

- _____. 1997. "Video games and the emergence of interactive media for children." In S. Steinberg and J. Kincheloe, eds., *Kinderculture: The corporate construction of childhood*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Seiter, E. 1993. *Sold separately: Parents and children in consumer culture*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.
- Steinberg, S. 1997. "The bitch who has everything." In S. Steinberg and J. Kincheloe, eds., *Kinderculture: The corporate construction of childhood*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Stewart, M. 1993. *Ellen is home alone*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Thiele, L. 1986. "Foucault's triple murder and the development of power." *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 19 (June): 243-260.
- Ventura, M. 1994. "The age of endarkenment." *Utne Reader* 64 (July/August): 63-66.
- Vogel, J. 1994. "Throw away the key." *Utne Reader* 64 (July/August): 56-60.
- Warde, A. 1994. "Consumers, identity, and belonging: Reflections on some theses of Zygmunt Bauman." In R. Keat, N. Whiteley, and N. Abercrombie, *The authority of the consumer*. New York: Routledge.
- Wartenberg, T. 1992. "Situated social power." In T. Wartenberg, ed., *Rethinking power*. Albany, New York: SUNY Press.

1

Home Alone and "Bad to the Bone": The Advent of a Postmodern Childhood

Joe L. Kincheloe

Home Alone (1990) and *Home Alone 2: Lost in New York* (1992) revolve around Kevin McAlister's (Macaulay Culkin) attempts to find his family after: (1) being left behind on a family Christmas trip to Paris; and (2) being separated from his family on a Christmas trip to Miami. Wildly successful, the two movies portray the trials and tribulations of Kevin's attempts to take care of himself while his parents try to rejoin him. In the process of using these plots to set up a variety of comedic stunts and sight gags, the movies inadvertently allude to a sea of troubles relating to children and family life in the late twentieth century. As we watch the films, an entire set of conflicts and contradictions revolving around the lives of contemporary children begins to emerge. In this way both movies take on a social importance unimagined by producers, directors, and screenplay writers. In this essay I will use the family dynamics of the *Home Alone* movies as a means of exposing the social forces that have altered Western childhood over the past couple decades. In both films a central but unspoken theme involves the hurt and pain that accompany children and their families in postmodern America.

A Generation of Kids Left Home Alone

Child rearing is a victim of the late twentieth century. Given the prevalence of divorce and households with two working parents, fathers and mothers are around children for less of the day. As parents are still at work in the afternoon when children get home from school, children are

given latchkeys and expected to take care of themselves. Thus, we have seen generations of “home-aloners”—kids that in large part have had to raise themselves. The past thirty years have witnessed a change in family structure that must be taken seriously by parents, educators, and cultural workers of all stripes. Since the early 1960s the divorce rate as well as the percentage of children living with one parent has tripled. Only one-half of today’s children have parents who are married to each other. By the twenty-first century only one-third of U.S. children will have such parents. Among children under six years old, one in four lives in poverty. The stress that comes from the economic changes of the last twenty years has undermined the stability of the family. Family incomes have stagnated, as costs of middle-class existence (home ownership, health care, and higher education) have skyrocketed. Since the late 1960s the amount of time parents spend with their children has dropped from an average of thirty hours per week to seventeen (Lipsky and Abrams, 1994; Galston, December 2, 1991). Increasingly left to fend for themselves, contemporary children have turned to TV and video games to help pass their time alone.

Any study of contemporary children must analyze the social conditions that shape family life. Rarely do mainstream social commentators make reference to the fact that Americans’ standard of living peaked in 1973, creating a subsequent declining economic climate that demanded mothers work. Although the effects of international competition, declining productivity, and the corporate reluctance to reinvent the workplace all contributed to a depressed economy, not all recent family problems can be ascribed to the declining post-Fordist economy. The decline of the public space and the growth of cynicism have undermined the nation’s ability to formulate creative solutions to family dysfunction. The 1970s and 1980s, for example, although witnessing the birth and growth of a family-values movement, represented an era that consistently privileged individual gratification over the needs of the community (Paul, 1994; Coontz, 1992). Such an impulse justified the privatistic retreat from public social involvement that has been institutionalized in the 1990s as part of a larger right-wing celebration of self-reliance and efficient government. Unfortunately, it is often our children who must foot the cost of this perverse abrogation of democratic citizenship.

One scene in *Home Alone* highlights the decline of the public space in postmodern America. While Kevin’s parents attempt to arrange a flight from Paris to their home in Chicago, the rest of the family watches *It’s a Wonderful Life* dubbed in French on TV. This positioning of movie within movie confronts viewers with the distance between the Americas of Jimmy Stewart’s George Bailey and Macauley Culkin’s Kevin McAlister. Kevin has no community, no neighbors to call for help—he is on his own

in his “private space.” George Bailey had a score of neighbors to help bail him out of his financial plight and to help him fight the capitalists’ efforts to destroy the community. Kevin is not just home alone—he is socially alone as well. But such realizations are not present in the conscious mind of the moviemakers. On the surface the McAlisters live in a desirable community and are a perfect family. Like millions of other late-twentieth-century families, they are physically together but culturally and emotionally fragmented. Plugged into their various “market segments” of entertainment media, they retreat into their “virtual isolation booths.”

Like millions of other kids, Kevin feels isolated in such an existence— isolation leads to powerlessness, hopelessness, and boredom. How could kids with everything handed to them, adults ask, become so alienated from their parents, schools, and communities? The answer to this question involves on some level the pervasive violation of childhood innocence. Popular culture via TV promised our children a Brady Bunch family circus, but they had to settle for alienated and isolated homes. The continuing popularity of *The Brady Bunch* is testimony to the mindset of American children—the Brady Bunch with its family values and two engaged parents seemed to provide what our children found lacking in their own homes. This melancholic nostalgia for suburban family bliss indicates a yearning for a lost childhood. All those hours home alone have taken their toll (James, December 23, 1990; Rapping, 1994; Ferguson, 1994).

