

The Lumet Touch

Sidney Lumet is nobody's idea of a neglected talent. During a fifty-year career, he directed a cluster of films enshrined in the Hollywood canon, from *12 Angry Men* (1957) and *Serpico* (1973) to *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975), *Network* (1976) and *The Verdict* (1982). His oeuvre has received careful attention from scholars and critics.¹ And during his lifetime he was widely venerated as an 'actor's director'. Yet despite this recognition – both of Lumet's general significance and of his particular prowess with actors – a key performative trait has gone unexplored: namely, a reliance on players' hands, not only as a major dramatic and expressive resource, but, more specifically, as a locus of dramatic equivocation.² My purpose in this analytical essay is to highlight, by reference to a range of examples, the forms and functions of this distinctive authorial tendency.³ As I hope to demonstrate, Lumet deepens character complexity, sharpens thematic meaning and enhances narrational effects (such as suspense and surprise) by imbuing hand gestures with ambivalence and ambiguity.

This tendency shines through in Lumet's first film, *12 Angry Men*. A cadre of disparate jurors, jammed together for hours in a sultry, oppressive jury room, reach a decisive juncture in their deliberation. A vote is set: the men, some of whom have vacillated in their judgments, must pronounce

on the defendant's guilt or innocence. Lumet presents the vote through a montage of hands and arms poking up from the lower frame line. Such repressive framings effectively anonymise the vote. Granted, Lumet helps us to identify one or two of the hands' owners, as when a porkpie hat creeps into view at the bottom frame edge of one shot; and when an elderly juror, whose return of 'not guilty' comes as no surprise, is granted an oblique facial close up. But Lumet generates ambiguity, and no small measure of suspense, by amputating most of the hands that rise into the juxtaposed frames.

Moreover, the hands themselves register varying degrees of ambivalence. While one hand enters the frame stridently, another droops limply in mid-air, a dangling organ of equivocation.

Some hands, embodying conviction, stick into the frame fast and true; others jerk haltingly into view, as if under duress. This brief suite of images yields a quiet abstract power and points the way to Lumet's future reliance on hands as a dramatic and expressive device, not to say as a potent zone of indeterminacy.

Lumet would continue to deploy hands in an abstract vein. In *The Pawnbroker* (1964), Sol Nazerman (Rod Steiger), a Jewish survivor of the Hitler scourge, receives a young, pitiable customer in his Manhattan pawnshop. The woman, forlorn and heavily pregnant, angles to hock her glass engagement ring, sparking in Nazerman a fractured memory from his years interned in a Nazi concentration camp. Lumet depicts this subjective flashback in sharp disjunctive bursts, evoking jagged shards of stifled memory, intercut with the ongoing pawnshop action. Soon the recollection overwhelms Nazerman, consuming longer stretches of screen time, and the initially oblique imagery comes into focus for us (as for him). A lateral tracking shot surveys a sea of outstretched hands braced against a barbed wire fence. As in *12 Angry Men*, these limbs are sliced off by the bottom of the frame. The mobile camera follows another disembodied figure – a uniformed soldier whose helmet peeks into view from the bottom frame line – as he sidles from one pair of prone hands to the next, plucking jewellery from the quaking, acquiescent fingers. Startling in its austerity, this abstract image evokes the casual dehumanisation of war.





At the finale, Lumet will endow hand imagery with symbolic force. Plagued by irrepressible horrors, Nazerman – deadened by wartime trauma – wilfully impales his hand on a metal spike. A persecuted Jew, he enacts a form of crucifixion in a putative quest for rebirth: an extreme effort to restore feeling, vitality, life. All the same, this climax (informed by the period's European art cinema) embraces ambiguity and open-endedness. Nazerman shuffles out of his pawnshop – its cage-like enclosures providing a visual correlative for the camps – and, contemplating his stigmata, drifts into a bustling milieu indifferent to his suffering.

A former film actor and stage director, Lumet evidently realised that hand behaviour could fulfil a range of dramatic functions. Its versatility perhaps resides most strongly in implying subjective states – not only characters' thoughts and emotions, conscious or otherwise, but also internalised modes of being. Richard Gere's hyperactive campaign strategist in *Power* (1986), for instance, embraces a lifestyle of perpetual motion. His fast-paced existence is reflected in a devotion to jazz music – he fills the few spare hours he has by beating out a drum rhythm, using any means at his disposal. Even in repose, his body pulsates to an energetic inner cadence. Reclining on an airplane couch, apparently asleep, he spontaneously lets his fingers tap out the beat of a jazz tune. Here, fingerwork materialises Gere's internal tempo, evoking the propulsive, unrelenting rhythm that governs his way of life. Elsewhere, hands find a natural function in the articulation of desire, both sensual (e.g. the teenage boy's transgressive fondling of a nag's smooth coat in *Equus* [1977])



and sexual (Martin Balsam's errant hand planted invitingly on Sean Connery's thigh in *The Anderson Tapes* [1971]).



