

Article Title

'Give people what they expect': John Hughes' Family Films and Seriality in 1990s
Hollywood

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Abstract:

This article explores serial production strategies and textual seriality in Hollywood cinema during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Focusing on John Hughes' 'high concept' family comedies, it examines how Hughes exploited the commercial opportunities offered by serial approaches to both production and film narrative. First, I consider why Hughes' production set-up enabled him to standardize his movies and respond quickly to audience demand. My analysis then explores how the *Home Alone* films (1990-1997), *Dennis the Menace* (1993) and *Baby's Day Out* (1994) balanced demands for textual repetition and novelty.

Article:

Described by the *New York Times* as 'the most prolific independent filmmaker in Hollywood history', John Hughes created and oversaw a vast number of movies in the 1980s and 1990s.¹ In a period of roughly fourteen years, from the release of *National Lampoon's Vacation* (Ramis, 1983) to the release of *Home Alone 3* (Gosnell, 1997), Hughes received screenwriting credits on twenty-seven screenplays, of which he produced eighteen, directed eight and executive produced two. Shortly after the release of *Home Alone*, *Entertainment Weekly's* Ty Burr proclaimed, 'Hughes has settled into churning out surefire hits that are routine and routinely enjoyable'.² Indeed, sizeable audiences bought into the filmmaker's vision

of suburban America and everyday life. Writing in the *New York Times*, Bill Carter observed, 'Hughes' movies have, by accident or design, created the perfect symbiosis between movie and moviegoer'.³

This fit between audience and product was not simply a happy coincidence, but was a result of the strategic targeting of particular niche markets and the filmmaker's keen sense of what would appeal to Middle American audiences. *Variety* quoted one Warner Bros executive, who claimed that 'his instincts are better than those of any studio executive'.⁴ In a 1991 interview Hughes suggested that 'My movies are popular because they do what they're supposed to do. You get what you think you're going to get. They're not pretentious. They're not hyped. They're accessible'.⁵ Certainly, the relative consistency of Hughes output and his ability to shape and to react to audience demand at a textual level was a major factor in his success as a commercial filmmaker. Time and again, he showed an aptitude for creating films that replicated successful formulas from his previous box office hits.

By both Hughes' standards and those of the American film industry, box office hits did not come much bigger than *Home Alone* (Columbus, 1990), which was by no means conceived as a big-budget blockbuster. Written and produced by Hughes and directed by Chris Columbus, the family comedy starred child-actor Macaulay Culkin, as well as Joe Pesci, Catherine O'Hara and John Heard. Despite modest expectations, the movie grossed over \$285 million at the domestic box office and a further \$190 million overseas.⁶ *Home Alone's* simple concept – a boy who is left home alone at Christmas defends his house from burglars – was widely cited as a key factor in the movie's success.⁷ In fact, Hughes built his professional reputation on his ability to develop films based on simple, marketable 'concepts' that offered audiences consistent and predictable pleasures.

The release of *Home Alone* marked the start of a creatively fruitful and financially lucrative phase in John Hughes' career. In just six years, from 1991 to 1997, Hughes received screenwriting credits on twelve films and produced eleven. His ability to produce movies relatively quickly and his willingness to harness the appeal of tested narrative formulas made this possible. Accordingly, this essay explores how Hughes' 'high concept' family comedies of the 1990s attempt to reduce financial risk through repetition and, thus, can offer insights into serial production strategies and textual seriality in the New Hollywood. First, I examine why Hughes was able to capitalize on the growing demand for family entertainment and reflect on why the repetition of gags and stunts formed a central part of his strategy for attracting family audiences. My analysis then focuses on identifying the major continuities and differences between the movies, in order to reflect on how the commercial and textual logics of sequelization shaped the *Home Alone* films. I then explore how textual seriality operates outside of the realm of the sequel, through a discussion of how *Dennis the Menace* (Castle, 1993) and *Baby's Day Out* (Johnston, 1994) rework elements of the *Home Alone* films while attempting to offer new and more spectacular comic set pieces.

