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2 Macaulay Culkin and child stardom in the 1990s

3 Holly Chard

4 Macaulay Culkin was one of the most famous and highly paid child stars in the
5 history of Hollywood cinema. He secured global fame through the international
6 success of *Home Alone* (Columbus 1990), one of the highest-grossing comedies of all
7 time. A major beneficiary of the US film industry's increased investment in family
8 entertainment during the early 1990s, he could command a salary of \$5.8 million per
9 movie and attracted extensive attention from the American press. Culkin built his
10 career and star brand on an image that combined modern precocity with
11 conventionally cute looks. Much previous scholarship on child stars has focused
12 primarily on the cultural dimensions of child stardom or analysis of children's
13 performances on-screen. Hollywood stardom is not simply a cultural phenomenon,
14 however. It is inextricably bound to the commerce of cinema. This chapter explores
15 how Culkin's career was contingent on wider trends in the American media industries
16 during the early 1990s, reflecting on how his fame and star image were used to sell
17 films and a range of other products. Using a historical methodology, this chapter
18 explores interactions between commercial and cultural facets of Culkin's stardom. An
19 extensive survey of primary materials, from the period 1990-1995, including

1 newspapers, magazines and film industry trade journals, forms the basis for this
2 evaluation of the child star's career.

3 Star images, as Richard Dyer has persuasively argued, can resolve or expose
4 ideological contradictions (1979, 1986). The structured polysemy (Dyer 1979^{BIB-010},
5 p. 3) of Culkin's star image was constructed through, and sustained by, various media
6 texts. Through analysis of media commentary on Culkin's attempts to move away
7 from his *Home Alone* image, this chapter reflects on the conflicts that arise from
8 competing claims over a child star's image. Child stars, observes Jane O'Connor, are
9 often called upon to provide an idealised image of childhood, which can be based on
10 an adult's ideal of what children should be like or a child's ideal of what they aspire
11 to be like (2008, p. 64). These notions of childhood are culturally constructed and
12 therefore bound to particular historical contexts. As social constructions of childhood
13 have shifted over time, notes O'Connor, so have the requirements of child stars
14 (2011, p. 285). Examining responses to Culkin's stardom in newspapers and
15 magazines, this chapter considers the tensions that can be created when trying to cater
16 for diverse, sometimes conflicting, visions of childhood.

17 Culkin's star image: the cute and the cool

18 Macaulay Culkin's rise to stardom coincided with Hollywood's renewed efforts to
19 court a family audience. During the early 1990s, as Robert C. Allen observes, a range

1 of cultural and economic factors fuelled the film and media industries' increased
2 investment in movies and television shows aimed at a cross-generational audience.
3 Family-oriented films were ideally suited to take advantage of the maturing home
4 video market in the United States and Europe, particularly as the market shifted
5 towards a sell-through model (Allen 1999^{BIB-001}, pp. 112-13). The extensive and
6 highly lucrative sell-through campaigns for movies such as Disney's *The Little*
7 *Mermaid* (Clements and Musker 1989) and 20th Century Fox's *Home Alone*
8 demonstrated the substantial profit margins that successful family movies could
9 generate on video. Family films also helped Hollywood to counter claims, made by
10 conservative and Christian groups, that the film industry was not 'family friendly'
11 (Allen 1999^{BIB-001}, p. 115). In addition to being ideally positioned to take advantage of
12 increased expenditure on family and child-oriented films, Culkin's association with
13 the genre helped him to develop a clearly defined 'brand'. As McDonald notes,
14 'generic conventions contribute to the formation of strongly identifiable and saleable
15 identities' for Hollywood stars (2013, p. 31).

16 Journalists and film industry personnel often referred to Culkin's 'natural'
17 acting talent (Gliatto 1990^{BIB-019}, p. 130) and his ability to deliver 'the real thing'
18 (Archerd 1993^{BIB-003}). This focus on the boy's innate ability was consistent with a
19 cultural tendency to judge child actors' performances on their authenticity and

