn on a dime. (Recall, too, that aforementioned instance

whereby a seductive embrace flirts casually with a chokehold.)

By contrast, Sidney and Myra share physical contact only fitfully. Recurrently, Sidney

rebuffs his wife's overtures. When she grasps his arm, he wriggles loose; in bed he shuffles

out of her nestling embrace. Lumet's staging underscores Myra's clinginess. Pacing the parlor, Sidney turns to address Clifford, only to find Myra – silently toddling behind him – mere inches from his face. "Myra, sit down. Don't hover!" This apparently incidental staging maneuver – an addition to Levin's play – does some fairly heavy lifting, supplying comic amusement, conveying Myra's fawning affection, and depicting Sidney's irritation at her relentless proximity, obliquely preparing the homosexual revelation to come. Perpetually wide-eyed and perky, Dyan Cannon's Myra seems to exist in a near-constant state of agitation – shrill, jittery, on the cusp of mania. Lumet establishes these traits from the outset. He introduces her teasingly: A close-up of the Bruhls' bedside table displays assorted bottles of pills and an ashtray jammed with cigarettes. Myra's tremulous hand reaches into the frame and seizes one of the bottles; the camera pans to her face as she swallows a pill. Her first utterance is a panicked shriek, a comical overreaction to a ringing telephone. The primacy effect is thus initiated: Myra's ailing health and physical fragility, her obsessiveness, her habitual skittishness – all these incipient traits establish her as a tightly-wound bundle of neuroses, while preparing the ground for her fatal coronary. True to Lumet's aesthetic of dramatic economy, this brief single shot is a model of efficient character exposition.

Sympathetic to Sidney's failures and flaws, tolerant of his tantrums, a champion of his projects and prospects, Myra will emerge as a doting yet neglected housewife. Again, Lumet sharpens this marital dynamic through staging. Early in the film, when Sidney prepares to telephone Clifford and lure him to the Bruhl manse, he first pulls Myra into a clinch and kisses her on the lips. As he releases her, Myra (in dorsal view) staggers slightly backward, a minute staging effect that, in lieu of a facial view, suggests her surprise: such romantic encounters, we infer, seldom occur in this marriage, and are still more rarely initiated by Sidney. As on other such occasions, Sidney's putative ardor is wholly tactical, a sneaky bid to assuage Myra's concern for Clifford's safety.

So much emphasis on ambiguous and ambivalent tactility – a large-scale trope not specified in the play – dovetails with a motivic emphasis on hands, again specific to Lumet's *Deathtrap*. This tendency can also be grasped as an authorial motif. Throughout his oeuvre, Lumet uses hands as instruments of equivocation. An exhaustive survey is beyond our purview,[19] but we can sketch some salient examples. In *12 Angry Men*, when the weary jurors cast a vote on the guilt or innocence of the defendant, Lumet presents a procession of shots, the framing of which amputates the jurors' hands or arms as they reach up into the frame. Prima facie the disembodied framings anonymize the vote, but Lumet aids the process of identification by the various ways in which each hand enters its assigned shot – stridently, limply, hesitantly, listlessly, and so on. The montage is stirringly forceful not only in its pictorial abstraction, but also in its dramatic play of ambiguation and disclosure. More complex is *The Offence* (1973). A detective's *anagnorisis* – that he is as capable of paedophilia and murder as the suspect in his custody – evolves gradually through intricate, equivocal handplay. As embodied by Sean Connery, the detective possesses large, powerful hands that variously caress, clutch, claw, and crush. The hand motif climaxes when Connery's giant fist hurtles toward the camera, a shot that delivers the suspect's POV. Ambiguous tactility is woven through *That Kind of Woman* (1959) too. Courted by Tab Hunter's smitten paratrooper, Sophia Loren cannot bring herself to reject him outright; instead she strings him along, and bamboozles him with a blizzard of mixed signals (pressing a palm in his face; clasping her hand over his mouth; pinching his cheek).