The Unwanted

Although the *Home Alone* movies work hard to deny it, they are about a child unwanted by his family—as with other films of the 1980s and early 1990s. The comedic forms of the movies supposedly render the unwanted theme harmless, in the process revealing contemporary views of parenting and the abandonment of children. In one particular scene in *Home Alone*, Kevin’s mother (Catherine O’Hara) pays her penance for abandoning her son by riding home to Chicago through midwestern snowstorms in a truck carrying a polka band and its leader (John Candy). In one dialogue mother and bandleader engage in a confessional on bad parenting and child abandonment:

MOTHER: I’m a bad parent.

BAND LEADER: No, you’re not. You’re beating yourself up. . . . You want to see bad parents. We’re (i.e., the band) on the road forty-

eight to forty-nine weeks out of the year. We hardly see our families. Joe over there, gosh, he forgets his kids' names half the time. Ziggy over there hasn't even met his kid. Eddie, let's just hope none of them [his children] write a book about him.

MOTHER: Have you ever gone on vacation and left your child home?

BAND LEADER: No, but I did leave one at a funeral parlor once. Yeah, it was terrible. I was all distraught and everything. The wife and I, we left the little tike there in the funeral parlor all day, all day! We went back at night when we came to our senses and there he was. Apparently, he was there alone all day with the corpse. He was okay. You know, after six or seven weeks he came around and started talking again. But he's okay. They get over it. Kids are resilient like that.

MOTHER: Maybe we shouldn't talk about it.

BAND LEADER: You brought it up.

So comfortable are marketers with the theme of abandonment that promos on the home video of *Home Alone 2: Lost in New York* present a *Home Alone Christmas Album*. Commodifying child abandonment, promoters urge viewers to "begin a tradition in your house." Something is happening in these movies and the promotions that surround them that is not generally understood by the larger society. By the early 1990s social neglect of children had become so commonplace that it could be presented as a comedic motif without raising too many eyebrows. There was a time when childhood was accorded protected status—but that time is growing obsolete, as safety nets disintegrate and child-supports crumble. Now, as children are left to fend for themselves, few public institutions exist to address their needs.

In the *Home Alone* movies not only is Kevin left to take care of himself, but when his parents and family are on-screen they treat him with disdain and cruelty. In one scene Kevin's uncle unjustifiably calls him a "little jerk." After understandably asking why he always gets "treated like scum," Kevin is banished to the attic, at which time he proclaims for his generation: "Families suck." These early experiences set up the comedic bread-and-butter of *Home Alone*: Kevin's transference of his anger toward his family to burglars Marv (Daniel Stern) and Harry (Joe Pesci) and his subsequent torture of them. Both *Home Alone* movies are not the only movies of the era that address child abandonment and child revenge. In horror-thrillers *Halloween* and *Friday the 13th* the only individuals spared from violence are those who give time to and care for children. Those who neglect children must ultimately pay with their

lives. As neglected social rejects, children are relegated to the margins of society. It is not surprising, therefore, that in *Home Alone 2* Kevin forges an alliance with a homeless pigeon-lady who lives in Central Park—after all they are both social castoffs. Together they learn to deal with their cultural status.

The American Ambivalence Toward Children

After World War II Americans began to realize that childhood was becoming a phase of life distinctly separate from adulthood. This distinction was most evident in the youth culture that began to take shape in the 1950s; it was this youth culture that convinced parents that they were losing the ability to shape the culture in which their children lived. As a result, they were losing control of their sons and daughters. This fear has informed the academic study of youth in the second half of the twentieth century, often focusing attention on children as "the problem." Too often refusing to question the dominant culture and values of the adult world and the tacit assumptions of the field of childhood studies itself, mainstream scholars have often viewed conflict between children and parents as dysfunctional. Childhood "experts" and the mainstream education establishment have often insisted in this academic context that children need to be instructed to follow directions. This functionalist orientation assumes that the order and stability of environments must be maintained (Paul, 1994; Lewis, 1992; Griffin, 1993; Polakow, 1992). This, of course, ensures that institutions such as schools become unable to accommodate change, as they regress into a state of "equilibrium," that is, rigidity.

The virtual ubiquity of parent-child alienation and conflict is rarely perceived at the individual level of human interaction as a social phenomenon. When such conflicting dynamics occur in almost all parent-child relations, it is not likely that fault rests solely with individual parents and individual children. As we said before, something larger is happening here. It seems as if individual children cannot help but judge parents for their inconsistencies and shortcomings. Yet parents cannot help but resent their judgment and strike back with equal venom (Ventura, 1994). Adults must understand the social nature of this familial phenomenon and, based on this recognition, attempt to transcend the demand for order inscribed into their consciousness by the larger culture. Indeed, Americans don't understand their children or the dynamics of children's culture. Kids understand that adults just don't get it, as they listen and watch adults express and act on their misunderstandings of the differences between generational experiences and mind-sets.

Schools are perceived by children as virtually hopeless—indeed, they are institutionally grounded on a dismissal of these differences. Little has changed since the 1960s when Kenneth Keniston wrote that adult misunderstanding of youth contributed to the conclusion reached by many children: American mainstream culture offers us little to live for (Lewis, 1992).