Hughes Entertainment and Serial Production Strategies

Hughes was ideally positioned to exploit the burgeoning family film market in the early 1990s because he had previously consolidated his status as an independent producer and secured greater control over this work. During the late 1980s, Hughes approached alliances with the major studios shrewdly, signing multi-picture contracts in order to gain access to financing and distribution, while using his previous box office hits to leverage greater creative and financial control over his projects. From

1987 onwards, Hughes ensured that he could make his films in Chicago, through his production company Hughes Entertainment.⁸ By the latter part of the decade, he frequently occupied the role of ‘creative’ producer on his movies, rather than director, in order to capitalize on his prolific output as a scriptwriter. With regard to his growing focus on production, Hughes stated, ‘I can expand the outlet for my material, and have greater control over its outcome. As a director I can only do one film a year, but now I can do three’.⁹

During the 1990s, Hughes used the success of *Home Alone* to leverage deals with the studios that gave him even tighter control over the the production and promotion of his movies. As his lawyer Peter Dekom explained in a 1991 interview, ‘We try to eliminate every creative decision from the studio that we can – even taking over the ad campaign and distribution’.¹⁰ From 1991 to 1997, Hughes held non-exclusive contracts with 20th Century Fox, Warner Bros and Disney, worth hundreds of millions of dollars in production financing. He was, therefore, never under the sole control of one company and was, as *Variety*’s editor explained, ‘in an ideal position to play one studio against another’.¹¹ This setup enabled Hughes to get his projects greenlighted and into production quickly, as well as allowing him to produce several major movies simultaneously.

Popular seriality, proposes Ruth Mayer, ‘relies on iconicity, on emblematic constellations, and on recognizable images, figures, plots, phrases, and accessories that, once established can be rearranged, reinterpreted, recombined, and invested with new significance’.¹² Harnessing the principles of textual seriality, Hughes self-consciously developed a signature product through six teen movies that shared themes, narrative tropes, character types and aesthetic features: *Sixteen Candles* (Hughes, 1984), *The Breakfast Club* (Hughes, 1985), *Weird Science* (Hughes,

1985), *Pretty in Pink* (Deutch, 1986), *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (Hughes, 1986) and *Some Kind of Wonderful* (Deutch, 1987). Crucially, the films' textual elements were inseparable from the slick, MTV-inspired soundtrack releases and youth-oriented publicity materials that accompanied them. This commercial strategy aligned closely with the major studios' growing appetite for movies which could be sold across multiple platforms. Consequently, Hughes showed he could consistently appeal to a niche audience of teenage consumers, while demonstrating an excellent understanding of industry agendas, particularly synergy.

Hughes' exceptionally prolific output enabled him and his collaborators to reflect on audience responses to his films and chart cultural trends, using such knowledge to shape forthcoming productions. While the content and aesthetics of his first two movies relied heavily on his intuition as a writer and filmmaker, from *Weird Science* onwards, he sought to cater to audience demand, by attempting to meet, if not exceed, fans' expectations of his movies. Reacting to reception in a timely way is key to the development of popular serialized fiction, the ongoing nature of which allows the author(s) to 'observe its effects on audiences while the narrative is still running and react accordingly'.¹³ Thus, the frequency of Hughes' movie releases, and his control over them, permitted the filmmaker to exploit the commercial opportunities offered by serial production strategies and textual seriality.

In adopting a serial production model of differentiated repetition, Hughes and his contemporaries adapted a manufacturing ethos established during the early days of Hollywood. As Amanda Ann Klein and R. Barton Palmer observe, 'the reuse, reconfiguration, and extension of existing materials, themes, images, formal conventions or motifs, and even ensembles of performers' has long been essential to the logics of 'continuing textual productions' and 'economies of scale' in the film

industry.¹⁴ Even though Hollywood moved away from the production-line logic of low-budget serials and series after the studio system's decline, by the 1980s repetition was a key strategy for mitigating financial risk during a period of spiraling budgets and diminishing box office returns. One of the most overt manifestations of this approach was 'high concept' filmmaking, which aimed to 'identify and exploit particular market segments' through films with built-in marketing hooks and 'an emphasis on style'.¹⁵ Critics of this approach to filmmaking argued, however, that 'as opposed to developing new ideas', high concept relied 'heavily upon the replication and combination of previously successful narratives'.¹⁶ The challenge for filmmakers like Hughes working in this high concept mode was meeting audiences' expectations while introducing sufficient novelty into movies.