1 innocence, rather than in terms of the level of craft and expertise involved (Lury
2 2010^{BIB-033}, p. 156). It was little coincidence that Culkin's blond hair, blue eyes, pale
3 skin, rosy cheeks and pouty lips conformed to longstanding (white American) ideals
4 of innocence and adorableness. This culturally enshrined ideal was encapsulated in
5 many of the images of the child that circulated during the early part of his career. In
6 Culkin's first film, the Burt Lancaster vehicle *Rocket Gibraltar* (Petrie 1988),
7 numerous shots of the boy's face are lit and framed to accentuate his distinctive facial
8 features. This focus on the child prompted *People* magazine's reviewer to note that
9 the director Daniel Petrie seems unable to keep the camera off Culkin (Travers
10 1988^{BIB-054}, p. 27). In the 1989 family comedy *Uncle Buck* (John Hughes 1989),
11 Culkin's cuteness was offset by precocity and an ability to comically undermine
12 adults through his observations, for instance in the rapid-fire dialogue his character,
13 Miles, exchanges with his uncle (played by John Candy). It was this brand of angelic
14 brattiness, as *New York* magazine's Stephen J. Dubner described it, that helped
15 Culkin secure the lead in *Home Alone* (1993^{BIB-009}, p. 56).

16 The character of Kevin McCallister in *Home Alone* combined a pre-teen
17 child's emotional vulnerability and naivety with resourcefulness and cunning. The
18 image of contemporary childhood that Culkin embodied in the movie was consistent
19 with a wider cultural trend, observed by Gary Cross, whereby the cute child is

1 naturally a little naughty but always nice, radiating not a naive look of youthful
2 beauty but energy, spunk and friskiness (2004, p. 44). The cute child's inherent
3 goodness and adorable good looks allow for the pushing of the boundaries of
4 acceptable behaviour. This interplay between what Cross terms 'the cute and the cool'
5 (ibid.) was not only deployed widely in Culkin's film roles during the early 1990s, it
6 also formed the foundation of his star image, underpinning representations of the boy
7 outside of his movies. Moreover, numerous companies attempted to harness this
8 modern image of childhood for commercial reasons. Of course, as McDonald
9 suggests, 'Hollywood stardom cannot simply be regarded as the major studios foisting
10 representations on a compliant public'; rather, 'audiences play their part in forming
11 this market of identities' (2013, p. 39). By purchasing cinema tickets, videos and
12 various consumer products, audiences anointed Macaulay Culkin 'America's child
13 star' (Gliatto 1990^{BIB-019}, p. 130).

14 Wider commercial uses of Culkin's image

15 During the early 1990s, tie-in deals with a range of corporations, particularly
16 manufacturers of toys and food, became a significant revenue stream and a source of
17 additional publicity for the major Hollywood studios. The highly orchestrated
18 merchandising and tie-in campaign for *Home Alone 2* (Columbus, 1992)
19 demonstrated the increasingly sophisticated methods that companies were using to

1 target a pre-teen demographic. The movie itself contained a number of prominent
2 product placements, including Coca-Cola and American Airlines. The most
3 controversial aspect of *Home Alone 2*'s product placement strategy, however, was the
4 way in which toys were incorporated into the narrative of the film. In a large number
5 of scenes, Kevin/Culkin is shown using a Talkboy cassette recorder. Not only did
6 such product placements capitalise on children's familiarity with Culkin as a
7 celebrity, they also built on the affective relationship that children had with *Home*
8 *Alone*'s Kevin McCallister, through the deployment of what Gary Cross calls 'play
9 narratives' (1997^{BIB-007}, p. 107). While he may not have been fully aware of his
10 commercial role, Culkin was nonetheless implicated in the strategy of 'enticing 6-
11 year-olds to covet costly toys by putting the eye-catching devices in the hands of film
12 heroes' (Horovitz 1992^{BIB-025}). Although Culkin's parents attempted to limit the ways
13 in which their son's image could be used (Busch 1992^{BIB-005}), companies produced
14 around eighty *Home Alone 2* products, including toys, books, video-games and
15 apparel, many of which featured the boy's face. While these tie-ins were financially
16 profitable for the Culkin family (Evans 1992^{BIB-015}, p. 50), the circulation of the
17 Macaulay Culkin image via the film's promotional campaign and merchandise lines
18 reinforced the connection between his star image and his *Home Alone* character.

