



## Home and the Superego: The *Risky Business* of Being *Home Alone*

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### Abstract

*Risky Business* (1983) and *Home Alone* (1990) are strikingly similar popular American films, family comedies. In both, the family conveniently vanishes and the son is left home alone, presented with the temptations of a newfound freedom which he promptly abuses, and then with seemingly overwhelming problems which he solves through ingenuity and risk-taking. Both are fantasies of the wise child in which adults are unsympathetic (*Risky Business*) or incompetent (*Home Alone*) and the child becomes the real adult. If we consider the superego as the internalized voice of the parents and of the culture, then both young protagonists are in revolt against the superego. In both films, we see the paradox of the child hero trashing his home in order to defend it. The two films present a rebellion against superego, home, and family not as an assault but as a defense of superego, home, and family. Both films represent the divided societal superego of America in the 1980s.

### Keywords

Film, *Risky Business*, *Home Alone*, superego, 1980s America, home

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"The more we reflect on the tyranny of the home, the less surprising it is that the young wish to be free of its scrutiny and control." Mary Douglas, "The Idea of a Home," 283

*Risky Business* (1983) and *Home Alone* (1990) are strikingly similar popular films, family comedies about the tribulations created by the fulfillment of a child's wish to eliminate the family. Both deal with a developmental dilemma: *Risky Business* on an oedipal level and *Home Alone* on a pre-oedipal one. *Risky*

*Business* has the aura of an adolescent wet dream and *Home Alone* of a fairy tale. In both movies, the family conveniently vanishes and the son is left home alone, presented with the temptations of a newfound freedom which he promptly abuses, and then with seemingly overwhelming problems which he solves through ingenuity and risk-taking. Both are fantasies of the wise child in which adults are unsympathetic (*Risky Business*) or incompetent (*Home Alone*) and the child becomes the real adult. "I can't be a wimp. I'm the man of the house," the eight-year-old hero of *Home Alone* tells himself.

If we can consider the superego as the internalized voice of the parents and of the culture, then both young protagonists are in revolt against the superego. In both films, we see the paradox of the child hero trashing his home in order to defend it. The two films present a rebellion against superego, home, and family not as an assault but as a defense of superego, home, and family. Thus in both *Risky Business* and *Home Alone*, the child heroes are reckless and lawless and break all the rules, yet the audience is intended to admire them as typical, all-American kids. Joel Goodsen in *Risky Business* is a "good son," a defender of free enterprise (the "risky business" of capitalism) even if it degrades the home through prostitution, and Kevin McCallister in *Home Alone* is a defender of law and order and the home, fending off burglars singlehandedly even as he wrecks the house with his booby traps and sings the burglars with a blowtorch and other elaborate torture devices.

As we will argue in our conclusion, both films can also be seen as representative of the divided societal superego of America in the 1980s.

## 1. Childish Rebellion in *Risky Business* and *Home Alone*

On the surface, *Risky Business*, a teenage sex comedy, seems dissimilar to *Home Alone*, a family comedy with many resemblances to a television sitcom. The R-rated *Risky Business* has a seventeen-year-old hero and is intended for a high school or adult audience; PG-rated *Home Alone* has an eight-year-old hero and is targeted for young children and families. *Risky Business* seems to satirize the American upper-middle class, who are seen as repressed and materialistic; *Home Alone* reaffirms the values of that same class.

Nevertheless, the films are fundamentally similar. Both plots are variations on the premise of "while the cat's away": the amount of mischief a white boy from an exclusive suburb can get into while his parents are out of town for a few days. Both are comedies about boys flexing their muscles for the first time. The best remembered images from the films tell the story: Joel (Tom Cruise) in his parents' living room, dressed in his underpants, wearing dark glasses, and playing air guitar to rock music (ironically, mimicked by Ron Reagan, the President's son, on *Saturday Night Live*); Kevin (Macaulay Culkin) in his parents' bathroom, shrieking as he slaps on aftershave. These are children playing the role of adult. Both grow up using highly unconventional means. By the end, each child is transfigured: Joel has lost

his virginity, gained autonomy and self-confidence, and been accepted to the Ivy League School of his choice; Kevin has saved the home from burglars, overcome his fears and helplessness, and is reconciled with his family.

The central element the films have in common is the fantasy of destroying the home in order to save it, a rebellion or revolt which is paradoxically seen as a defense of the family. In a psychoanalytic sense, the protagonists rebel against the superego in the name of the superego; that is, they allow the desires of the id to go on a rampage but are able to rationalize this behavior as necessary to protect the household. Joel gradually allows the outside world of sexuality, risk, and chaos to enter his family's home, reluctantly at first, but finally wholeheartedly, so that the climax is the bordello orgy inside the home that Joel orchestrates. His justification is that this is the quickest way to earn the money to repair his father's Porsche, wrecked when he let it fall into a lake. Kevin, however, fights against the entry of outside chaos into his home, so that the climax is his pitched battle to expel the burglars. His rationalization is that he is the man of the house now and must repel invaders (he never calls the police).