Understanding this adult-child alienation, children slowly begin to withdraw into their own culture. Culkin's Kevin has absolutely no need for adults, as he shops (with newspaper coupons even), takes care of the house, and defends himself against robbers all by himself. This is quite typical for the films of John Hughes, whose children and teenagers rule in a world where youth culture is the only one that matters. Parents in these films are notoriously absent—they are either at work or on vacation; their advice is antiquated, consisting generally of pompous pronouncements about subjects they obviously know nothing about. Typical of the genre is *The Breakfast Club*, which revolves around the stupidity of parents and adult authority. Although it is a flagrant attempt by Hughes to commodify and exploit youth culture, the film does point out the width and depth of the chasm that separates kids and adults (Rapping, 1994). Children's culture, of course, takes shape in shadows far away from the adult gaze—as well it should. The point here is that it behooves parents, teachers, social workers, and other cultural workers who are interested in the welfare of children to understand the social dynamics that shape children and their culture in the final years of the twentieth century. When parents intensify their anxiety about the threat of postmodern kinderculture and strike out against it, they simply widen the chasm between themselves and their children. In this situation, the assertion of parental control becomes simply an end in itself, having little to do with the needs of children.

As adults in the 1950s and early 1960s began to understand the power of children's culture and the separations between childhood and adulthood it represented, parent and educator anxiety levels reached new highs. Adult fears that the kids were out of control expressed themselves in a variety of ways, none more interesting than in two British films of the early 1960s, *Village of the Damned* and its sequel, *Children of the Damned*. *Village of the Damned* is based on an invasion by an intergalactic sperm that impregnates earth women to produce a new race of mutant children who mature quickly and are capable of reading adult minds. Reflecting adult anxieties of the era concerning the growing partition between childhood and adulthood, the movie offers a "solution" to the youth problem. Although they embrace it with great difficulty, adults in *Children of the Damned* ultimately decide that they must kill their children. Understanding that child murder by necessity is suicidal

in that it involves killing a part of oneself, parents sacrifice themselves in order to eradicate the iniquity their children embody. The youth rebellions of the mid- and late 1960s that followed *Children of the Damned* would serve to raise the emotional ante expressed in the movie's fantasized infanticide.

The adult hostility toward children is omnipresent in the *Home Alone* movies, but such issues are consistently hidden from overt recognition. Previous films—*The Other*, *The Exorcist*, *The Bad Seed*, *Firestarter*, *It's Alive*—recognized adult hostility but projected it onto evil children as a means of concealing it. The abundance of these evil-children films points to a social tendency of parents to view their children as alien intruders. This child-based xenophobia positions children as foreigners whose presence marks the end of the family's configuration as a couple (Paul, 1994). Old routines are undermined and new demands must be met, as the child's power as manipulator is experienced by harried adults. Such familial dynamics set the scene for the postmodern child-custody case where lawyers, judges, and parents decide who *has* to take the kids.

Commercial children's culture understands what parents and educators don't—children and adolescents are wracked by desire that demands stimulation and often gets out of hand. We see its manifestation in children and children's culture with the constant struggle to escape boredom. Of course, most adults view this childhood desire as a monstrous quality to be squashed by any means necessary even if it requires the stupidification of young people in the process. In the *Home Alone* movies Kevin constantly feels as if he has done something terribly wrong, as if he were a bad kid. In *Home Alone 2* Kevin prays to the Rockefeller Square Christmas tree: "I need to see my mother, I need to tell her I'm sorry." Exactly for what he should be sorry, no one is quite sure. One can only conclude that he is sorry for being a child, for intruding on the smooth operation of the family, of being goaded by his monstrous desire.

If we equate children with that which is monstrous, it is not a long jump to the position that the manipulative aliens are evil. In *The Bad Seed*, a successful novel, play, and movie of the mid-1950s, Rhoda is an eight-year-old murderess endowed with a greed for material things—childhood desire run amuck. As the first work that explored this homicidal dimension of childhood, *The Bad Seed* equates youth with absolute malignancy—concealed at first in an innocent package. As Rhoda's landlady says of her: "She never gets anything dirty. She is a good child, a perfect child. She saves her money and keeps her room clean." The appearance of evil so close to goodness and innocence made the child monster that much more horrible. Children who are so evil (or at least so capable of it) in a perverted sense justify child abuse. By 1990 this image

of the bad child would be used for comic effect in *Problem Child* and *Problem Child 2* a year later. The way adults in *Problem Child* reacted to the problem child is revealing:

SCHOOL PRINCIPAL: Being a principal's great 'cause I hate kids. I have to deal with the weenies.

SCHOOL TEACHER to principal after he brings problem child to her class as a new student: O God, another one. How many kids are they going to make me teach?

LAWANDA, the owner of the bank: What's this thing [referring to problem child]? This kid's a nightmare. . . . Kids are like bum legs. You don't shoot the patient, you cut off the leg.

PROBLEM CHILD'S GRANDFATHER to father: You little psycho—you're an evil boy. You got to learn to respect your elders.

LAWANDA: Listen you little monster. I'm going to marry your father and send you to boarding school in Baghdad.

SCHOOL PRINCIPAL: You rotten kids should be locked in cages.

LAWANDA: I hate children. They ruin everything. If I had enough power I'd wipe them off the face of the earth.

Child-murderer Sharon Smith never stated it this clearly and unambiguously.

Whenever the problem child seeks to subvert the order of the status quo, viewers are alerted to what is coming by George Thorogood's blues guitar riff from "Bad to the Bone." Such innate "badness" cannot be indulged. As with the neo-folk wisdom in 1990s America that criminals cannot be rehabilitated, there is no hope for the growth and development of the problem child. *Home Alone's* Kevin, who is certainly capable of "badness" and sadistic torture, is still struggling with parental forgiveness; the problem child is beyond all that. Parental and educational authority is concerned simply with control; the issue is naked power—there is no need for ameliorative window dressing in this realpolitik for children. In this context kindness becomes the cause of juvenile delinquency, child advocacy the response of dupes and bleeding-heart fools. Movie audiences want to see the problem child punished, if not physically attacked. Not too far from such sentiments looms child abuse.