In Lumet's hands, the eroticised touch – as with other forms of tactility – is tethered to authorial principles of equivocation and ambivalence. *That Kind of Woman* (1959) provides an instance. On a furlough to Tennessee, a guileless paratrooper, Red (Tab Hunter), grows infatuated with Kay (Sophia Loren), the entrancing mistress of a wealthy businessman (played by George Sanders). Kay accepts Red's overtures but keeps him at arm's length. Under Lumet's aegis, Loren's ambivalent handplay – at once playfully affectionate and rebarbative, and sprinkled across the plot in motivic fashion – becomes a keynote of Kay's personality. Ostensibly tender hand actions spring forth as parrying gestures. Anxious to jettison Red, Kay presses a gloved palm into his face, all but shoving him away. Though her dialogue conveys warmth – 'Take care of

yourself now' – the gesture functions contrapuntally, an oblique act of repudiation. Still, their nebulous romance limps along. Later, Kay anticipates the affair's conclusion: his furlough at an end, Red must depart for Vermont that night. As they canoodle under a tree, Red reveals that he has purchased a ticket for Kay aboard the train to Vermont. Abruptly Kay claps a hand over Red's mouth, silencing him. Presently she will make explicit her rejection ('I will not go'), but not before her hand, still fastened on his mouth, segues into a subtle caress – a tacit hint of the genuine affection she has developed for him. Red kisses her hand. Later, he reacts violently when Kay teasingly pinches his cheek, another passive-aggressive gesticulation. Their impasse prepares a suspenseful climax: will Kay join Red on the train?



Lumet organises the melodramatic denouement around hand activity. Rebuffing her rich lover, Kay stoops down and kisses his hand, a chaste parting gesture. Now Lumet crosscuts between Kay, darting across town in a taxi, and Red, disconsolate aboard the moving train. Parallel cutting reveals echoic gestures, both protagonists rubbing their faces, wiping away tears. This rhyming action hints at shared feeling: after a blizzard of quarrels, separations and hesitations, their respective emotions are at last aligned. Kay alights the taxi as the train pauses at a way station. In close-up, Red pensively rests his

hand against his mouth, convinced he has been jilted. Slowly, Kay's fingers float into the frame behind him. Here Lumet extends narrational omniscience – already established by the intercutting that places Red in the position of least knowledge – by turning the soldier away from the fingers advancing toward him. Upon Kay's touch, Red swivels around. The camera tracks his gaze, panning upward to a close-up of Kay, whose hand travels from Red's neck to her own mouth, echoing Red's posture at the outset of the shot. Rising from his seat, the soldier grasps his lover's hand, presses it to his lips and softly kisses it – another gestural echo, this time harking back to the clinch beneath the tree.



In all, Lumet has tethered hands to character revelation, as when Kay's conflicted gestures belie her utterances; and he has recruited hands for motivic purpose, creating long-range echoes that mark transitions in the protagonists' relationship. Not least, he has assimilated this hand motif to an aesthetic of expressive subtlety. None of the moments I have discussed isolate (and thereby italicise) hands in close-up framings. In a quieter register than *12 Angry Men*, *That Kind of Woman* integrates hand expressivity into the flow of the wider mise-en-scène, operating in concert with other bodily cues and

scenographic details. Lumet's preferred shot scales – medium shots, plans américains, long shots – are keyed to the actors' dramatically expressive handwork.

Throughout his career, Lumet placed a premium on pre-production rehearsal. Over an extended period – typically spanning two to four weeks (Lumet 1996: 61-2) – he presided over 'a full-blown run-through of the movie', treating this preparatory phase of production 'like it was a play' (Bettinson 2015: 5). During rehearsal Lumet would choreograph or 'block' the action, but he disdained any prior conception of composition and camera placement, thus granting the actor latitude to explore a wide range of bodily expression (Lumet 2006: 63). Only as the performance crystallised did Lumet determine the position of the camera, calibrating shot scales and camera angles to the actor's gestural activity (Applebaum [1978] 2006: 76; Malcolm [1983] 2020). Out of this rehearsal method emerged Lumet's spacious compositions, oriented to the player's studied gaits and gestures. Any discussion of physical activity in Lumet's oeuvre must, of course, recognise the indispensable input of the actor. But not to be downplayed is the collaborative ethos baked into Lumet's production strategy – a practice that at once invited and facilitated the actor's inventive, dextrous handplay.