Both films enact childish wish fulfillments with many dreamlike elements. *Risky Business* opens with Joel recounting his dream about sexual temptation in the home and a test at school, and the rest of the film seems to recapitulate the dream conflict, complete with dreamlike sex scenes (Ansen, Gelmis). *Home Alone* has a fairy-tale structure: because he feels unloved, a boy makes a bedtime wish that his family disappear and awakens the next morning to find that his wish has come true. Like a fairy-tale child, Kevin must fight off the ogres and is aided by a wise old man. Then his Christmas wish is fulfilled--that the original wish be undone--and his family returns on Christmas morning, loving him more than before. Several critics have compared the film to another perennial American Christmas family movie, the fantasy *It's a Wonderful Life* (Bernard, Martin and Porter 295).

## **2. *Risky Business*: Andy Hardy Becomes a Pimp**

*Risky Business* is a slick variation on the teenage "hormone" comedy about a young man's sexual initiation (see Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics*). A rite-of-passage film told tongue in cheek, with satiric exaggeration, it is a cynical film for a corrupt, cynical age, distinguished from many others of its genre by its clever script and direction, superior acting, sophisticated visuals, and highly stylized eroticism. Reviewers saw it as a cross between an arty social commentary film and a teenage sexploitation flick, a blend of *The Graduate* (1967) and *Porky's* (1981)--in other words, as a movie that sends mixed messages (Asahina, Benson, Denby, Gelmis, Newman).

In the opening scene, Joel faces a conflict between his raging hormones and his desire for a secure future through academic and career success. In the end, he finds that there is no contradiction between his sexual desires and his

financial ambitions, that, indeed, sex is good business. Prostitution, he discovers, is the highest form of capitalism. In the course of a few days, Joel is transformed from a naive, virginal adolescent into an experienced panderer: Andy Hardy as pimp.

And, paradoxically, he is rewarded for his illicit enterprise: the Princeton interviewer is so impressed by Joel's daring and initiative in turning his home into a whorehouse that he recommends Joel be admitted to Princeton. Ironically, unleashing his lust and greed secures Joel's future.

Joel and Kevin are both anxious, alienated boys, uncomfortable within their own households, who are suddenly left home alone. In the opening scene of *Risky Business*, Joel recounts a recurrent nightmare. He enters the house next door without permission and finds apparently no one home. But in an upstairs bathroom he spies a beautiful girl, a total stranger, taking a shower. She invites him to join her, but when he opens the shower door, he finds himself instead in a classroom where he is supposed to be taking his college boards. But he has arrived too late to complete the test. He says, "I just made a terrible mistake. I'll never get to college."

In the scenes that follow Joel's anxiety dream, we see that he is a cleancut, obedient, and repressed teenager, a "good son," as his patronym implies. His parents, introduced satirically through subjective camera, from Joel's point of view, are unaffectionate, fussy perfectionists. The subjective camera also renders Joel invisible in this scene and suggests his marginalization within the family. His parents demand of Joel performance and conformity. Their relations with him are *instrumental*, consisting primarily of comments, requests, and demands, rather than *expressive* of feelings, thoughts, and ideas. The family doesn't sit down to eat together, nor do they touch. His mother urges him to take the SAT again so he can do better; his father lectures him about not touching the stereo, saying, "My house, my rules." The music the father plays is bland Muzak. The house is expensively furnished, neat, and sterile. The father is symbolized by the stereo and the Porsche (which Joel is forbidden to drive); his mother, by the station wagon and an expensive Steuben glass egg on the mantel. Joel is like another of their household possessions. We are meant to dislike these parents, so that we can sympathize when Joel later rebels and deceives them.

His repeated nightmare suggests that Joel feels burdened by their high expectations and his lack of freedom. One critic writes that "you feel for him the way you felt for the strangulated Benjamin in *The Graduate*" (Benson). His chief anxiety is that the slightest misstep at this crucial stage (his senior year in high school) would mean disaster and lifelong failure. But as the dream reveals, he also desperately desires to make a mistake; in fact, he will soon make a whole series of huge, progressively escalating mistakes. Indulging in "risky business" is his way of retaliating against his parents and his internalized parental wishes: the superego.

