1990, Winter holidays, Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. It was our goal to always get out of town during what is commonly known as Christmastime. Neither Joe nor I relished the annoying pleasantries, decorations, insane shopping, and Christianity of the holiday period. Each year we would come up with another way to entertain four children and ourselves, by avoiding the tripe that the holiday brought. In Myrtle Beach, we found long beaches for the kids to run and walk on, and, well, cold weather. So we decided to go to 3 movies a day and see everything the theaters had to offer. After boring our kids with grownup stuff, they convinced us we had to see Home Alone. We snuck in two cans of beer, and settled in with the progeny to watch a dreaded kid flick. The film was well produced, directed, and entertaining. But every few minutes, Joe and I would turn to one another and comment, or even just raise our eyebrows. We realized we had something. What was it with this mother hating, smartass filmmaker, who had the audacity to even sneak in an anti-Semitic scene? What was it with this over-stimulated blond brat, and the construct of the American family as kid-hating, kid fearing? On the drive home, we came up with Kinderculture. Americans did hate their kids, mothers were seen as failures, and corporate culture had redefined childhood. Joe would spend many hours watching the Home Alone and Parenthood films, and his work sophisticated the newly developed area of cultural studies and childhood. SS

JOE L. KINCHELOE

6. THE NEW CHILDHOOD

Home Alone as a Way of Life

Home Alone (1990) and Home Alone 2: Lost in New York (1992) revolve around Kevin McAllister’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 begin to emerge. In this way Home Alone 1 and 2 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 last couple of 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

Childrearing is a victim of the late twentieth century. With divorces and 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 last 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 live 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, 1991). Increasingly left to fend for themselves, 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 the American standard of living peaked in 1973 creating a subsequent declining economic climate that demanded mothers work. While 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, while witnessing the birth and growth of a family value movement, also 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 had been institutionalized in the 1980s 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 particularly 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 into French on TV. This positioning of movie within a movie confronts viewers with the distance between the America of Jimmy Stewart’s George Bailey and Macaulay Culkin’s Kevin McAllister. Kevin has no community, no neighbors.