Like Lumet, many of his leading players had honed their talents in the New York theatre, fine-tuning a complete and eloquent body language. Nowhere is this eloquence better evinced than in the performances of Marlon Brando in *The Fugitive Kind* (1960) and Katharine Hepburn in *Long Day's Journey Into Night* (1962). Each actor composes a symphony of hand gestures that pulses with discordance, tacitly counterpointing the drama's surface action. Apropos Brando, lyrical hand movements – his long sensual fingers scratching his scalp, rubbing his chin, or clicking together as if to trigger a thought – permeate his entire performance. In one scene, a married storekeeper, Lady (Anna Magnani), invites Brando's young mythical vagabond, Val Xavier, to lodge with her. Lumet significantly embellishes Tennessee Williams' source play, orchestrating a suite of hand gestures that serves double duty: the actors' handplay both underscores Val's attendant



dialogue about existential solitude and hints at the sexual connotation of Lady's overtures to Val. As the drifter grips Lady's wrist, the pair interlock fingers and press their palms together.

Their utterances, along with Lumet's spacious medium over-the-shoulder framings, give emphasis to this suggestive hand interplay: '[You feel] the size of my knuckles,' Val states, 'My palm ...' Now Val lets go, his large open palms flanking Lady's idle hand at screen centre. 'That's how well we know each other,' Val asserts. 'All we know is just the skin surface of each other.' Cut to a close-up of Lady, studying her fingers. This brief encounter teems with contradictory implications. Brando's hand manoeuvres chime with Val's discourse on human alienation. But, in concert with his facial and vocal cadences, Brando's hand actions – alternately tender and taut, sensual and severe – register an underlying menace, conveying simultaneous attraction and animus for a middle-aged, sexually frustrated woman and her flagrant ploy to seduce him.⁴

In *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, as per Eugene O'Neill's play, Mary Tyrone (Katharine Hepburn) calls attention to her apparently rheumatoid hands, declaring them 'ugly'. Her husband, James Tyrone (Ralph Richardson), demurs: 'They're the most beautiful hands in the world'. Pointedly, Lumet refuses a disambiguating close-up: are Mary's hands truly knotted and gnarled, as she contends? Or are they, as James later alleges, but a pretext for Mary's acquisition of morphine, a furtive yet transparent effort to sustain a drug habit? Throughout the film, Hepburn delivers a virtuoso display of hand gestures, some of which crystallise as motifs: a self-conscious tendency – reserved for judicious moments of insecurity – to dab her hair, anxious that stray strands will betray signs of dissipation; and a habit of clasping her hands to her face to conceal guilt or shame. Contemporary critics might disparage such gestures as mannerisms, but Hepburn's hand activity – even in moments of apparent familial harmony – continually bespeaks a woman in the throes of addiction, self-denial and despair.

By the mid-1970s Lumet had cultivated an understated, even sedate, visual style that thumbed its nose at the 'high concept' stylistics then in vogue. A character's sexual ambivalence could be implied in unobtrusive ways. In *Network*, Faye

Dunaway and William Holden contemplate an extramarital affair. Lumet frames the pair in medium two-shot as they traverse a Manhattan sidewalk, a shot scale that enables Dunaway to conduct some discreet hand business at the bottom frame edge: during the walk-and-talk, she absent-mindedly fondles a band on her ring finger. A seemingly incidental gesture harbours ambiguity: Does Dunaway's finger byplay expose guilt or arousal, or both?



More elaborate is *Deathtrap* (1982). A passé dramatist, Sidney Bruhl (Michael Caine), plots to kill his protégé Clifford Anderson (Christopher Reeve), whose ingenious new manuscript bears all the hallmarks of a box-office blockbuster. Sidney intends to lay claim to Clifford's unpublished play. His skittish wife Myra (Dyan Cannon) professes to find his scheme repugnant, but her own moral propriety will be thrown into doubt later in the film. Sidney telephones Clifford, launching his plan to ensnare the young playwright. Anxiously observing him, Myra tweaks her wedding ring, an apparent symptom of spousal vacillation. She repeats the gesture when Clifford arrives at the Bruhl manse. Still later, after Sidney has fatally throttled Clifford, Myra distractedly slides the bridal ring clean off her finger. (Here again expressive understatement is the order of the day: Lumet thrusts this activity into the deep space of a long shot composition.) On the one hand, Myra's finger motif betrays marital disequilibrium. It presages a scene in which, dismayed by Sidney's crime, Myra demands a divorce. On the other hand, the motif vibrates with sexual titillation. After Clifford's demise, Myra confesses to having found Sidney's homicidal prowess seductive. Sidney ponders: 'Do you think it's possible that murder is an aphrodisiac?' In

toto, Myra's handplay embodies warring impulses, evoking a psychological reaction at once aroused and aghast.