The neighbor's house in the dream really symbolizes his own house, a familiar place where he feels he does not belong. The desire to have sex in the house with a strange, beautiful woman represents his desire to rebel against his parents, which he later acts out by inviting the prostitute Lana into his home. In his life, as in the dream, asserting his sexuality threatens him with the punishment of failing to get into college and of displeasing his parents. Joel's solution to the dilemma, which did not occur to him in the nightmare, is to turn sex into a moneymaking proposition, thus simultaneously fulfilling his two previously incompatible desires for sex and for success, satisfying both himself and his parents. Joel is rewarded for acting out his rebellion, becoming transformed from an anxious, alienated boy into a confident, sexually experienced, and financially successful young man who has found his place in his family and in society.

Joel and his teenage friends admit they are cynical and materialistic. They are all white, upper-middle class, and exclusively focused on success, money, and sex. The film constantly juxtaposes notions of business with those of sex, foreshadowing the later introduction of prostitution. For example, early in the movie, Joel attends a meeting at his high school of the "Future Enterprisers Club"; in the following scene, a boy comes over to borrow Joel's bedroom for an assignation with his girlfriend. Joel tries to study business but is distracted by the sounds of intercourse in the room above.

Joel's liberation is aided by two people: first is his friend Miles, a foil who is looser than the uptight Joel and pushes him to act on his desires, telling him, "Sometimes you just gotta say, 'What the fuck.'" Joel at the beginning is anally repressed, caught in a bind between the poles of holding on and letting go (Erikson, *Childhood and Society* 82-83). Because he has been holding on so tightly, when he does finally let go, it is to the extreme. Later, Joel far outstrips Miles in his willingness to take risks, and Miles is revealed as a conformist and hypocrite.

Joel's second helper is the teenage prostitute Lana (beautifully played by Rebecca De Mornay), who becomes his lover, his substitute mother, his mentor, and his business partner, the madam to Joel's pimp. Through Lana, Joel becomes a man.

The cool and calculating Lana is not only a sex object but also tough, independent, smart, knowledgeable, experienced, unsentimental, and totally materialistic. She is stonger and wiser than Joel, and she tutors him in both sex and business even as she uses and manipulates him. He is crazy about her body and also admires her mind: "It was great the way her mind worked: no guilt, no doubt, no fear." Lana, in other words, is not only the perfect prostitute but also the perfect *capitalist*. In this film, there is a cynical equivalence between the two.

In the scene in which Joel loses his virginity (the central scene of the movie), Lana suddenly appears in his living room. She has invaded, entering the house without knocking. As she begins to undress, she speaks, the only

dialogue in the scene: "Are you ready for me, Ralph?" (Joel had given a false name over the phone.) When they embrace, the doors blow open and autumn leaves blow into the house, suggesting a breakdown of the barriers between inside and outside. Lana is a powerful force of nature that will take over both Joel and the house.

Joel's making love with a prostitute in the family home is represented as a deliberate transgression and an assertion of autonomy. The act is the logical climax of a series of transgressions: drinking, playing loud rock music on his father's stereo, jumping on the furniture, allowing his friends to use the house for sex, and driving his father's Porsche without his permission. The scene relies on the myth of doing it "the first time": the act is represented as monumental, amazing, transformative, a transition into manhood. Their sex is portrayed wordlessly, in a stylized, dreamlike manner. It is glamorous and erotic, yet punctuated with ironic shots redolent with symbolism: baby pictures, and, to close the scene, the American flag on late-night TV. The pan across Joel's baby and boyhood pictures reinforces the notion of his passage into adulthood. The shot of the flag raising on TV suggests the passage of time--they have been doing it all night long--but also symbolizes both erection and patriotism, as if his loss of virginity has suddenly granted him both manhood and citizenship. Joel and Lana make love all over the downstairs, which seems more daring than using the more private upstairs bedrooms. Joel is deliberately violating taboos and desecrating the house; by extension, he is attacking his parents. Never in the movie do we witness love-making in a bedroom --it is always in the public spaces of the house and, later, on a train. If the bedrooms represent the id, then the living room represents the superego.

After he desecrates the house, the next move in Joel's rebellion is to trash his father's car. The family owns two cars, a station wagon and a Porsche, one domestic and the other expensive and sporty, the former associated with his mother and with security and safety, the latter with his father and with wealth, prestige, speed, and risk. Joel is only insured for the station wagon.

The Porsche equals his father's position or the paternal phallus. When Joel ignores his father's restriction and drives the forbidden Porsche, he is usurping his father's position: it's an oedipal move. The accidental dumping of the car in the lake demonstrates his immaturity; he is as yet unable to successfully handle all that power. It is only in dealing with the consequences of the disaster that Joel begins to develop maturity and true autonomy.