In John Carpenter's *Halloween* the camera shows the audience an unidentified murderer's point of view of a middle-America suburban house occupied by two teenagers making love in an upstairs bedroom. As we watch from the murderer's eyes, he picks up a carving knife in the

kitchen, observes the teenage boy leave the house, and walks back up the stairs to the bedroom where the teenage girl is now in bed alone. Looking directly into the gaze of the camera the girl expresses her annoyance with an obviously familiar character wielding the knife. At this point the hand carrying the knife stabs the girl to death, principally focusing the attack on her bare breasts. It is only after the murder that we are granted a reverse-angle shot of the killer, who is a six-year-old boy. In 1978, when *Halloween* was made, reviewers made little note of the age of the murderer (Paul, 1994). So accustomed was the American audience to the "innate" evil potential of children that moviemakers perceived no need to explain the etymology of the child's violent behavior. By the end of the 1970s headlines such as "Killer Kids" and newspaper copy such as "Who are our children? One day they are innocent. The next, they may try to blow your head off" (Vogel, 1994, 57) had made an impact. No more assumptions of innocence, no surprises. A new era had emerged.

The Blame Game

Clusters of issues come together as we consider the role of mothers and fathers in the family wars of the late twentieth century. The battle to ascribe blame for family dysfunction in general, and childhood pathology in particular, plays out on a variety of landscapes: politics, religion, and popular culture. On the political terrain in the 1990s, we have witnessed the Dan Quayle–Murphy Brown showdown over single mothers as parents; on the religious battleground right-wing Christian fundamentalists have fingered feminism as the catalyst for mothers' neglect of their children. The analysis of this blame game as expressed in popular culture offers some unique insights.

In the *Home Alone* movies Kevin's mother has internalized the right-wing blame of women for the neglect (abandonment) of Kevin in particular and family pathology in general. Though they are uncomfortable with a negative maternal figure, the screenplay writers leave no doubt as to who's to blame. Banished to the attic because he has been *perceived* as a nuisance, Kevin is (justifiably) hurt and angry.

KEVIN: Everyone in this family hates me.

MOTHER: Then maybe you should ask Santa for a new family.

KEVIN: I don't want a new family. I don't want any family. Families suck.

MOTHER: Just stay up there. I don't want to see you again for the rest of the night.

KEVIN: I don't want to see you again for the rest of my whole life. And I don't want to see anyone else, either.

MOTHER: I hope you don't mean that. You'd be pretty sad if you woke up tomorrow morning and you didn't have a family.

KEVIN: No, I wouldn't.

MOTHER: Then say it again. Maybe it'll happen.

KEVIN: I hope I never see any of you again.

The mother here is the provocateur, the one who plants the ideas that emerge as Kevin's wishes. Insensitive to his emotional hurt, she induces him to request a new family, she is the first to speak of not wanting to see him, she is the one who dares Kevin to tempt fate by wishing away his family (Paul, 1994). There is little doubt left by the *Home Alone* movies that child care is the mother's responsibility. John Heard's father-character is virtually a nonentity. He is disinterested in Kevin, condescending and hostile. He knows (along with the audience) that he is not responsible for Kevin's abandonment even though he was present during the entire episode. He has no reason to gnash his teeth or rent his garment in displays of penitence—this is the domain of the mother. And pay she does with her polka-band trip in *Home Alone* and in her frenzied running through the nighttime streets of New York calling for her son in *Home Alone 2*. In an era when child abuse and child murder by mothers occupy national headlines, Kevin's mother's quest for forgiveness may signify a much larger guilt. The right-wing male's blame of women for the ills of the family, however, is grotesquely perverse, implying as it does that battalions of strong but tender men are struggling with their wives to let them take charge of child rearing—not hardly (Rapping, 1994).

Feminist research and analysis of child abuse and domestic violence have subverted the happy depiction of family life as a safe haven far removed from pathologies emanating from internal power inequities. As such scholarship documented the ways that family life has oppressed women and children, profamily conservative groups responded by calling for a reassertion of patriarchal control in the home. Women, they argued, should return to child rearing. Some conservatives have even maintained that women who don't adequately perform these "maternal" chores should have their children taken away and placed in orphanages. The most optimistic estimates place the number of children who would

be institutionalized under this plan at over 1 million—the costs of such care would run over \$36 billion (Griffin, 1993; Morganthau et al., December 12, 1994). The male backlash to the assertive feminist critique has only begun with its depiction of women's political organizations as the rise of a dangerous special-interest group. Protectors of male power are waging an effective public relations battle: Any campaign that is able to deflect blame for family failure from absent and often abusive fathers to mothers possesses a superior penchant for persuasion and little concern for truth (Griffin, 1993).

Home Alone displays these gender dynamics in its complete refusal to implicate the father in the abandonment. Upon learning that Kevin is not in Paris with the family, his mother exclaims "What kind of mother am I?" The lack of effect on the part of the adult males of the family, Kevin's father and his uncle, is perplexing. The careful viewer can only conclude that they neither like nor care about the eight-year-old. An explanation of the father's dismissiveness is never provided. All the viewer can discern is that the father and uncle seem to be fighting for their manhood, expressing it perhaps in their resistance to the "breadwinner-loser" male character who forfeits his "male energy" in his domestication and subsequent acceptance of fidelity in marriage, dedication to job, and devotion to children (Lewis, 1992). Such a male figure was ridiculed by beatniks as square, by *Playboy* devotees as sexually timid, and by hippies as tediously straight. The search for a hip male identity along with a healthy dose of irresponsibility has undermined the family as a stable and loving environment. Indeed, to "do the right thing" in regard to one's family as a man is to lose status among one's fellow men.