1 During the early Nineties, observed *The New York Times*, brands were
2 showing renewed interest in salvaging star power as a marketing tool (Elliott 1992,
3 p. D5). With marketing strategies focused on adding values to brands, in a bid to
4 influence consumers' feelings, celebrity endorsements offered a potentially efficient
5 way of transferring additional meanings to a product. Although advertising of this
6 kind had increased during the 1980s, partly due to deregulation of the television
7 industry, the use of celebrity endorsements to sell products to children came under
8 considerable scrutiny in the early Nineties. As a major celebrity with a young fan
9 base, Culkin was an ideal spokesman, and several major brands, including Pepsi and
10 Reebok, approached his managers with endorsement deals (Busch 1992^{BIB-005}). In
11 1992, Culkin signed a deal to endorse Sprite soda, which was reportedly worth at least
12 \$2 million (Rosato 1992^{BIB-045}, p. 1B). In the wake of the deal, Culkin allegedly stated
13 of Sprite: "I'm not crazy about the stuff. But money is money" (*Newsweek* 1992^{BIB-038},
14 p. 23). The American press seized on this comment as an example of the child star's
15 preoccupation with money and his growing cynicism. Based on the campaign that
16 followed, Coca-Cola seemed aware of the need to mitigate the negative press
17 coverage of the deal and criticisms of their use of Culkin's fame to sell sugary drinks
18 to children.

1 Culkin's Sprite television commercial appears to have been devised to deflect
2 criticism, by playing with notions of authenticity and audience knowingness. The
3 advertisement shows Macaulay Culkin on a soundstage telling a girl that he is an
4 actor. He then knocks down a set and points out that her parents are extras. After
5 offering her a Sprite he explains: 'It's all an illusion. The only thing that isn't fake is
6 this and us,' whereupon the girl becomes a cardboard cutout. The Sprite commercial's
7 ironic stance towards authenticity and overt deconstruction of its own premise, argues
8 Carolyn Hicks, reflects a more general trend towards anti-advertising (1996, pp. 79-
9 82). Through acknowledgement of the artifice of Macaulay Culkin one of the
10 presumed foundations of celebrity endorsement, credibility (McCracken 2005^{BIB-035},
11 pp. 98-9), is seemingly undermined. By openly acknowledging their efforts to
12 manipulate consumers into buying their product, asserts Hicks, Coca-Cola sought to
13 appeal to media-savvy and cynical members of Generation X (1996). However,
14 given Culkin's central role and the commercial's ties to *Home Alone 2*, teenagers and
15 young adults were clearly not the primary target audience of the campaign. When
16 viewed in this light, the Sprite commercial appears to be a playful attempt by Coca-
17 Cola to argue that pre-teen children are also savvy enough to see through the artifice
18 of advertising, television and movies. The approach may not have been sufficient to
19 allay many parents' and media commentators' ethical concerns about Sprite's efforts

1 to exploit Culkin's status as a pre-teen role model. Rather, the promotional strategy
2 demonstrated the lengths that corporations would go to in order to target young
3 consumers.

4 The limitations of Culkin's star image

5 Although the strength of Culkin's identification with his *Home Alone* persona and the
6 family film was commercially advantageous, in the case of *My Girl* (Zieff 1991) and
7 *The Good Son* (Ruben 1993) his presence in marketing materials and on-screen had
8 significant consequences for the movies' reception. Following the success of *Home*
9 *Alone*, studios were keen to capitalise on Culkin's popularity with audiences and the
10 publicity that this celebrity status garnered. On this basis, Columbia agreed to pay \$1
11 million for the boy's participation in *My Girl*. Seeking to justify this substantial
12 expense, the producer of *My Girl*, David Friendly, focused on the child's apparent
13 uniqueness. 'A Macaulay Culkin doesn't come along very often,' Friendly asserted. 'I
14 think it would be a mistake to think there are a lot of 10-year-olds who can do what he
15 does' (Gliatto 1990^{BIB-019}, p. 130). After making this investment in the child star,
16 Friendly and Columbia Pictures clearly felt under pressure to capitalise on the
17 audience's recognition of Culkin and his popularity with family audiences. Rather
18 than focusing on the film's adult stars Dan Aykroyd and Jamie Lee Curtis, *My Girl's*
19 poster instead showed Anna Chlumsky and Macaulay Culkin giggling cutely for the

1 camera. Similarly, the trailer emphasised the comedy within the film and the
2 relationship between the two children. Audiences' expectations were undoubtedly
3 shaped by this use of Culkin's image in publicity materials. Stars, as John Ellis notes,
4 'provide a foreknowledge of the fiction' (1982, p. 91). Thus, the studio's
5 foregrounding of Culkin and selective representation of *My Girl* suggested that the
6 movie would be a family-friendly comedy, consistent with his previous work.