Needing to quickly raise thousands of dollars to repair the car before his parents return, Joel panics and turns to Lana, agreeing to her proposition that she and her friends use his house one night for "business." The film encourages us to suspend ethical judgments of Joel's actions. He is presented as driven by circumstances, with no other choice, a naive, innocent high-school boy--not a greedy, conniving pimp. Everything he does is easy to justify or explain: he is only acting to placate his parents. But in trying to conceal the effects of his

rebellion (the damaged car) he allows himself to indulge in a far greater transgression, until things escalate out of his control.

The night of the bordello orgy, in which Joel introduces his friends to Lana's friends, is one of the high points of the film. The family home undergoes an amazing overnight transformation into a cathouse: young men are lining up outside rooms all over the place, spare beds are being rolled back and forth, and even couches commandeered for business. Joel complains, "Some of the girls are wearing my mother's clothing. I just don't want to spend the rest of my life in analysis."

In the midst of this wild orgy, the interviewer from Princeton arrives. It is obvious what is going on--the hookers proposition him--but he maintains his aplomb and proceeds with the interview. Joel, sporting the black Ray-Ban shades that have become part of his pimp uniform, is beyond caring and tells the man, "One thing I've learned: sometimes you just have to say, 'What the fuck.'"

The next morning, however, Joel is not so nonchalant when he discovers that Guido, Lana's "manager," has stolen all the furniture because Joel was hurting his livelihood. In a last-minute maneuver, Joel must surrender the remainder of his illicit earnings to buy back the furniture before his parents return from the airport. The action seems an appropriate punishment for his misconduct; moreover, Joel is now instantly transformed from desecrator to defender of his home.

The last item returned is his mother's precious crystal egg, which they fling at him; Joel sprints to catch it before it falls and shatters. He has not only degraded her house, her furniture, her bedroom, and her clothing but also risked the prized Steuben egg, which symbolizes her (cold) personality and her femininity. Nevertheless, once again, Joel is not seen as risking the egg but as protecting it. Earlier, Lana had maintained power over Joel by holding the egg hostage. When his parents return, they notice nothing amiss--except that his mother chides him because there is a crack in her egg. His father says, "This is so damned irresponsible. I am very disappointed in you." We recognize the irony: an almost invisible crack in the egg is the least of his misdeeds.

But when word soon arrives that Joel has been accepted to Princeton, even his terrible crime of cracking the egg is forgiven. Now he won't have to attend the local University of Illinois, which the family associates with failure.

Although we are meant to admire Joel, he is never a real rebel: just compare the ending of this film with the ending of *The Graduate* (1967), the film about adolescent rebellion and rite of passage to which many reviewers compared it. In the sixteen years since young Benjamin Braddock (played by Dustin Hoffman) defied Mr. and Mrs. Robinson, times had changed: Benjamin escapes from corruption but Joel escapes *into* corruption. Compared to Benjamin, Joel is too anxious to cover his tracks when he breaks the rules and too eager to succeed on the cynical, materialistic terms of his parents and his friends. We are supposed to despise them and admire him, but it is merely a

difference of lifestyle--uptight yuppie versus swinging yuppie--not of values. The film unleashes the forces of the id to support the superego. In *Risky Business*, unlike *The Graduate*, the parental and societal superego triumphs.

### **3. *Home Alone*: The Child as Criminal Condensation**

Kevin in *Home Alone* begins the film as anxious and alienated as Joel. And, like Joel, he too rebels and turns into a criminal, only to be returned at the end to the bosom of his family.

The opening shot of *Home Alone* is of a large, suburban mansion (as in *Risky Business*, the movie is set in an expensive suburb near Chicago). There is snow on the ground, the trees and bushes are glittering with lights, and every room of the house is lit. We hear the voices of the people inside, everyone talking at once. The image evokes Christmastime, family warmth and togetherness. We move into the front hallway of the house, which is flooded with relatives busily preparing for a flight to Paris the next day. But we don't see much warmth or closeness in this family: tense, hyperactive, preoccupied individuals scurry up and down the stairs. The only touching we see is aggressive: the parents grab Kevin to make him obey and Kevin fights with his brother.

As nerves fray in this crowded house at holidaytime, Kevin believes that all the hostility is being dumped on him. He gets pushed far down the pecking order by the appearance of all his cousins; he feels as if his home has been invaded. He's not allowed to watch a movie with the big kids, he can't get his parents' attention, no one will help him pack his bag, his older siblings and cousins dismiss him as an irritating, helpless little pest, and he is told he will have to share a bed with a bedwetting younger cousin. He has a tantrum, yelling, "This house is so full of people. When I grow up, I'm living alone!" They ignore him.