Deathtrap – a comedy thriller – also extracts suspense and humour from its emphasis on hands. Sidney has concocted the 'perfect murder', but his wrongdoing may be exposed by the psychic prognostications of Helga Ten Dorp (Irene Worth), a local snoop. Even before Helga enters the drama, her association with hands is laid bare: Myra alludes to Helga's 'famous pointing finger' and her penchant for 'pointing at murderers'. Upon greeting the Bruhls, the soothsayer shares a handshake with Sidney, only to sharply withdraw from him in alarm. Her eyes fasten on Sidney's idle hand; cut to a medium shot of Sidney, quizzically inspecting his upturned palm. Though brief, this abortive gesture triggers suspense: has Sidney's physical touch ignited psychic vibes that will tip Helga to his crime? A reprisal of the handshake concludes the scene, but now the gesture's tenor is comic. As Helga bids



the couple farewell, she instinctively offers Sidney her hand, suddenly recollects the previous disquieting exchange, and clumsily, comically aborts the parting gesture. In *Deathtrap*, then, Lumet assimilates a favourite motif to the effects of comedy and suspense, yoking hand behaviour to fresh narrational functions. That hands are to be afforded saliency in *Deathtrap* is signalled in the opening credits sequence. The titles unfurl against a series of static close-ups, each one isolating the motley bladed weapons that festoon Sidney's study. Reserved for Lumet's title card is an image of an armoured glove, protruding from below the frame like the jurors' hands in *12 Angry Men*, as if clutching at a weapon.⁵



Lumet's most fertile use of hands is oriented around forms of violent aggression. Many of his films, from *Long Day's Journey Into Night* and *A View from the Bridge* (1962) to *Prince of the City* (1981) and *Night Falls on Manhattan* (1996), depict hand behaviour that conflates, or oscillates between, aggression and affection. Nick Nolte's rogue cop in *Q&A* (1990) wields tactility as a cajoling strategy.⁶ In comradely fashion, he plants his hands on the shoulders of the rookie official assigned to investigate him. The ingenue, played by Timothy Hutton, remains resolute: he will conduct an honest investigation. Nolte's ingratiating demeanour morphs into indignant anger. In an over-the-shoulder close-up of Hutton, Nolte softly strokes the young man's cheek, but the caress is anything but benevolent. Lumet's fondness for contrapuntal action again comes to the fore: Nolte's tender strokes belie the

bitterness in his face and the venom in his dialogue: 'I wish you were dead.'

Partway through Lumet's final film, *Before the Devil Knows You're Dead* (2007), brothers Andy (Philip Seymour Hoffman) and Hank (Ethan Hawke) rendezvous in a bar, urgently trying to strategise an escape from an imbroglio of their own making: they have presided over the armed robbery of their parents' jewellery store, the fluffed execution of which has left their mother mortally injured. Now the domineering Andy browbeats his timorous younger brother into explaining how the heist went awry. A medium shot presents Hank seated in a booth. Andy stands beside him at the right of frame, his upper body occluded by the top frame edge. Ostensibly, Lumet's staging prioritises the frontally positioned Hank. But throughout this shot – which Lumet intercuts with a low-angled two-shot privileging Andy – the viewer cannot



ignore Andy's fleshy, balled-up fist occupying the lower right zone of space. Wrought up with panic and rage, Andy pounds his fist against the table, but even in repose his hand simmers with latent ferocity. As if to offset Hoffman's coiled passion, Hawke adopts open-handed gestures – an adroit physical index of Hank's naiveté and passivity – as when he tearfully raises a trembling, outstretched hand to his face. Gradually, Andy determines that the brothers have fully covered their tracks. Now the same hand that had pulsed with fury comes to rest on Hank's left shoulder in a gesture of mutual reassurance and relief. Andy breathes a sigh: 'We're probably okay.'