Consider as one final example *Network*. Strolling on a New York sidewalk, Faye Dunaway and William Holden mull the prospect of an extramarital affair. In a subtle gesture conducted just above the lower frameline, Dunaway massages a ring on her wedding finger, registering an unconscious hint of vacillation. *Deathtrap* promotes this byplay to motivic status. When Sidney telephones Clifford and invites him to visit, Myra watches him

circumspectly, absently fondling her wedding ring. As often in Lumet, this hand gesture can be read two ways: as a subconscious index of marital disequilibrium; and as an expression of latent arousal. Later Myra will confess to being stimulated by Sidney's potent capacity for murder. (As Sidney puts it: "Do you think it's possible that murder is an aphrodisiac?") Evoking both anxiety and arousal, Myra's hand motif recurs when Clifford arrives at the Bruhl abode, the homicidal fantasy now tapering into reality. And it resumes when Helga first enters the action. As the soothsayer predicts that Sidney's dagger will be plied by "a woman," Myra slides the wedding band completely off her finger. On each occasion, Lumet refuses to italicize this motif. Each iteration unfolds in medium and long shots, and the final reiteration occurs in depth, Myra occupying the remote end of a diagonally staged composition. But these hand gestures quietly serve double duty, lending cohesiveness to distinct plot episodes, and nuancing Levin's characterization through granular details of behavior.

Lumet deploys hands as an organ of suspense and comedy too. The introduction of Helga provides illustration. We have been primed for her entrance: in Presson Allen's script (an embellishment on Levin), Myra invokes the psychic by reference to hands ("Helga Ten Dorp and her famous pointing finger," she contends, earns a living "pointing at murderers"). Lumet, it seems, treats this dialogue as an invitation to engage Helga in handplay. Arriving at the aftermath of Clifford's feigned murder, the mystic offers her hand to Sidney in greeting. Abrasively, she breaks off contact, prompting Sidney to glance gingerly down at his errant palm. Has his touch sparked a troubling intuition? Will Helga divine his diabolical scheme? The ensuing stretch of action concludes with a comic payoff: as Helga prepares to exit, she automatically offers Sidney a parting handshake, then thinks better of it; Sidney likewise swiftly and sheepishly aborts a physical exchange that could prove incriminating.

In all, *Deathtrap* enlists hands and tactility as a key dramatic and performative motif. Occasionally it draws our notice, but most often it operates unobtrusively, discreetly shaping

the drama through inflection, implication, and motivic accumulation. Lumet tips us off to its importance in the opening credit sequence. Under superimposed titles, a string of shots isolates various weapons scattered across the walls of the Bruhl study, some of which acquire salience in the story: the mace, the battle-axe, the handcuffs, the pistol. At last arrives the director's screen credit – often, in cinema, an occasion for authorial self-consciousness. The image accompanying Lumet's credit shows motley bladed implements. And at the bottom center of the image resides an armored glove, protruding into the frame like those outstretched hands in *12 Angry Men*, as if grasping for a weapon.

Stage Fright

By way of conclusion, I wish to consider a scene I have thus far scanted – the faked throttling of Clifford – since it pulls together many of the features of staging and performance I have highlighted. At first blush, the scene's staging might strike us as largely inert: Clifford is riveted to a chair, and Lumet builds much of the action out of close shots of objects and faces. But figure choreography, imbricated with actors' performance, will prove integral to the scene's effects of suspense and surprise. <Callout 6 about here>