Kevin's frustrations climax when he gets no dinner because his older brother Buzz, a loutish teen who despises Kevin, has finished the only plain cheese pizza. Mocked by Buzz, Kevin attacks him physically, setting off a chain of chaos in the kitchen. Then there is silence as everyone glares at Kevin until they all begin denouncing the pariah. His mother sends him to bed early, without his supper; he is left alone in the attic. Feeling that he is being treated like an outcast or criminal within his own home, Kevin announces to his mother, "I don't want any family! Families suck!" And he wishes that they might all disappear forever.

Our opinion of his behavior in the opening sequence is mixed: although we can sympathize with Kevin's feeling of being neglected, frustrated, harassed, unloved, and cruelly mistreated, we can also sympathize with his parents' exasperation at having to cope with his misbehavior in a tense, crowded household during a busy holiday season. The audience is supposed to like Kevin and view him as a comic hero but also to like his parents, who

are decent if ineffectual; we desire and expect that Kevin will mend his ways, learn the importance of family, and be reconciled with them at the end. Later, when he misses his family, he regrets that he had behaved so badly at Christmastime, when children are traditionally supposed to be extra good: "I've been kind of a pain."

In truth, Kevin is the sort of difficult child parents dislike dealing with: demanding, self-centered, and defiant. He's a manipulator, who, when he can't get what he wants from his mother, leaps on her bed. Asked to leave, he declares, "Hang up the phone and make me, why don't you?" If he can't get attention, he will provoke it, but he doesn't like the negative repercussions when he is provocative. He proclaims his helplessness, refusing to pack his suitcase and demanding that someone do it for him, but he doesn't like it when he is labeled incompetent. He is highly verbal and expressive; he throws tantrums and stages scenes. His relatives may call him an idiot and a little jerk, but he is arrogant and also calls his uncle a jerk and his mother a dummy (in fact, except for Kevin's parents, the entire McCallister clan is given to insults and namecalling). Finally, Kevin acts out his rage when he assaults Buzz. Granted, this is the climax of a day full of frustration, and Kevin was provoked by his brother, but the incident shows his impulsiveness and his style of aggression. Kevin rages against his family because of what he perceives as their unfairness, but when he acts out that anger, he is punished.

We sympathize with Kevin because he is a little boy and because his misbehavior is a reaction to and defense against his systematic ostracism within his family. His marginalization is represented by his exile to the attic (a place to store discards) and his accidental exclusion from the Paris trip. His being left behind is presented as a comic oversight; actually, it represents a serious flaw in the family structure. No one notices Kevin's missing until the plane has been aloft a while; the McCallisters really wanted to ditch him. Like Joel, Kevin is marginalized, the victim of a major imbalance within the family.

In this opening sequence, Kevin is linked with two angry, alienated men, both of them criminals without families. The first is the burglar Harry, who has come to the house disguised as a policeman, intending to case the joint for holiday pickings. Harry, who will later become Kevin's chief antagonist, winks at the boy with his gold tooth, as if establishing a bond between them. The second is "Old Man Marley," a white-bearded neighbor who lives alone and keeps to himself. The boys watch from a bedroom window as old Marley (the name is straight out of Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*) shovels snow off his walk. They are horrified and fascinated, believing wild rumors that he is "the South Bend Shovel Slayer" who "murdered his whole family and half the people on the block with a snow shovel." Later, Kevin will befriend this hermit, finding in him a kindred soul: both quarreled with their families and wished them away, paying the price in loneliness. In a sentimental twist, Kevin helps the old man reconcile with his family at Christmastime, and Marley helps Kevin by using his shovel, not to murder a family, but to clobber the criminals.

One can regard Harry and Marley as projections of Kevin's own anger against his family, and of his alienation and feelings of criminality. In addition, they stand for the split aspects of the father--Harry the bad parent and Marley the good--in this cinematic fairy tale. We see that things are not what they appear: Harry the cop is actually Harry the burglar and Marley the killer is actually Marley the protector of children. Kevin too is not what he first appears to be: this pesky little brat is later revealed to have all the Boy Scout virtues. He longs to be accepted in the family and to be given a chance to prove his competence.