By the finale, a concatenation of crises puts Andy in hospital. His father Charles (Albert Finney) – now cognizant of his sons' part in the murder of his wife – sneaks into Andy's hospital room. Andy is contrite: 'I never meant to hurt her.' Charles, in a putative act of clemency, reaches out his left hand toward Andy and strokes his thumb gently over his son's forehead. His dialogue echoes Andy's utterance in our previous scene: 'It's okay.' The penitent son raises his hand to touch his father's fingers and the stage is set for forgiveness. But what begins as a gesture of reconciliation degenerates into savagery: by the scene's end, Charles's hands have become instruments of filicide. The family's total annihilation is now complete. *Before the Devil Knows You're Dead* conjures suspense and surprise out of hands that, at any instant, can execute startling volte-faces. This is, we might say, the Lumet touch.

No less intricate is *Family Business* (1989). Here Lumet binds a hand motif to a thematic of patriarchal tyranny. The



plot pivots around a caper orchestrated by a cross-generational cadre of family members: Jesse (Sean Connery), his son Vito (Dustin Hoffman) and Vito's son Adam (Matthew Broderick). The heist is bungled and Adam lands in jail. Holding Jesse accountable for his son's predicament, Vito furiously slaps an open palm against Jesse's forehead, yelling: 'Listen to me!'. Now a skirmish fomented: Jesse springs up from his chair and, seizing Vito's wrist with his left hand, primes his clenched right hand for attack. Lumet furnishes the fracas in a taut two-shot. An emotional shift – played out in this single composition – registers an adjustment in Jesse's temperament, a wilful effort to arrest a violent impulse. Slowly the prospect of conflict dissipates. Jesse's raised fist hovers at screen centre, but soon it morphs into an open hand, gently patting and rubbing Vito's cheek, before winding around Vito's shoulder in a semi-embrace. The father has stayed a destructive reflex, repurposing his hands for paternal affection. This display of self-restraint marks significant psychological growth, for at the plot's outset, Jesse – a career criminal prone to brawling – languishes behind bars for assaulting an off-duty cop.⁷

Physical confrontation runs in the family. Early in the drama, Adam defies his father by pledging himself to Jesse's risky caper. A chip off the block, Vito exerts parental discipline by delivering Adam a stinging slap to the face. Sagely, Jesse shakes his head: 'Vito – that won't get you anywhere.' If Vito has inherited a tendency to resolve family disputes by physical force, Jesse has come to learn that draconian control only deepens the schism between father and son. It is this lesson that Vito must learn in his 'family business' with both Jesse and Adam. Yet subsequent events push Vito and Jesse further apart. In a reversal of the earlier faceoff, Vito raises his fist to his father, only now the punch is executed. Lumet links these two scenes further by reviving (and reversing) a distinctive hand gesture. Just as Vito slapped Jesse's forehead, so Jesse smacks his hand against Vito's forehead, a corporeal motif that signals a habitual – and generational – failure to communicate. Jesse dies before Vito fully grasps the folly of his ways. But at Jesse's funeral (which supplies the film's coda), Vito will tenderly clasp his son's hand, striking a poignant, optimistic note of fatherly intimacy.

Lumet's fixation with hands reaches its apogee, I think, in *The Offence*. Detective-Sergeant Johnson (Sean Connery) is a ferocious, clenched fist of a man. Two decades of investigative grind – an unyielding, corrupting exposure to human depravity writ large – have polluted his psyche and now, a hulking knot of repressed trauma, he moves through life primed for conflict. When a suspected child molester is brought into custody, Johnson commandeers the interrogation. The fingered suspect, Baxter (Ian Bannen), professes innocence. But



Johnson's zeal for justice has curdled into hardboiled sadism, and – convinced of his quarry's guilt and determined to coerce a confession – he pummels Baxter to death. An inquest is launched. Now Johnson becomes the subject of a police inquiry, led by the tenacious Detective Superintendent Cartwright (Trevor Howard). The film shuffles these story events out of order, toggling between the two inquisitions and interpolating the events that precipitate them (Johnson's discovery of a child victim; Baxter's arrest) and succeed them (Johnson, now facing a murder charge, returns home to his wife, Maureen [Vivien Merchant]).

Johnson treats his wife callously, but her touch provides a palliative (however fleeting) for psychological distress. When she places a consoling palm on the side of his head, he grasps her hand and gently rubs it against his forehead, as if to massage the miasma from his mind. 'If you could only put your hands into my mind, hold it, make it stop ... If you could somehow cut out the thoughts, the pictures, the noise, the endless screaming panic.' This is a rare moment of physical intimacy between the couple, but as so often in Lumet, affectionate hand gestures turn on a dime. Their hands remain entwined as Johnson, exhorted by Maureen to share the burden of private trauma, recounts a volley of grisly episodes from his investigative past, each one a sordid vignette of human iniquity. Maureen lowers her head, appalled. In this single gesture, she fails him – incapable, despite her efforts, of withstanding the horrors in his head, she affirms what he has all along surmised: that he must bear his private suffering alone. Still, Johnson reacts with contempt to his wife's lack of fortitude. His left hand, still clasping hers, clenches firm; with his right hand he clutches her chin, pivoting her head to face him as his macabre anecdotes grow ever more lurid. Maureen – sobbing, too distraught to hold eye contact – wriggles loose of Johnson's grip, scampers to the bathroom and retches. What began as a gesture of emotional rapprochement has transmogrified, gradually but inexorably, into a scene of marital disintegration.