An examination of adult-male behavior in families indicates that many men are desperately concerned with peer-group status. For example, recent media reports indicate that men on average pay pitifully inadequate child support to their former spouses (if they pay it at all). Only half of women awarded child support ever receive what they are owed; another quarter receive partial payments, and the remaining quarter get nothing at all (Galston, December 2, 1991). This ambiguous role of the father in the family highlighted by the indifferent father of *Home Alone* is addressed in a more overtly oedipal manner in other movies of the past couple of decades (Paul, 1994). *The Shining*, for example, retrieves that which has always been repressed in Western culture—a father's hostility toward his own son—and builds an entire plot around it. Danny, the child protagonist in *The Shining*, develops the psychic power to see beyond the limits of time and space after his father (Jack Nicholson) in an alcoholic stupor broke Danny's arm. Danny's power, his shining, is expressed through his imaginary friend, Tony, who lives in Danny's mouth. Tony exists to help Danny cope with his violent

and abusive father. Danny's presence and growth remind his father of his emasculation, his stultification by the family. The father's solution to his problem—the attempted ax-murder of his wife and child—allows for none of the *Home Alone* ambiguity; the movie jumps into the maelstrom of the conflict between virile masculinity and the demands of domesticity.

As the screen image of the crazed, ax-wielding Jack Nicholson fades into our blurred image of *Jurassic Park* (1993), the continuity of the child-hating adult male remains intact. Even in this “child-friendly,” Spielberg-produced dinodrama, the paleontologist (Sam Neill) holds such an extreme hatred of children that he won't ride in the same car with them. At one point in the film, in response to a prepubescent boy's sarcastic question about the power of dinosaurs, Neill evokes the image of the violent Nicholson, circling and threatening the child with the ominous claw of a velociraptor. The difference between *Jurassic Park* and *The Shining*, however, involves Neill's moment of epiphany; when the children are endangered by the dinosaurs, Neill sheds his hatred and, like a good father, risks mutilation and death to save their lives. As in the *Home Alone* movies, the issue of the father's hatred is buried in a happy ending: the safe children celebrating with the “reformed” Neill and the happy McAlister family celebrating Christmas in a frenetic present-opening ritual. The demand for family values in the 1980s and 1990s had changed the cultural landscape: family values must triumph; adult men must be depicted as ultimately devoted to their children; the feminists' portrayal of the “bad father” must not be reinforced.

And as if the Ambiguity Wasn't Bad Enough, Some Kids Matter More Than Others

It doesn't take long to discern that with the class dynamics of the 1990s poor children in America don't matter as much as upper-middle-class children, that is, privileged children like the ones portrayed in the *Home Alone* movies. The frequent assertion that America is not a class society, uttered so confidently by mainstream politicians and educators, holds profound psychological and political consequences. This class silence undermines the well-to-do's understanding that they were granted a head start while paralyzing the less successful with a feeling of personal inferiority. At the political level, as the belief sustains the fiction it reifies the status quo: When the poor are convinced that their plight is self-produced, the larger society is released from any responsibility (Rubin, 1994).

An overt class silence pervades the *Home Alone* movies. Even newspaper reviewers referred to the upper-middle-class, white, and Protestant “bleached and sanitized” microcosm of the two movies (Koch, Decem-

ber 27, 1990). The McAlisters are very wealthy, living in their enormous brick colonial in a generic Chicago suburb filled with extravagant furnishings and conveniences. Indeed, they are an obnoxious and loathsome crew, but being so privileged they believe they can act any way they want. The filmmakers go out of their way to make sure viewers know that the family deserves its money—as father McAlister drinks from crystal in the plane's first-class cabin on the way to Paris he alludes to his hard work and humble origins. The message is clear—the American dream is attainable for those willing to put in the effort. The McAlisters deserve their good fortune.

It is a restricted world of affluent WASPs. Harry and Marv (two small-time robbers with an attitude) make their appearance as the only poor people and the only non-WASPs in the two movies. Harry (Pesci) and Marv (Stern) are quickly positioned as “the other” in both screenplays: They speak in specific lower-socioeconomic-class accents; obviously ethnic, Pesci exaggerates his working-class Italian accent; and just so we are not confused Stern signifies his Jewishness with a curiously gratuitous “Happy Hanukkah” reference as he steals money from a toy store. They are ignorant and uneducated—Pesci makes specific reference to the fact he never completed the sixth grade; they also hold an irrational hatred of the affluent—their *modus operandi* is to flood the affluent homes they rob (thus they are known as the “wet bandits”). These class- and ethnic-specific traits set Marv and Harry apart to such a degree that the audience can unambiguously enjoy their torture at the hands of Kevin.

The *Home Alone* movies pull their weight in the larger social effort to erase class as a dynamic in late-twentieth-century American life. Under interrogation the movies confess their class complicity, as evidenced through the “otherization” of Marv and Harry. Compare Marv and Harry with Mr. Duncan, the toy-store owner who appears in *Home Alone 2*. Imbued with the sweetness and generosity of Clarence, the guardian angel in *It's a Wonderful Life*, Duncan is the most charming character in the *Home Alone* movies. After the McAlister family's reunification in *Home Alone 2*, he showers them with scores of presents. His only motivation for being in business is that he loves children and wants to see their happy faces when they open presents from his store. His loving smiles prove that capitalism cares and the status quo is just. He deserves every penny of his profits just as much as Marv and Harry deserve their torment. Such characterization gently dovetails with the dominant political impulses of the moment, marked by a callous acceptance of poverty, child poverty in particular, in the midst of plenty.