Nevertheless, Kevin shows a lot of his typical aggression when he is home alone, although it is funnier when directed against safe targets--an annoying pizza delivery boy, a pair of bumbling burglars--rather than against his own family. In fact, this is an odd sort of holiday film: in allowing us to identify with a child, the story combines Christmas sentiment with incredible violence in the comic but cruel mayhem Kevin inflicts on the burglars. Admittedly, great filmic clowns such as Chaplin blend sentiment with slapstick, but the mix in *Home Alone* strikes us as incongruous because the sadism of the violence seems disproportionate. But evidently millions of viewers had no problem going from laughing as Kevin fries burglars with a blowtorch to crying as Kevin is reunited with his mother and the rest of his family on Christmas day. The burglars are comic villains, kid haters, stupid and mean, and the horrific violence is ludicrous cartoon violence, like the little, clever Tweety bird foiling big, stupid Sylvester the cat, or the Roadrunner outwitting Wile E. Coyote. Nevertheless, there is something disturbing and dehumanizing in seeing cartoon violence carried out against human actors. One reviewer complained that this scene resembled "*Straw Dogs* redone by The Three Stooges" (Rainer). The sequel was even more violent.

The audience's enjoyment of the sadistic aggression in the film--both the burglars' aggression and Kevin's--implies that, like *Risky Business*, *Home Alone* succeeds because it provides a release for the id. The subversion of the superego begins in the opening scene, in which a burglar posing as a policeman stands in the entrance hallway of the house. The burglars Harry and Marvin are figures of calculating, illegitimate desires and pure id aggression. They are self-centered and have boundless desires: they want everything for themselves, sole possession of the house, and they will stop at nothing to get it. Says Harry, "Ever since I laid eyes on that house, I wanted it." But Kevin too wants the house exclusively to himself and will stop at nothing; in that respect, he is just like the crooks. There is both an identification and a competition between Kevin and these housebreakers. Just as, in *Risky Business*, Joel identifies with and competes with Guido the pimp, and yet is still perceived by the audience as a well-meaning kid doing the best that he can, so in *Home Alone*, Kevin is in his own way as crooked as the burglars, but we are meant to see him as wearing a halo.

The similarity between Kevin and the criminals is underscored by his ransacking the house, engaging in forbidden activities (looking at Playboy, enjoying a violent gangster movie), and stealing his brother's money. After he is chased by a policeman for inadvertently shoplifting a toothbrush (frightened by old man Marley, he fled the store), he says to himself, "I'm a criminal." (This accounts for his never phoning the police for help.) The similarity between the boy and the crooks is further enhanced by the burglars' childish banter: they constantly bicker and insult each other, just like the McCallister kids. Marvin, Harry's inept sidekick, is particularly stupid and infantile. He steals toys and likes to leave the sink clogged and the water running in the homes they break into. That's the team's calling card, he announces proudly: "We're the wet bandits." Marvin resembles Kevin's bedwetting little cousin.

In other words, this pair of burglars are overdetermined figures who symbolize Kevin's criminality, the bad father, and his obnoxious siblings and cousins as well, fighting him for possession of the house and position within the family. They invade the house, just as his relatives did; in fighting them off, Kevin is fighting his family as well. Kevin's glee in punishing the burglars lies in the fact that he is taking revenge against the adult world and against his family, but doing it all in the name of the home. Before the final battle begins, he says to himself, "This is my house. I have to defend it." To put it another way, both Kevin and the audience can enjoy the ensuing violence because the aggression of the id is released in the name of the superego.

#### **4. *Risky Business* and *Home Alone* as 1980s Films**

The 1980s in America were a time when the rich got richer and the poor got poorer. Both politically and culturally, *Risky Business* and *Home Alone* are representative of the Reagan-Bush era (the former film appeared during Reagan's first term and the latter during Bush's term in office), when rich, ruling-class Americans imagined themselves to be the lords of the earth: "Masters of the Universe," as Sherman McCoy, the protagonist of Tom Wolfe's 1987 novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, puts it. Like Sherman, Joel and Kevin are rich kids thumbing their noses at the world; unlike Sherman, they triumph. Both films concern unusually affluent families living in large, expensive homes in the suburbs of Chicago. Both the Goodsens in *Risky Business* and the McCallisters in *Home Alone* own houses loaded with electronic gadgets, art objects, and two cars in the garage, and take expensive vacations. Yet these professional families living in million-dollar mansions are presented as if they were typical middle-class Americans. (The same strategy was used in presenting the wealthy black family the Huxtables on the *Bill Cosby Show*, the top-rated television sitcom for most of the 1980s.) Neither family faces serious hardships or financial difficulties (they can buy their way out of most problems), merely temporary comic confusion.

By presenting rich white families as if they were average Americans, *Risky Business* and *Home Alone* disguise some real problems of Americans in the 1980s. The evasion also extends to the plot of both pictures: *Risky Business* makes light of a teenager's involvement with a teen prostitute, whereas the real fears of Americans during the decade involved rising incidents of child sexual abuse, teenage pregnancy, and venereal disease; *Home Alone* creates comedy out of a youngster accidentally left at home while his well-to-do family vacations in Paris, whereas the more pressing concerns in the 1980s U.S. were with expensive and inadequate child care, the neglected, latchkey child, or the homeless child.