Seesaw staging has propelled the main nexus of action into the study. Only Myra occupies a position in the parlor. Coaxed into Houdini's trick handcuffs, Clifford sits in a wooden chair, struggling to remove the restraints; Sidney, standing, searches the study for a key to unlock the manacles. Afforded fresh narrative context, the seesaw schema emphasizes Clifford's physical disadvantage. Lumet raises the tension's pitch by means of a vertical camera maneuver untethered to figure movement. Thus violating an established intrinsic norm, the ominous shot – slowly booming up from a close view of Clifford's tremulous hands to a medium shot of his face – instantly seizes our attention. Lumet's shot scale is

savvy: it allows him to push in closer to Clifford's face and escalate the tension further, culminating in an oppressive facial close-up (from hairline to chin). Reeve's visage becomes a tapestry of microscopic gestures, each one "leaking" Clifford's apparently authentic emotion of fear. As he concocts a bit of subterfuge ("I forgot to mention that I should be getting a phone call any minute now"), he contorts his face into a casual smile, but the smile takes effect only on the right side of his face, and the easy-going façade collapses. When this effort at blitheness falters, Clifford quickly "resets" his face, moistening his lips as if to make his mouth more obedient. His taut lips now pursed, he gulps back the abortive smile, and rearranges his face into another feeble mask of composure. An accelerating shot/reverse-shot passage – juxtaposing ever tighter close-ups of the two men – amplifies Clifford's anxiety, his averted glances and frequent blinks no match for Sidney's skeptical, unwavering stare. (Again Caine's studied impassivity holds a pregnant power.)[20]

Clifford looks at Myra for succor, but she ducks behind a table lamp. The foreground object occludes her face so that only her clasped hands are visible; we must glean Myra's interior state from her trademark handwringing. By now, the choker close-ups, accelerated cutting, and emotionally tense performances have supercharged our anxiety and anticipation. At last, to the protagonists' relief and ours, Sidney produces the key. Myra heads into the study and embraces him. To further dissipate suspense, Lumet relaxes the shot scale: a medium long shot encompasses all three characters, the better to capture their collective relief. Pointing offscreen, Sidney acknowledges the fraught atmosphere: "Ye Gods! I do believe that you two thought I was going to take that mace and do a Vincent Price." Next a brief two shot in which Sidney kisses Myra – a rare and tactical act of affection designed to quell her disquiet.

Yet the viewer senses something still amiss. While the Bruhls canoodle at frame left, Clifford sits patiently at the lower right frame edge, holding aloft his cuffed hands.

Furthermore, Sidney's allusion to the mace has pricked our ears: the weapon has been referenced often before, not least when Sidney first proposes to kill Clifford by bludgeoning him with it (the mace hanging invitingly on the wall behind him). In this and subsequent scenes, *Deathtrap* plants the mace as Sidney's professed weapon of choice. Now, in the study, it is invoked again, and not only through dialogue. In a slice of space between the Bruhls and Clifford – lurking at the center of the frame in the deepest plane of space – hangs a poster bearing the legend "Mace." Here again we find Lumet's precise and playful coordination of framing, blocking, and set design. Moreover, this intrinsic norm – the comic or commentative use of posters – is not only playful but frankly deceptive, for though the mace obliquely kindles suspense here, it ultimately serves only as a misdirection device, cunningly diverting our attention from the garrotte in Sidney's hand.

Not that Lumet doesn't play fair. Granted, he exploits tactics of staging to conceal this weapon from us. Nestled in Sidney's arms, Myra obstructs our view of the garrotte dangling from Sidney's left hand. The couple breaks apart: she slips off screen, heading into the parlor; he retreats behind a leather chair. En route he gives Clifford the key. But as Sidney ambles toward the background chair, the garrotte can be glimpsed swaying by his side. Lumet grants us the opportunity to spot the weapon. Our attention, though, is riveted on Clifford in the right foreground, and more specifically, on his hands as they wrestle with the cuffs. Lumet uses this procedural business as a decoy: It is Sidney's hands, not Clifford's, to which our attention should properly be targeted. By now, though, Lumet lets the chair in front of Sidney occlude the garrotte completely (Figure 6). The scene has built suspense only to dissolve it; now Lumet produces surprise. Sidney circles behind Clifford and winds the garrotte around his throat. (As we noted earlier, this moment recasts a variant on the seesaw schema.) Lumet's repressive staging stratagems have laid the ground for surprise. The two men crash to the floor in extremis, tumbling into the parlor. As the garrotte is yanked taut, Clifford's

body falls limp and plops to the ground. Lumet a la Levin caps this grotesque murder with mordant humor, as Sidney indulges in sly self-praise: "Right on the rug. One point for neatness."