7 The reception of *My Girl* demonstrated the risks of building an advertising
8 campaign around a child star whose primary fan base consists of pre-teens. Although
9 publicity materials sold *My Girl* as a light-hearted family film, the movie itself was
10 thematically mature and more suitable for older children. One scene in particular,
11 which depicted Macaulay Culkin's character lying dead in an open casket after being
12 killed by a swarm of bees, became a focal point for criticisms of the movie. Parents
13 and critics accused Columbia of misleading audiences and exposing young children to
14 potentially distressing content (James 1991^{BIB-026}, pp. H11-12). Reacting to criticisms
15 of their commercial strategy, the studio announced that child psychologists and
16 teachers had given the movie positive reviews (James 1991^{BIB-026}, p. H12). Acting as
17 an unofficial spokesman for 'the attitudes of savvy 90s children', suggested *The New*
18 *York Times*' Caryn James, Culkin stated that anyone upset by his character's death
19 'ought to know it's a movie' (James 1991^{BIB-026}, p. H11). The controversy

1 surrounding *My Girl* formed part of a wider debate concerning what was appropriate
2 subject matter for a family film and whether it was appropriate for studios to build
3 children's awareness of more mature movies through the use of a child star.

4 A slightly different set of concerns underpinned press coverage of Culkin's
5 involvement in *The Good Son*, an R-rated thriller. The role of 'bad seed' Henry was
6 what Richard Dyer terms a 'problematic fit' (1979^{BIB-010}, pp. 146-9) for Culkin's star
7 image. A number of senior studio personnel, including *The Good Son*'s original
8 producer Lawrence Mark, allegedly objected to the boy's casting in the central role
9 because they felt his *Home Alone* persona would make it difficult for audiences to
10 accept him in the role of a sociopathic child (Eller 1992^{BIB-012}, p. 1). Similarly,
11 *Variety*'s reviewer predicted 'complaints about casting [a] childhood icon as the
12 embodiment of evil' (Lowry 1993^{BIB-032}). Anticipating criticisms of the use of
13 Culkin's image in the advertising campaign for *The Good Son*, executive vice
14 president of 20th Century Fox, Tom Sherak, explained to *Variety*, 'We do not want
15 this to look like a comedy or family fare' (O'Steen 1993^{BIB-041}, p. 11). The studio
16 made a concerted effort to market the film as a thriller and, consistent with
17 Hollywood's standpoint in this period, argued that parents should pay attention to the
18 R-rating (O'Steen 1993^{BIB-041}, p.11). Culkin's involvement in *The Good Son* was not
19 necessarily detrimental to its commercial prospects, however. At least one report

1 suggested that a large number of parents had agreed to accompany their pre-teen
2 children to the cinema so that they could watch the movie (Smith 1993^{BIB-047}),
3 suggesting that the boy's involvement had widened the film's audience.

4 The reception of *The Good Son* was clearly influenced by what Dyer describes
5 as 'a clash between two complex sign clusters, the star as image and the character as
6 otherwise constructed' (1979, p. 147). Reactions to Culkin's involvement in the
7 movie focused primarily on whether he was an appropriate choice for the role of
8 Henry. In some cases, his lack of suitability for the role was framed merely in terms
9 of his limited ability as a dramatic actor. The *Los Angeles Times*'s Kenneth Turan
10 suggested that, despite Culkin's best efforts, he 'comes off more sullen and pouty than
11 evil' and 'can't overcome the fact that he is simply miscast' (1993). A number of
12 reviewers proposed that Culkin's star image was so firmly established in audience
13 members' minds that it was difficult to disassociate the character of Henry from the
14 child star's *Home Alone* persona. The *Hollywood Reporter*'s David Kronke, for
15 instance, described the film as 'inadvertent camp' and argued that the character of
16 Henry 'pretty much apes Culkin's behaviour in the *Home Alone* films, except in those
17 it was considered cute' (1993). Similarly, *Variety*'s Brian Lowry argued that Culkin's
18 performance relied on 'the same detachment as the *Home Alone* movies' (1993, p.
19 41). Such appraisals hinted at an uncomfortable relationship between the comic,

1 slapstick violence of the *Home Alone* films and the malicious, homicidal actions of
2 Henry in *The Good Son*. They also alluded to a potentially dark side to the character
3 traits that Culkin embodied as Kevin in *Home Alone*. Ultimately, these reviews
4 indicated that Culkin's cuteness, when presented alongside the mixture of comedy and
5 sentiment that characterised movies like *Home Alone*, was key to the popularity of his
6 star image. As a consequence, any attempts to move beyond his established image
7 seemed unlikely to succeed.