More than 12.6 million children live below the poverty line, making one out of every five American children poor (Polakow, 1992). Too often unaware of even the existence of such class realities, Americans and

their institutions are far removed from the insidious effects of such poverty. Poor children too infrequently escape the effects of living with parents scarred by their sense of shortcoming, of having to negotiate movie and TV images of the poor and working class as dangerous and oafish caricatures (as in *Home Alone*), and of confronting teachers and social workers who hold lower expectations for them than their middle- and upper-middle-class peers. A key feature of the class dynamic in the *Home Alone* movies involves the public reaction to the McAlisters' child abandonment episodes as "good fun," as opposed to the real-life home-alone cases that keep surfacing in the 1990s. When Kevin's parents report his having been left alone in New York to the police after they reach their vacation destination in Miami, it's no big deal. Even when they admit that abandoning the child has become "a family tradition," no one is excited—after all, the McAlisters are upper class, well-to-do people. Almost daily, parents (especially single mothers) who leave their young children home alone for sometimes just a few hours are arrested and forced to relinquish their offspring to foster care. With child care often costing \$200–400 per month, poor mothers are placed into virtually impossible circumstances (Seligman, August 1, 1993). The society's refusal to address poor and single mothers' need for child care has contributed to the feminization of poverty (Polakow, 1992). The *Home Alone* movies indicate the double standard that dominates the American view of the rich and the poor and the mean-spirited class bias of some expressions of popular culture in this conservative age.

The Postmodern Childhood

Within the bizarre *Home Alone* mix of child abandonment, child-parent alienation, children caught in the crossfire of gender wars, crass class bias, and comedy resides something profound about the role of children in contemporary American culture. The movies could have been made only in a culture that had experienced a profound shift in the social role of children. To all individuals who have a stake in understanding childhood—parents, teachers, social workers, family counselors, and so on—knowledge of these changing conditions becomes a necessity. A no-growth economy has mandated that all adults in the family must work outside the home; because of such needs, children find themselves saddled with daily duties ranging from housecleaning, baby-sitting, and grocery shopping to cooking, laundering, and organizing car pools. With the "family values" agenda of right-wing movements of the 1990s threatening to eviscerate government's economic support of poor and middle-class families, the poverty problem of children looks to get worse before it gets better.

The new era of childhood—the postmodern childhood—cannot escape the influence of the postmodern condition with its electronic media saturation. Such a media omnipresence produces a hyperreality that repositions the real as something no longer simply given but artificially reproduced as real. Thus, media-produced models replace the real—simulated TV kids on sitcoms replace real-life children as models of childhood. In this same, media-driven, postmodern condition a cultural implosion takes place, ripping apart boundaries between information and entertainment as well as images and politics. As media push the infinite proliferation of meaning, boundaries between childhood and adulthood fade as children and adults negotiate the same mediascape and struggle with the same impediments to meaning-making. Children become "adultified" and adults become "childified" (Aronowitz and Giroux, 1991; Best and Kellner, 1991). Boundaries between adulthood and childhood blur to the point that a clearly defined, "traditional," innocent childhood becomes an object of nostalgia—a sure sign that it no longer exists in any unproblematic form (Lipsky and Abrams, 1994; Postman, 1994).

There is nothing childlike about a daily routine of child care, cooking, and shopping. In the *Home Alone* movies Kevin is almost completely adultlike in meeting the demands of survival on his own. He checks into hotels, uses credit cards, orders pizzas, and shops for groceries (even with coupons)—all as a part of a day's work. He needs no adult figure; he can take complete care of himself. In the postmodern childhood being home alone is an everyday reality. Children now know what only adults used to know: postmodern children are sexually knowledgeable and often sexually experienced; they understand and many have experienced with drugs and alcohol; and new studies show they often experience the same pressures as single working mothers, as they strive to manage the stresses of school, work at home, and interpersonal family dynamics. When the cultural dynamics of hyperreality collide with post-baby boom demographics and the economic decline of the early 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, the world changes (Lipsky and Abrams, 1994). The daily life of media-produced family models such as the Cleavers from *Leave It to Beaver* is convulsed. June must get a job and Wally and Larry and Whitey leisurely play on the streets of Mayfield after school. Anyway, it's dangerous—Mayfield is not as safe as it used to be.

In the mid-1990s children under twelve belong to a generation only half the size of the baby boomers. As a result, children as a group garner less attention in 1996 than they did in 1966 and exert a correspondingly diminished voice in the society's social and political conversation. In such a context, youth issues are not as important as they once were. Add to this a declining economy, complicated, rising expectations. As

American manufacturing jobs have disappeared and dead-end service jobs have expanded, advertising continues to promote higher and higher consumer desire. Frustration levels among children and teenagers rise as a direct result of this socioeconomic contradiction. Given the centrality of TV in the lives of this postmodern home-alone generation, the awareness of the desirability of children's consumer goods becomes a central aspect of their lived reality. Consumer desire, however, is only one aspect of the effect TV and other electronic media have upon American children. TV is where children find out about American culture. Indeed, one doesn't have to be a movie critic to know how often Hollywood has drawn on the TV-taught-me-all-I-know theme. In *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, David Bowie as an alien learns all about earth culture from TV; in *Being There* Peter Sellers as idiot-savant Chauncey Gardner knows nothing about the world but what he has learned on TV. The movie ends with Chauncey on his way to a possible presidential candidacy—life imitates art? The robot in *Short Circuit*, the mermaid in *Splash*, the aliens in *Explorers*, and the Neanderthal in *Encino Man* all are completely socialized by TV (Lipsky and Abrams, 1994).

What does the repeated invocation of this theme say to observers of childhood? With the evolution of TV as a medium that attempts to more or less represent reality, children have gained an adultlike (not necessarily an informed) view of the world in only a few years of watching TV. Traditional notions of childhood as a time of sequential learning about the world don't work in a hyperreality saturated with sophisticated but power-driven views of reality. When a hotel porter asks Kevin McAlister in *Home Alone 2* if he knows how the TV in his hotel room works, Kevin replies, "I'm ten years old; TV's my life." The point is well taken, and as a consciousness-dominating, full-disclosure medium TV provides everyone—sixty-year-old adults to eight-year-old children—with the same data. As postmodern children gain unrestricted knowledge about things once kept secret from nonadults, the mystique of adults as revered keepers of secrets about the world begins to disintegrate. No longer do the elders know more than children about the experience of youth; given social/technological changes (video games, computers, TV programs, etc.) they often know less. Thus, the authority of adulthood is undermined, as kids' generational experience takes on a character of its own.