The 1980s was also a period of increasing concern about the future: for the first time since WW II, the American middle class feared downward mobility, and began to worry that their children might do worse than they had (Barbara Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling*). This fear is expressed in such films as *Risky Business* and *Back to the Future* (1985). Seventeen-year-old Joel says, "I don't want to make a mistake, jeopardize my future," and seventeen-year-old Marty McFly in *Back to the Future* sees his middle-class family sliding into downward mobility and worries, "What if I've got no future?" Both films arouse and then overcome that anxiety about the future: Joel gets into Princeton, and Marty, through time travel, assures a better (i.e., yuppie) future for himself and his family.

Taking the SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test) has become a crucial rite of passage for contemporary high school students, determining whether they will be admitted into the college of their choice or into any college at all. The importance attached to this gatekeeping ritual, especially in a time of economic downturn and downward mobility, is reflected by the anxiety involving standardized test results that teenagers show in late 1980s and early 1990s films such as *Stand and Deliver* (1988), *Boyz N the Hood* (1991), the made-for-television movie *How I Got into College* (1989), and *Risky Business*.

In both *Risky Business* and *Home Alone*, a role reversal takes place, and children rule. The triumph of the wise child or of a conspiracy of children against adults forms the basis of the plot of many popular films of the 1980s, beginning with *E.T.* (1982). John Hughes succeeded with this formula in such films as *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986), about a rich teenager who plays hooky and outwits all the grownups (a favorite film of Dan Quayle), and, of course, *Home Alone*. The success of Hughes' formula prompted imitations, such as the lame comedy, *Don't Tell Mom the Babysitter's Dead* (1991).

*Home Alone* is one of many comedies, mostly about kids and teenagers, cranked out in the 1980s by the enormously prolific writer-director-producer Hughes. Other popular successes in his oeuvre include *Sixteen Candles* (1984), *The Breakfast Club* (1985), *Ferris Bueller*, *Planes, Trains, and Automobiles* (1987), and *Uncle Buck* (1989). Hughes is a deft writer who has evolved a comfortable formula that usually succeeds with young audiences and families: he puts recognizable, sympathetic protagonists--often anguished kids

and teenagers from dysfunctional families--into comic, frequently farcical situations, and then finishes off with a happy, sentimental ending and a pat moral. He writes feature-length sitcoms. One reviewer says of Hughes, "Part of his secret may be that he is a feel-good fantasist who nevertheless acknowledges that even the most affluent household often resembles a war zone" (Ansen). Hughes at his best is a realist capable of penetrating social commentary, as in *The Breakfast Club*, but more often he takes the low road, offering slapstick and sentiment--a mix guaranteed to entertain everyone and offend no one.

*Home Alone*, written and produced by Hughes but directed by Chris Columbus, was an unexpected breakaway hit, perhaps because it perfected the formula, had a Christmas holiday tie-in, and offered the charming child actor Macauley Culkin in his first starring role. Critics agreed that the movie "keys into children's fears and fantasies on a basic level" (Moore) and that Kevin is a quintessential 1980s youngster, "Media Kid, a sort of boundlessly resourceful pre-teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle" (Denby). The film was one of the biggest moneymakers in two decades, after *Star Wars* (1977) and *E.T.*, two other movies for the child and family audience.

*Home Alone* is also related to the spate of age-reversal comedies of the late 1980s and early 1990s, in which an adult and a child switch bodies (*Like Father, Like Son* [1987], *Vice Versa* [1988], *18 Again* [1988], *Dream a Little Dream* [1989]), a boy turns overnight into a full-grown man (*Big* [1988]), or a middle-aged man rediscovers his "inner child" (*Hook* [1991]). This cycle of films, all released within a four-year period, might be seen as expressions of the era's desire to escape back into the innocence of childhood and to remain forever young, as the perpetually boyish, grinning Reagan seemed to promise. This is the period of the child-man and of the "Peter Pan syndrome." The titles of two other popular films of the period perhaps tell part of the story: *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids* (1989) and *Honey, I Blew Up the Kid* (1992). Even as the government showed a shrinking concern for the real needs of children, Americans expressed increasing concern with the needs of their "inner child," which blew up like the gigantic infant in the film.

It was also the period in which Macauley Culkin of *Home Alone* became the most popular child star since Shirley Temple in the 1930s. For all their appearance of affluence, the 1980s might have a lot in common with the Depression years of the 1930s.