8 Suggesting a retreat from more challenging subject matter, all of Culkin's last
9 three film roles as a child star, *Getting Even With Dad* (Deutch 1994), *The*
10 *Pagemaster* (Johnston and Hunt 1994) and *Richie Rich* (Petrie 1994), traded heavily
11 on his *Home Alone* persona. As the *Los Angeles Times*' Lynn Smith bluntly stated,
12 'Anyone who was hoping that by now Macaulay Culkin would have outgrown the
13 *Home Alone* character can forget it' (1994). The centrality of cuteness to Culkin's
14 image and his appeal to audiences became increasingly evident in these films. Despite
15 the studios' attempts to conceal changes to Culkin's physical appearance, by casting
16 tall adults in central roles and strategic use of editing and camera angles, the onset of
17 puberty undermined this fundamental element of his star image and his appeal to
18 audiences. The inclusion of somewhat awkward references to puberty and sex in both
19 *Getting Even with Dad* and *Richie Rich* further demonstrated the filmmakers' struggle

1 to address Culkin's shift from pre-teen to adolescent. *Getting Even With Dad*, *The*
2 *Pagemaster* and *Richie Rich* also struggled to reconcile the growing tensions between
3 Culkin's established on-screen persona and his rapidly changing off-screen image.

4 Construction and destruction of Culkin's star image

5 The extensive coverage of Macaulay Culkin's career in newspapers and glossy
6 magazines during the early 1990s not only helped to sustain the child star's career, but
7 also stimulated sales of publications to a public eager for more details of his off-
8 screen life. In many respects, press coverage of Culkin's life and career conformed to
9 the general image of stardom identified by Richard Dyer, which portrays a version
10 of the American dream, organised around the themes of consumption, success and
11 ordinariness (1979^{BIB-010}, p. 39). Initially, articles and images in a wide range of
12 publications focused on the message that Culkin was a normal child, who lived an
13 ordinary life, despite the fact that he had been a professional actor since an early age.
14 Stories of Culkin's ascent to fame and fortune were consistent with established myths
15 of success and the American dream. Articles often noted that Culkin had grown up
16 sharing a bedroom with six siblings, while his parents struggled to make ends meet
17 via part-time work. Praise for Culkin's work ethic and ability to cope with the
18 responsibility of being the star of *Home Alone* were seemingly compatible with this
19 narrative of individual success through hard work. *People* magazine, for example,

1 highlighted Catherine O'Hara's observation that, "He's a darling little guy who has
2 been acting since he was four, so he's very professional" (Allis 1990^{BIB-002}, p. 92). At
3 the same time, however, the average American childhood was distanced from the
4 world of work, creating an underlying tension between his supposed ordinariness and
5 his professionalism. Much of the publicity that followed sought to hold these elements
6 of Culkin's star image together.

7 The tension between Culkin's on-screen "everykid" persona and his status as a
8 millionaire celebrity was evident in many of the articles written about Culkin during
9 the early 1990s. In an attempt to confirm Culkin's normality, a cover article on "The
10 World's Richest Kids" in *People* claimed that the child star was given a "\$5 a week
11 allowance" and "doesn't get to flaunt his money" (Green 1992^{BIB-020}, p. 116). At the
12 same time, a large number of articles focused their attention on Culkin's exceptional
13 wealth and celebrity lifestyle. Following *Home Alone*'s box-office success, *Time*
14 magazine proclaimed, "Now whatever Mack wants, Mack gets" — video games, trips to
15 Florida, multimillion dollar movie and merchandising deals" (Chua-Eoan 1991^{BIB-006},
16 p. 82). This perspective was also offered in the glossy magazine coverage of Culkin's
17 brief, chaste relationship with pre-teen model and actress Laura Bundy, which
18 focused on the boy's wealth and the glamorous aspects of his increasingly atypical
19 childhood. Photographs of the cute "couple" attending various events alongside adult

1 celebrities, such as a 'Manhattan Christmas bash', and reports of grand 'romantic'
2 gestures, such as trips to Bundy's home in Kentucky to celebrate Halloween,
3 limousine rides and various gifts, highlighted Culkin's wealth and the children's
4 distance from the domestic sphere (Lipton [1992^{BIB-031}](#), p. 58; Fink [1992^{BIB-016}](#), p. 45).
5 Thus, reports of Culkin's fame and commercial influence soon started to erode any
6 impression of his normality.