The social impact of such a phenomenon is profound on many levels. As discussed in more detail in Chapter 14 on McDonald's, a subversive kinderculture is created where kids, through their attention to child-targeted programming and commercials, know something that mom and dad don't. This corporate-directed kinderculture provides kids with a body of knowledge adults don't possess even while their access to adult themes on TV at least makes them conversant with marital, sexual, busi-

ness-related, criminal, violent, and other traditionally restricted issues. When combined with observations of families collapsing, the dynamics of the struggle of a single mother to support her family, parents involved in the "singles" scene, and postdivorce imposition of adultlike chores, children's TV experience provides a full-scale immersion into grown-up culture.

In the context of childhood education the postmodern experience of being a kid represents a cultural earthquake. The curriculum of the third grade is determined not only by what vocabulary and concepts are "developmentally appropriate" but by what content is judged to be commensurate with third-grade experience in the lived world (Lipsky and Abrams, 1994; Postman, 1994). Hyperreality explodes traditional notions of curriculum development—third-graders can discuss the relationship between women's self-image and the nature of their sexual behavior. And while parental groups debate the value of sex education in the public schools, their children are at home watching a TV docudrama depicting the gang rape of a new inmate in the federal penitentiary. When teachers and the culture of school treat such children as if they know nothing of the adult world, the kids come to find school hopelessly archaic, out of touch with the times. This is why the postmodern subversive kinderculture always views school with a knowing wink and a smirk—how quaint school must look to our postmodern children.

There is nothing easy about the new childhood. Indeed, many teenagers and young adults speak of their stress and fatigue originating in childhood. If one has juggled the responsibilities of adulthood since the age of seven, physical and psychological manifestations of stress and fatigue during one's adolescence should surprise no one. Adolescent suicide did not exist as a category during the "old childhood"—by 1980 it was second only to accidents as the leading cause of death of teenagers. By the 1990s 400,000 young people were attempting suicide yearly and youth suicide was being described in the academic literature as an epidemic (Gaines, 1990). The covenant between children and adults has been broken by parental and clerical child abuse and the pathological behavior of other caretakers. Too often children of the late twentieth century have callously been deposited in inadequate child care institutions administered on the basis of cost-efficiency concerns, not on a larger commitment to the welfare of children. The tendency to segregate by age is well-established in late-twentieth-century America, and unless steps are taken to reverse the trend more generational alienation and antagonism will result (Gaines, 1994; Polakow, 1992).

In the context of this child segregation, cultural pathologies manifest themselves. Excluded from active participation in the social order, children find themselves both segregated and overregulated by institutional

forms of social control. The overregulators pose as experts on child-raising, child development, child morality, and early childhood education with their psychodiscourse on the rigid phases of child development and the strict parameters of normality. In the name of "proper child-rearing techniques" experts tap into the larger ideology of personnel management that adjusts individuals to the demands of an orderly society. Like all strategies of personnel management, mainstream child psychology masks its emphasis on control. Intimidated by the scientific language of the experts, parents lose faith in their own instincts and surrender control to the authority figure on *Sally Jesse*. Play gives way to skill development as structure permeates all aspects of the child's life. Whereas middle- and upper-middle-class children suffer from the hyperstructure of skill development, poor children labeled "at-risk" are medicated and drilled in the misguided effort to reduce chaos and disorder in their lives. In the name of order the experience of poor children is further bureaucratized (Seiter, 1993; Polakow, 1992).

The Worldliness of Postmodern Childhood: The Wiseass as Prototype

The *Home Alone* movies can be understood only in the context of the postmodern childhood. Kevin McAlister is a worldly child—light-years separate Kevin from Chip, Ernie, and Robbie Douglas on *My Three Sons* of the late 1950s and early 1960s. As a black comedy for children, *Home Alone* struck an emotional chord with moviegoers that made it one of the most popular and profitable films of all time. Kevin, as kiddie-noir hero, is a smart kid with an attitude; Macauley Culkin's ability to portray that character turned him into an overnight celebrity—a role model for the prepubescent wiseass.

Kevin as postmodern wiseass could not tolerate children from the 1940s and 1950s, with their simpleminded the-policeman-is-our-friend view of the world. Bizarre in their innocence, such children are viewed by postmodern kids as antimatter reflections of themselves without responsibilities or cynicism. "What would we talk about?" Kevin might ask of a meeting with such kids. Unless Kevin had watched old movies or lived near a separatist group such as the Amish, he would have never seen such unworldly children. Almost every child depicted on TV in the contemporary era—Alex Keaton on *Family Ties*, Michele in *Full House*, Lisa and Bart Simpson on *The Simpsons*, Rudi on *The Cosby Show*—is worldly and wise. Bart Simpson may be an underachiever, but only in school—a place he finds boring, confining, and based on a childhood that no longer exists. Bart is not childish, the school is. The smart-ass

child à la Culkin and Bart Simpson is the symbol for contemporary childhood. Imagine Bart's reaction to a "Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus" adult monologue: "Right, daddy-o, now eat my shorts."

The wiseass is the hero of the subversive kinderculture. The appeal of *Home Alone* is connected to this insurgent response to middle-class propriety with its assumption of child helplessness and its worship of achievement. Child and adult are pitted against one another with the child as the sympathetic character. In the case of *Home Alone* no one could feel much sympathy for Kevin's parents with their lack of empathy for Kevin's position in the family and their lack of attention to his needs. Kevin's behavior is an act of righteous resistance to this unjust status quo. Like his kindred spirits, Bart Simpson and Beavis and Butt-Head, Kevin thrives on disorder—a chaos that undermines the social order constructed around bourgeois stability. As Beavis and Butt-Head might put it, order "sucks," disorder is "cool." The subversive kinderculture of the postmodern childhood thrives on this disorder.