## **5. Conclusion: Home and the Superego in Reagan-Bush America**

In a review of *Risky Business*, David Denby wrote,

*The Hollywood of 1983 is overflowing with liberal filmmakers trying to adapt themselves to a conservative period in American life. Shuffling ideologies and values like second-rate cardsharps, these directors are turning out movies that are confused--even schizoid.*

Denby found *Risky Business* to be one of this new breed of 1980s Hollywood pictures, "so confused, so strange, and so openly corrupt" (Denby 62).

*Risky Business* lightly satirizes but also seems to epitomize 1980s American values concerning home, family, sex, and business, especially the Reagan-era motto that "Greed is good." One reviewer wrote, "critics who have called *Risky Business* this generation's version of *The Graduate* apparently think it skewers the relationship between capitalism and sex. It doesn't. Like the exploitation genre it tries to rise above, *Risky Business* ultimately endorses its purported target" (Asahina). As Denby notes, "Thus, the hero becomes a man and a successful businessman at the same time; he surmounts his sex and career anxieties by turning himself into a pimp. This is presented, without irony or a hint of criticism, as a triumph of free enterprise" (Denby 62).

Andrew Sarris also finds *Risky Business* corrupt, if charming, a movie whose message reduces to: "Long live wealth, success, status, and the best lay that money can buy" (Sarris).

Among the most representative Americans of the 1980s were Donald Trump and Madonna, representing, respectively, the art of the deal and sex as commerce. In *Risky Business*, Joel, an aspiring high school Trump, meets his Madonna in the form of Lana, a teenage prostitute. Joel and Lana become both sexual and business partners as they discover their shared lust for commerce. *Risky Business* substitutes irony and cynicism for social criticism and ends by acquiescing to and propping up a corrupt system. What takes place in the film is not a real rebellion but a kind of fake "Reagan Revolution," a rebellion in the name of a reactionary status quo.

One reviewer wrote, "The fabulously successful *Home Alone* combines sadism, sentimentality, and kiddie worship with almost frightening efficiency" (Denby 108). That could perhaps stand as well as an apt description of the Reagan-Bush regime, with its wars in Grenada, Panama, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Lebanon, Libya, and Iraq, and its backlash at home against women, minorities, homosexuals, and the poor; its sentimentality about "Morning in America" and "A Thousand Points of Light"; and its dumbing down of the American public.

The superego is not a monolith that remains constant over time; rather, it changes with the changing structure of our institutions. It is possible to consider a political leader as a kind of externalized superego for the society. Erik Erikson discusses the interplay between leaders and followers and suggests that a leader is "prototypical for his time" and also fulfills "specific needs in the lives of those who followed him" (*Dimensions* 14).

The societal superego represented in both these films is the punitive, corrupt, and reactionary one of the Reagan-Bush regime. This regime, while it publicly represented itself as a law-and-order administration, was among the most lawless in American history. In a similar fashion, *Risky Business* and *Home Alone* feature a teenage pimp and an unsupervised eight-year-old as defenders of the home. Americans have always imagined themselves as innocent children; Reagan played into this ingenuousness and American belief in their innate virtue. Such beliefs seem to guarantee that Americans not only can do no wrong but also are free to punish wrongdoers. Thus *Home Alone* shows a child scourging criminals the same year that Bush savagely punished the Iraqis.

Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, the issue of "family values" was hotly contested in the political, cultural and social scientific arenas. Such hypothetical values are a favorite product of the superego as conceptualized in these decades.

According to Christopher Lasch in *The Minimal Self*, in American society in the 1980s, the old political divisions of left and right, liberal and conservative had broken down and no longer accurately described American ideological divisions. Lasch proposed a redefinition of the American political spectrum into three parties, along psychological lines: "the party of the ego," representing liberal rationalism; "the party of the superego," incorporating religious fundamentalism and the Republican right wing; and, "the party of narcissism," including countercultural, new age, gay and lesbian, yuppie, and feminist values (Lasch 197-208). *Risky Business* and *Home Alone*, then, could be said to represent "the party of the superego" crossed with "the party of narcissism." These two movies are a marvelous portrayal of the internal contradictions of the discourse on values in 1980s American society. In these films, the superego, the value of the home --in other words, "family values"--are reaffirmed only through their own destruction. Both children desecrate their homes in order to preserve them.

These are quintessential Reagan-Bush era films, reproducing the split structure of the societal superego of the period. The Reagan and Bush administrations presented themselves as staunch defenders of home and hearth, law and order, invoking family values while devastating millions of American families through neglect of the needs of women, children, minorities, and the poor. It is not by chance that these years were marked by the rising numbers of the homeless, who became as much a staple in American cities as in Third World metropolises. Similarly, the young haves in *Risky Business* and *Home Alone* defend their homes by trashing them. The superego in America in the 1980s, as these movies show, was fundamentally divided against itself: confused, even schizoid.

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