In toto, the scene is a triumph of calculated staging, fine-grained performance, and restricted narration as vehicles for modulating suspense and surprise. <Callout 7 about here> As such, it serves as a microcosm of the film's wider strategies. *Deathtrap*, I have tried to show, deserves more attention than it has received from Lumet scholars, not least because it extends and refines norms of visual narration at work in his official masterpieces. More than this, *Deathtrap* assimilates to a waning tradition of American cinema distinguished by pictorial economy, legibility, and understatement. <Callout 8 about here> From this angle, we should not be surprised that the film's stylistic achievements reside principally at the levels of denotation and expressivity. Mid- and late-period Lumet flouted decorative style. This is not to say that *Deathtrap* cannot be appreciated purely on abstract grounds – certainly one can notice and admire the staging patterns repeated and recast across the film – but these patterns do not jump out at us in self-conscious fashion, nor does Lumet devise them solely for purposes of graphic play. Rather his staging schemas put story first: they dramatize and dynamize the narrative action; and they shape our cognitive and emotional responses in ways germane to Levin's drama. This is the "classicist" dimension of Lumet's aesthetic, a cinematic tradition rendering style subservient to story. As *Deathtrap* testifies, Lumet is a director *par excellence* of this subtle, graceful, and masterful mode of American filmmaking.

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Callout list:

1. By surveying the dramatic and expressive functions to which Lumet ascribes staging, my analysis of *Deathtrap* aims to demonstrate the richness of a stylistic program operating chiefly on the denotative and expressive levels.

2. The result is an internally coherent visual scheme ideally matched to Levin's finely tuned plot construction.

3. What emerges is a choreographic macrostructure – a totalizing vision of cinematic staging – that teems with forward-pointing motifs, rhyming actions, and echoic symmetries.

4. As often in *Deathtrap*, staging and performance operate contrapuntally, undermining the scripted text.

5. Lumet's casting approach is oriented to first impressions, the better to occlude a pivotal *deus ex machina*.

6. Figure choreography, imbricated with actors' performance, will prove integral to the scene's effects of suspense and surprise.

7. The scene is a triumph of calculated staging, fine-grained performance, and restricted narration as vehicles for modulating suspense and surprise.

8. *Deathtrap* assimilates to a waning tradition of American cinema distinguished by pictorial economy, legibility, and understatement.

Notes:

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[1] Key monographs include Boyer (1993), Cunningham (1991), Malone (2020), and Spiegel (2019). Lumet makes no mention of *Deathtrap* in his memoir, *Making Movies*. To the extent that *Deathtrap* has been discussed, it is mostly in the context of gay representation (Bryant 2000; Farmer 1992; Kis 2017; Nelson 1985; Richards 1982) and postmodern metafiction (Carlson 1993; Schildcrout 2011). The film's visual style has been overlooked.

[2] Lumet commentary, *Network* Special Edition DVD, Warner Home Video, 2006.

[3] "The Making of *Dog Day Afternoon*," directed by Laurent Bouzereau. *Dog Day Afternoon* Special Edition DVD, Warner Home Video, 2006.

[4] The final shot of *Just Tell Me What You Want* (1980), for instance, privileges the performances of Ali MacGraw and Alan King as they converse in a hospital room; the shot's duration is 4.1 minutes. Four years later, another hospital room scene would prompt Lumet to extend the single shot further. In *Garbo Talks* (1984), he allows Anne Bancroft's deathbed monologue to unfurl in a single unbroken take lasting 6.3 minutes.