The protagonist's feral instincts are never far from the surface. Connery assigns Johnson a motivic finger-jabbing gesture, thrusting his forefinger down onto a desk or table for



emphasis. Recalled during both interrogations, this emphatic action hints at a proclivity for physical intimidation, not to say violence. At times, Johnson seems insensitive to his own brute force: attempting to re-enact a skirmish with Baxter, he seizes Cartwright's wrists, clinging vigorously as the Superintendent lets out a panic-stricken cry: 'Let go! What are you trying to do? Burnt my bloody hand'. (Later, Johnson apologises to Cartwright – 'Sorry I burnt your hand' – then instantly retracts the apology before falling contrite again. Ambivalence consumes the character: his bearish acts of brutality harbour a latent desire for penitence.) Throughout *The Offence*, Johnson's muscular hands bristle with lethal potential. Taunted by the supercilious Baxter, Johnson knocks him to the ground and, crouching over him, yanks the suspect upward; Baxter slips from his grasp, dropping to the floor. Here Connery adopts a revelatory posture, subtle in its brevity: his open hands evoke a strangling action, betraying an instinctive urge to throttle or kill. Just as abruptly, he quells this destructive reflex by pressing his hands together, a conscious effort to arrest a nonconscious impulse. Not for the last time in Lumet, a mercurial hand gesture provides a meaningful conduit to character interiority.⁸

Johnson's pugilism prepares the way for a startling revelation: he is as capable of assault – physical, sexual, even paedophilic – as the beleaguered man in his charge. The plot's nonlinear chronology ensures that this discovery coalesces gradually, in piecemeal fashion. Especially communicative are the variant flashbacks, scattered across the drama, that depict Johnson's recovery of a missing child, Janie (Maxine Gordon), the abduction and rape of whom are provisionally attributed to Baxter. Lumet presents the first iteration of this event objectively. In pitch darkness, a police search party scours a wooded area. Rummaging through the brush, Johnson discovers the bedraggled and petrified child, whose shrieks he subdues by means of forcible restraint. A low-angled medium shot of Johnson shows Janie's tiny hands reaching up from the lower frame edge, flailing at her rescuer as if he were her aggressor. As the pair wrestles in the dirt, he clutches her shoulders, arms and face until, the girl's hysteria subsiding, Johnson plants an assuaging, outstretched hand on her chest. Is this touch soothing or sexual? Ambiguity springs not only

from hands but also from faces: Lumet furnishes tight close-ups of the protagonist 'smil[ing] down at the girl a little too long' (Cunningham 1991: 214).

Subsequent iterations of this event, intercut with Cartwright's inquiry and funnelled through Johnson's addled subjectivity, ambiguate the protagonist's behaviour still further. These renditions posit alternative drafts of the objectively rendered action. Now the nocturnal setting has inexplicably switched to daytime. Across a string of four shots (each lasting 3 to 6 seconds), Lumet deforms the lighting expressionistically, so that a shadowy daybreak in the first shot has blended fluidly into broad sunlight by the fourth. Instead of recoiling and screaming in terror, Janie blithely returns the detective's smile. Her face dappled by sunlight, she sweeps a hand through her hair. In a close framing, Johnson wears a facial expression that can be grasped as amorous. The event will be replayed in jagged bursts throughout Cartwright's probe; by its final iteration, Johnson is caressing the child's cheek, sliding his forefinger over her chin, stroking her hair. Lumet recasts a scene of childhood trauma as one of erotic seduction. And as these replays unfold, a character revelation shimmers into focus: the detective hero and his adversary share deep, disturbing compulsions.