7 Film stars' identities, as Marshall notes, 'are invested with conceptions of
8 freedom, independence and individuality' (1997, p. 85). Culkin clearly demonstrated
9 these traits both on- and off-screen. These values are incompatible, however, with the
10 notion of children as dependent on adults and with idealised images of children as
11 untainted by commerce. Moreover, Culkin's status as a minor amplified the
12 seemingly contradictory attitudes expressed towards celebrities' lifestyles, which, as
13 Karen Sternheimer observes, 'reveal a central contradiction within American culture:
14 the coinciding desire for plenty and the lingering value placed on self-restraint' (2011,
15 p. 12). As Culkin's fame and commercial status increased, articles focusing on his
16 personal life became more critical of what was presented as excessive consumption
17 and freedom, symptomatic of the lack of control that adults had over the young
18 millionaire. Following an alleged boast by Culkin that he could watch as much
19 television as he wanted, *People* magazine published several letters condemning the

1 boy and his parents. It's easy to see who is in control in that house, proclaimed one
2 incredulous reader (Peronne 1992^{BIB-042}, p. 4). He used to be a precocious darling,
3 another reader declared; He has now become a pompous, spoiled brat (Kochiss
4 1992^{BIB-028}, p. 4). While ostensibly focused on Culkin's status as a role model, the
5 consternation expressed in these letters arguably alluded to a more general anxiety
6 about submissive parenting and American children's excessive exposure to television.

7 The perils of child stardom also became a subtext to press coverage of
8 Culkin's friendship with Michael Jackson. Although US media outlets reported on
9 Culkin's association with several former child stars, including Elizabeth Taylor, Liza
10 Minnelli and Brooke Shields, it was Culkin's close friendship with Jackson that
11 became a particular source of fascination during the early 1990s. Stories of shopping
12 sprees in Toys R Us, a vacation in Bermuda, visits to theme parks and numerous trips
13 to Jackson's Neverland ranch provided plenty of material for glossy magazines and
14 tabloid newspapers. Although publications often acknowledged the age gap between
15 Culkin and thirty-something Jackson, they typically presented the relationship
16 between the two as innocent and childlike. During this period, suggests Amy Billone,
17 Jackson's attachment to the character of Peter Pan and his celebration of eternal
18 childhood allowed him to sustain the fame he first experienced as a child star (2012,
19 p. 46). From August 1993 onwards, following highly publicised allegations that

1 Jackson had abused 13-year-old Evan Chandler, the press became more cautious in
2 their reporting on the pop star's friendship with Culkin. Despite Culkin's public
3 declarations that nothing inappropriate had occurred during his sleepovers at
4 Jackson's Neverland ranch, the mere spectre of child abuse cast Jackson's relationship
5 with Culkin in a new light. The press also began to present Jackson's lifestyle as a
6 warning of what the future could hold for Culkin if steps were not taken to lessen the
7 impact of his fame and fortune.

8 Given the press's interest in Michael Jackson's dysfunctional childhood and
9 relationship with his father, it was perhaps unsurprising when Macaulay Culkin's
10 father came under increased scrutiny. Christopher Kit Culkin was the driving force
11 behind his son's career and the Hollywood trade press often referred to his reputation
12 as a tough negotiator. From 1989 onwards, Kit Culkin managed his son's career full-
13 time and was therefore entitled to ten per cent of his earnings (Schneider 1993^{BIB-046},
14 p. 48). In November 1993, *Variety* published a major story entitled 'Kit Culkin
15 Orchestrates *Nutcracker* Nightmare', which accused Culkin's father of creative
16 interference and of using his child as a bargaining tool (Fleming 1993^{BIB-017}, p. 2).
17 Cover stories in *New York* magazine and *People* followed, bringing accusations of Kit
18 Culkin's controlling nature and alleged exploitation of his son to a wider audience
19 (Dubner 1993^{BIB-009}; Schneider 1993^{BIB-046}). Interestingly, these stories did not have a

1 negative impact on industry perceptions of the child star. *People's* Karen Schneider,
2 for instance, suggested, "No one, no matter how angry, blames Macaulay himself for
3 the backlash" (Schneider 1993^{BIB-046}, p. 46). Through their evocation of the image of
4 the pushy stage parent, such reports seemed to endear the child star more to adults.
5 Consequently, Kit Culkin was increasingly viewed by audiences as, in the words of
6 one *People* reader, "an overzealous control freak who is trying to live out his own lost
7 celebrity through his son" (Thompson 1994^{BIB-053}, p. 13).