[5] See, for instance, Bordwell (1988) and Chapter 13 in Bordwell (2008).

[6] That is, I am not concerned here to critique Bordwell's four functions of film style, which I consider to be conceptually sound and useful distinctions. I take it as uncontroversial that the matters that occupy me in this article – the ways in which figure staging and performance sculpt attention, convey story information, and elicit responses of suspense and surprise – operate at the denotative and expressive levels of stylistic discourse. Decorative style (or parametric narration) is perhaps the most controversial dimension of Bordwell's typology, but I am not centrally concerned with this aspect of film style here, except as a mode of stylistic expression that mid-career Lumet largely repudiates.

[7] Levin's play consists of two acts, but Lumet conceives of Presson Allen's screenplay in terms of four discriminable acts, each one marked by a dissolve or fade out.

[8] Similarly Lumet told *The New York Times*, "With 'Deathtrap' we were afraid that opening it up realistically would deflate it, primarily because it is melodrama" (Duka 1981).

[9] As Martin Fox observes, the ubiquitous posters also "serve as biting reminders to Sidney Bruhl of his past triumphs" (Fox 2011: 97).

[10] Lumet perhaps takes *Deathtrap*'s theatre-based subject matter as an occasion for a subtle play with "theatrical" staging. More speculatively, we might infer the influence upon Lumet of Henri-Georges Clouzot's *Les Diaboliques* (1955), a film whose plot twist (as reviewers of Levin's play pointed out) anticipates the midpoint reversal of *Deathtrap*. As Susan Hayward has observed, Clouzot subjects his three protagonists to spatial triangulation, hinting at character relationships yet to be disclosed (Hayward 2005: 69-70).

[11] Lumet revives the diagonal staging schema in *The Verdict* (1982) and *A Stranger Among Us* (1992), and triangulation in *Guilty as Sin* (1993) and *Night Falls on Manhattan* (1996), but far more sparingly and less elaborately than in *Deathtrap*.

[12] In retrospect, Sidney's sinister countenance is not necessarily disingenuous (in the sense that he doesn't actually intend to kill Clifford) nor is it necessarily a performance for *our* benefit (i.e. designed to hoodwink us to the impending twist): rather, Sidney may well be contemplating murder here, but the victim he envisions is Myra, not Clifford.

[13] For intensified continuity, see Bordwell (2006).

[14] See Bordwell (2006), 122.

[15] They also permit continuity of performance, as Caine observes: "There was no way for an editor to throw off the timing by hacking into the performance" (Anon 1982: 12).

[16] Lumet: "We have a saying among ourselves that you cast for the third act. You cast for what the character finally winds up as being." "The Making of *Network*," directed by Laurent Bouzereau. *Network* Special Edition DVD, Warner Home Video, 2006.

[17] No less playful is the casting of Dyan Cannon. In *Heaven Can Wait* (1978) Cannon occupied, in essence, the Sidney Bruhl role, portraying an avaricious wife who, in cahoots with her secret lover, plots and orchestrates the death of her moneyed spouse. Both Cannon and Caine, moreover, had significant mystery-thriller titles in their back catalogues: Cannon had starred in *The Last of Sheila* (1973) and Caine in *Sleuth*, a two-hander explicitly cited in Ira Levin's play (but wisely omitted from Jay Presson Allen's adaptation). Lumet's strategy of intertextual casting, then, is no mere stunt. Along with its propensity for misdirection, it wholly accords with the core metatextuality of Levin's source play.

[18] We find similar facially distorting close-ups in *The Pawnbroker* (1964), *The Hill* (1965), and *Murder on the Orient Express* (1974).

[19] I have explored this signature trait at length elsewhere (Bettinson 2021).

[20] Caine's philosophy of blinking on screen – that "blinking makes your character seem weak" – proves valid here (Caine 1997: 61).