Handplay cues us to their affinities. Both characters are aligned by a recurring motif whereby an uninvited touch – typically, a hand on the shoulder – elicits from them a palpable flinch, a defensive, hostile repudiation of intimacy. Both figures derive power from touching (or more specifically, from illicit touching); to be touched, by contrast, is



to cede dominance to someone (an interrogator, a victim, a spouse) who might control or betray them. Even touch by mutual consent can be maladroit if initiated by another, as when Johnson accepts Cartwright's handshake only after a flicker of hesitation and, even then, executes the greeting cack-handedly. Other gestures hint at the protagonists' likenesses. During Cartwright's inquiry, Johnson describes Baxter as physically suspect. 'His hands ...' Johnson asserts, raising his own hands as if to illustrate an aptitude for depravity. Lumet handles this action in visually bold fashion: first, we are shown a frontal medium shot of Johnson, his outstretched hands filling the foreground; cut to a reverse frontal shot of Cartwright, observed from Johnson's optical vantage point, as the detective's hands still loom in the foremost plane.⁹ A brief subjective flashback follows, depicting the protagonist's manhandling of Baxter, whose blood-spattered face bears witness

to his inquisitor's savage interrogation methods. Cut back to the foregoing framing of Johnson, whose gaze now falls upon his own fanned-out fingers; he then guiltily looks at the camera, cuing a reprise of his POV which registers Cartwright's disconcerted reaction. Though Johnson invokes the dead suspect's hands as organs of violence, his own brawny hands are no less ready to inflict harm, as the interpolated flashback testifies. This silent procession of shots (Johnson's assertion – 'His hands ...' – is left dangling) steers both Cartwright and the viewer, if not Johnson himself, to the realisation that the line between cop and child molester is vanishingly thin.¹⁰

Tactility as an instrument of power and as a font of sexual ambiguity – this dual trope coalesces during Johnson's solitary questioning of Baxter. Lumet's staging underscores the detective's physical dominance: low and high angle framings alternate in shot / reverse-shot pattern, consonant with

Baxter's seated position as Johnson, standing, towers over him. Clutching the suspect by the head, Johnson tries to dragoon him into confessing. But his brutish manhandling soon tapers into something more ambiguously predatory, his roving hands sliding down Baxter's cheeks, brushing over the suspect's chest and reaching beneath his coat, his fingers exploring the man's body like a lover's caress. Johnson couches this suggestive probing as a deliberate provocation – 'My hands, well, they're all over you, reaching into your secrets' – and as a flaunting of control: 'If I want to touch you, I'll touch you.' Defensively, Baxter clasps Johnson's roaming hand. Now Lumet's camera supplies a close-up of the entwined hands grappling and then slackening, so that for an instant the men's mutual touch seems subversively intimate. But here again, furtively erotic contact slips back into unalloyed barbarity. In the same close-up shot, Johnson squeezes Baxter's knotted fist until it splays open. He claps his other hand into Baxter's open palm and, with bone-crunching force, crushes the suspect's hand.

So far, an intricate choreography of hands has crystallised, modulated and amplified a power play between the two adversaries. As the interrogation (and the film) reaches a climax, so the hand motif culminates in emphatic fashion. Johnson, prodded by Baxter into a kind of anagnorisis about his own illicit drives, crumples into a chair, inconsolable. Here Lumet inverts the earlier staging: Baxter stands over Johnson, cupping a hand – sympathetic? goading? – around the stricken detective's shoulder. In a state of benumbed horror, Johnson recognises in the accused paedophile a kindred

spirit. Again he grasps Baxter's hand, but now in a gesture of communion. And again his grip, unconsciously tightening, exerts unintended force; Baxter, his hand already pulverised by Johnson's iron fist, sinks to his knees in agony. In a tight two-shot, the detective lifts Baxter's hand toward his face and wedges it between his teeth, as if to silence a scream. Johnson whimpers, 'Help me.' (Beset by psychic angst, he asks others for psychological aid throughout *The Offence*, but his pleas are unavailing.) Sobbing, he stands up and the two men stagger against a wall. Baxter, reeling in pain, spits out a retort: 'Help your bloody self, will you!' This act of rejection triggers Johnson's fury and climaxes the film's hand motif: from Baxter's POV, Johnson's bunched-up fist barrels toward the camera, a literal fist-in-your-face image. Lumet hammers home the sheer brute potency of the protagonist's hand by virtue of a shot that puts us on the receiving end of its destructive



force. Ultimately, Johnson will murder Baxter with his bare hands – a barbarous flagellation that constitutes nothing less than an act of self-annihilation.

As so often in his films, Lumet has treated us to a nuanced, dramatically charged repertoire of hand movements. In *The Offence*, as elsewhere in his work, hands wield expressive power, advancing story action and carrying thematic meaning. They add value to the drama by hinting at interpersonal dynamics not articulated in dialogue. And they foster structural unity, binding scenes through motivic patterning. Not least, Lumet's hands embody psychological indeterminacy,

deftly pointing to the morally conflicted, complex and murky motives of his ambivalent protagonists.