Indeed, one of the subtexts running through the *Home Alone* movies involves the humorous juxtapositioning of comments of family members concerning poor, helpless little Kevin with the visual depiction of Kevin happy and in control of the disorder of his solitude. The appeal of the film revolves around Kevin's ability to tell his parents, "Even in the middle of all this exciting chaos, I don't need you." The self-sufficient boy-hero of the postmodern era—what a movie-marketing bonanza. He shows no remorse on learning that his parents have left him home alone: With eyebrows raised Kevin says to the camera, "I made my family disappear." Compare this postmodern reaction to parent-child separation to Dorothy's in *The Wizard of Oz*—Judy Garland's raison d'être is getting back home to Kansas. Kevin is self-actualized, living out the childhood fantasy of life without parental encumbrance. Since he "can't trust anybody in this family," Kevin decides he would rather vacation alone than with "such a group of creeps." As a bellman scoops ice cream for him in his posh New York hotel room, it is obvious that Kevin's intuitions are correct. "This is a vacation," he sighs.

Confronting the Intensity of Youth in a Postmodern Childhood

As parties interested in the status of contemporary childhood, we ask: What does the popularity of the *Home Alone* movies tell us about the inner lives of children and their attempt to understand their relationship with the adult world? For a generation of home-aloners Culkin's Kevin is a character with whom they can identify, for he negotiates the cultural ob-

stacles they also have had to confront. He offers them a sense of hope, a feeling that there is something heroic in their daily struggle. Once again, the corporate marketers are one step ahead of the rest of us, as they recognize the changing nature of childhood and colonize the psychological ramifications such changes produce. In retrospect it seems so easy: To canonize a child who is left home alone for Christmas is to flatter every postmodern child in the audience. Kevin's predicament validates a generation's lived experience, transforming unwanted children into pre-teen Ninja warriors. If nothing else, *Home Alone* is a rite-of-passage story about a boy home alone, endangered, besieged, who emerges victorious and transformed (Koch, December 27, 1990). "I'm no wimp," he proclaims as he marches off to battle, "I'm the man of the house."

In a postmodern era where children have already seen everything, have watched the media sell laundry detergent by exploiting a mother's love for her children, it is no surprise that kids of the 1990s experience difficulty with emotional investment. As a result, the interpersonal affect of postmodern children tends to be minimal—everything is kept at a distance and treated ironically (Grossberg, 1994). Kevin offers such children both something in which to invest and a sense that their desire for real experience is not pathological. This childhood and adolescent desire for extremes, for intense sensation, is typically viewed by the adult world as dangerous and misguided. Indeed, the very purpose of certain forms of traditional schooling and child rearing has been to tame such feelings. This visceral energy of the young—so central to Kevin in *Home Alone* and so enticing to young moviegoers—lays the foundation for a progressive postmodern child rearing and childhood education. Too often adults who are "in charge" of children forget the nature and power of this visceral energy/life force of young people. In their adult amnesia they fail to connect with the force and, as a result, relinquish the possibility of guiding it or being replenished by it. They often blame rock music, MTV videos, video games, communists, or satanists for creating the energy, forgetting that historically mediated forms of it have expressed themselves from ancient hunter-gatherer societies to modern and postmodern ones (Ventura, 1994; Rodriguez, 1994).

Its suppression in the postmodern North American culture at the end of the twentieth century undermines our civic, psychological, and intellectual growth. The very qualities adults fear most in our children—passion, visceral energy, and life force—can be used as the basis for a postmodern childhood education. In a sense the genie is out of the bottle and there is no way to get it back in. As the communication revolution has opened adult esoterica to children, we find there is no turning back. The endless debates over movie and record ratings are futile exercises; the question now revolves around how to provide children the type of

emotional and intellectual supports that help them balance the interaction between their visceral energy and their newfound insights. Just as traditional forms of teaching and childhood curricular arrangements are passé given the "new times," forms of discipline and control strategies are obsolete. Can kids who hold Kevin's knowledge of the world in general and the anxieties and tribulations of adulthood in particular be domesticated and controlled (not to mention the question of *should* they) in the same ways as children of a different era of childhood were? Custodial schooling is no longer adequate for children of the 1990s—indeed, it was never adequate for children no matter what the era.

Education for domestication assumes that the information a child encounters can be regulated and sequentially ordered (Polakow, 1992; Gaines, 1990). Much schooling and child rearing is still based on such an archaic assumption, resulting in strategies that negate children's exploration, invention, and play. Indeed, the purpose of many of these strategies is to prevent the integration of acquired information from a variety of sources into the cognitive and emotional structures of an evolving personhood, that is, growth itself. Thus, child rearing insufficiently prepares children for adulthood or even postmodern childhood, as it ignores the world that surrounds children and shapes their lives. The lessons to be excavated from this quick analysis of the *Home Alone* movies are sobering in their urgency. The state of the family at the end of the twentieth century and the inability of the public conversation about it to transcend the most trivial forms of platitudes to the value of family in our "national character" is distressing. An effort to examine the nature of kinderculture and the forces that shape it simply does not exist in the surreal, image-based politics of the present era. The ambivalent adult relationship with children is a suppressed feature of the cultural landscape, rarely if ever addressed in even the professional schooling of child-welfare professionals, child psychologists, or elementary educators. These silences must end.

References

- Aronowitz, S., and Giroux, H. (1991). *Post-modern education: Politics, culture, and social criticism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Best, S., and Kellner, D. (1991). *Postmodern theory: Critical interrogations*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Coontz, S. (1992). *The way we never were: American families and the nostalgia trap*. New York: Basic Books.
- Ferguson, S. (1994). The comfort of being sad. *Utne Reader* 64 (July/August): 60-61.