8 An ageing child star

9 While the decline of Culkin's career seems to fit neatly within the narrative of the
10 curse of the child star, it would be a mistake to view this trajectory as preordained.
11 Culkin was able to build a brand through a reliance on what Barry King has dubbed
12 "personification" whereby "the range of the actor is limited to parts consonant with his
13 or her personality" (1985, p. 30). This approach relied heavily on attempts to regulate
14 Culkin's image by his management team and the studios. As has been illustrated, his
15 stardom was firmly tied to the family-film genre and a persona based on his character
16 from *Home Alone*. This connection was reinforced via various efforts to utilise his star
17 image and notoriety for commercial gain. While child stars had, to varying extents,
18 been implicated in promoting conspicuous consumption in the past, Culkin's fame
19 coincided with a growing interest in children as consumers and increases in

1 specifically child-oriented marketing. Media commentators and, no doubt, parents
2 questioned the ethics of exploiting Culkin's notoriety and children's desire to emulate
3 his lifestyle, their concerns occurring against a backdrop of wider debates on
4 marketing to children. Negative responses to Culkin's role in endorsing products
5 hinted at anxieties concerning their influence over their own children and
6 corporations' attempts to shape children into consumers from an early age. In spite of
7 attempts to broaden Culkin's appeal and demonstrate his abilities as an actor, most
8 notably via *The Good Son*, separating the child star from his reputation as a performer
9 in family-friendly comedies proved to be a difficult enterprise.

10 Culkin later confirmed that pressures caused by his family life and his lack of
11 interest in making more family films were the primary drivers in his decision to
12 suspend his career as an actor in 1994. The failure to develop Macaulay Culkin's on-
13 screen persona, to accommodate shifts in his off-screen image or physical appearance,
14 was nonetheless a major factor in the decline of his childhood acting career. In a
15 review of *Richie Rich*, Culkin's last film as a child star, the *Hollywood Reporter* noted
16 that the 14-year-old was 'finding [it] tough to still play "cute" while in the greasy
17 throes of adolescence' and was 'getting a tad long in the tooth for the role he was born
18 to play' (1994). Similarly, *Daily Variety's* reviewer referred to his 'fading
19 superstardom' and attributed this decline primarily to his status as an 'aging child

1 star and his limitations as an actor (Leydon [1994^{BIB-030}](#)). Physically no longer able
2 to offer the cute image audiences had come to associate with Macaulay Culkin and
3 his lack of developed acting skills meant that he was unable to meet the expectations
4 of critics, and the contradictions in his star image became increasingly exposed.

5 The myth of the curse of child stardom, argues O'Connor, serves to promote
6 the idea of childhood as a private, family-oriented time of life separate from the adult
7 world of work and responsibility (2008, p. 75). Early press coverage of Culkin's
8 career and off-screen life often attempted to reconcile this contradiction, no doubt to
9 the delight of Culkin's management team and publicists. As the 1990s wore on,
10 however, magazine and newspaper reports focused much more on the unusual aspects
11 of the boy's life and the dangers posed by his behaviour. The fascination with fallen
12 child stars, adds O'Connor, can be seen as a reaction against the more generalised
13 fear that children today are becoming too powerful, too knowing, and are growing up
14 too fast (ibid., p. 75). Through evocation of the concept of sheltered innocence,
15 argues Gary Cross, adults can convince themselves that threats to this ideal of
16 childhood originate from outside the home and the family (2004, p. 14). In this way,
17 reactions to Culkin's alleged misbehaviour provided an outlet for more general
18 anxieties about contemporary childhood. The powerful contradiction at the heart of
19 child stardom, however, is that while adult audiences express pity and hostility

1 towards child stars, they are often complicit in the manufacture of these young
2 celebrities. Child stars are often perceived as melancholy, sacrificial figures,
3 suggests Jacqueline Warwick, with audiences lamenting the “normal” childhoods lost
4 even as they devour the manufactured childhoods offered (2012, p. 252). As Culkin’s
5 career illustrates, while they are often called upon to present idealised representations
6 of “normal” childhood on-screen, due to their engagement in commercial and public
7 spheres, child stars will always struggle to conform to this image.

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