In all, Lumet's expressive use of hands is both systematic and distinctive. With remarkable consistency, the director harnesses handplay to the articulation of power, control, violence and eroticism, variously fusing these traits or juxtaposing them in unpredictable ways. Hand gestures thus emerge as startlingly enigmatic: characters' physical actions and, as corollary, the narration's affective tone, are apt to perform hairpin turns, the better to supercharge dramatic surprise and suspense. Then there is the sheer range of visual means by which Lumet explores hand behaviour. Hands might be thrust into the foreground (*The Offence*) or tucked into the frame edge (*Network*); isolated as lone elements within a composition (*12 Angry Men*); braided through the film as ever deepening motifs; or otherwise rendered salient as privileged moments in the drama. Few directors have so fruitfully and extensively probed the expressive power of hands. In a period governed by 'intensified continuity' (e.g. facial close-ups; rapid cutting), Lumet's films recall us to a neglected aspect of the actor's craft, one that harbours tried-and-proven potential for pictorial, dramatic and emotional enrichment.

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¹ Key studies include Boyer (1993), Cunningham (1991), Malone (2020), Rapf (2006) and Spiegel (2019).

² David Bordwell (2011) has also drawn attention to hand business in Lumet's *Fail Safe* (1964) and *The Verdict* (1982). Of course, Lumet is not the only director to make use of hand gestures as motifs. V. F. Perkins (1981) elucidates the ambiguity afforded a motivic hand gesture in Nicholas Ray's *In a Lonely Place* (1950), with each repetition shifting meanings of intimacy and control. (I am grateful to my anonymous reader for guiding me to this example.) See also Lola Breaux (2017) and David Scott Diffrient (2019) on hand motifs in Otto Preminger's *Bunny Lake Is Missing* (1965) and Hong Kong's horror and kung-fu genres, respectively.

³ My survey is confined to cases of equivocal gestures. Lumet's oeuvre plays host to several performers whose handwork does not fit this category but is nonetheless dexterous. Of particular note is the eloquent handplay of Anouk Aimée in *The Appointment* (1969) and Irene Worth in *Deathtrap* (1982). Striking moments of hand activity are also furnished in *Child's Play* (1972), *Daniel* (1983), *Critical Care* (1997) and *Strip Search* (2004).

⁴ This physical interaction is specified neither in Williams' dialogue nor in his stage directions: the two protagonists refer only to 'touchin' each other' and 'close contact' (Williams [1940] 1987: 41). Lumet embroiders Williams' play in ways that enrich both the explicit action and its subtextual undertones. He does likewise in another of his 1960s stage adaptations, *The Sea Gull* (1968), treating a scripted line – 'You've got magical hands' – as an occasion for Konstantin (David Warner) to clasp his mother's (Simone Signoret) hands, a gesture pregnant with incestuous desire.

⁵ I analyze *Deathtrap* at greater length elsewhere (Bettinson 2021).

⁶ Likewise, Harry Andrews' dogmatic sergeant major in *The Hill* (1965) and Christopher Reeve's charismatic sociopath in *Deathtrap* marshal familiar tactility for cajoling and coercive purpose.

⁷ One character in *Family Business* describes Jesse as possessing 'a grip of steel', a description equally applicable to Connery's protagonist in *The Offence* (1973), as we shall see.

⁸ In a more comedic vein, Dyan Cannon fosters a similar gesture in *Deathtrap*. Anxious for Sidney to collaborate with Clifford on his auspicious play (and so avert any necessity for murder), Myra urges her husband to postpone his own nascent thriller about a soothsaying sleuth: 'People are always interested in psychics who can point at someone and say "That man" – here she points a forefinger at Sidney – "murdered that man" – now she extends her other forefinger toward Clifford. A comic beat, as Myra realises the subconscious implication of her body language. She hastily brushes her palms together, as though to erase the tacit, undesirable undertones of her nonconscious gestures. As

in our instance from *The Offence*, an actor's apparently incidental byplay is tethered to the revelation of inner states.

⁹ Lumet recasts this device to subtler effect in Q&A (1990).

¹⁰ Though such instances as I describe here carry this thematic point visually, John Hopkins' screenplay does, on other occasions, make the protagonists' affinities explicit. As doppelgängers, Johnson and Baxter are afforded identical dialogue phrases (e.g. 'I know you'). When the detective castigates his suspect as 'a filthy, bloody little pervert', Baxter fires back: 'It takes one to know one'. Baxter, shrewdly perceptive about Johnson's sublimated instincts, informs his opponent: 'Nothing I have done can be one half as bad as the thoughts in your head'.