Much like his teen films, John Hughes' 1990s movies were closely entwined with a particular set of commercial practices. With the exception of *Career Opportunities* (Gordon, 1991), a teenage romantic-comedy, all the films Hughes wrote and produced in the early 1990s were 'family films'. In this period, the family film, asserts Robert C. Allen, 'became a discursive marker for a set of narrative, representational and institutional practices designed to maximize marketability and profitability across theatrical, licensing and merchandising markets by means of ... cross-generational appeal'.¹⁷ As both Allen and Peter Krämer note, the family film's ability to generate home video sales was a major factor fueling this production trend.¹⁸ Moreover, family films of the late 1980s and early 1990s broke new ground in the creation of 'supersystems' of transmedia intertextuality - 'networks' of texts 'constructed around a figure or group of figures from pop culture', which were designed to appeal to broad audiences and to encourage the consumption of a wide range of associated consumer products.¹⁹ Hughes was ideally positioned to benefit

from this production trend, thanks to his flair for developing movie concepts and characters that could be extended and multiplied across a range of texts for the purposes of marketing and merchandising.

Hughes also possessed an astute understanding of children's consumption habits, which helped him to prosper in the family film market. As well as being aware that pre-teens accounted for a major part of the home video market, he was conscious that many children were creatures of habit who enjoyed enacting the same pleasures repeatedly. However, many adults remained sceptical about children's tendency toward repeat viewing of movies on video.²⁰ This anxiety cannot be attributed solely to new technology; similar concerns had circulated about children's popular culture since the latter part of the nineteenth century. A condemnation of serialized fiction stems from 'the worry that its purveyors corrupt children into benighted consumers by recycling the same empty product'.²¹ But children's enjoyment of repetition derives in no small part from the process of mastering narratives and identifying minor variations in plot.²² In this regard, the youthful fan of Hughes' movies is like Umberto Eco's 'smart' reader, who delights in 'the strategy of the variations' in serial texts.²³ Even so, the lowly status of both mainstream comedy and the family film in hierarchies of culture means that such knowledge is not valorised and is often overlooked when exploring a text's popularity.

To ensure consistency between his films and to connect with his young audience, Hughes focused on the reworking of gags. Within comedy production, this approach was not unusual. Many gags in Hollywood cinema rely on tried and tested formulas, which are adjusted and expanded by writers, directors and performers. It is possible, as Anthony Balducci suggests, to 'detect distinct patterns beneath the

stylistic flourishes and surprising variations' in many popular comedy routines and gags.²⁴ As well as recycling numerous jokes across his movies, Hughes and his collaborators also borrowed gags from Hollywood's past, particularly the silent era. Even children can recognise and understand comic scenarios within Hughes' films, due to the appearance of similar situations and gags in myriad popular cultural texts, including cartoons. Much of the pleasure in watching familiar gags lies in their serial logic. As Jerry Palmer argues, every gag functions as a 'micronarrative' with a preparation stage and a subsequent culmination stage.²⁵ After recognising a familiar setup, pleasure can be gained from seeing the gag unfold with various embellishments or slight twists added to the preparation stage and culmination stage. The viewer can also enjoy the confirmation or subversion of their expectations in the conclusion of the joke. Through repetition of material across films, Hughes ensured there were predictable laughs, while inviting audiences familiar with his earlier films to marvel at the mechanics of the gags and enjoy a sense of anticipation.

The *Home Alone* Sequels: Funnier and Bigger

Home Alone and its sequels are prime examples of not only Hughes' use of repetition, but also the logics of sequelization and serial spread. When creating his family films of the 1990s, Hughes extracted a number of the popular elements from his 1980s comedian vehicles – *National Lampoon's Vacation*; *Planes, Trains and Automobiles* (Hughes, 1987); *Uncle Buck* (Hughes, 1989); and *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation* (Chechik, 1989) – while expunging the crude and moderately sexual gags. Reflecting on the creation of *Home Alone*, Hughes explained to the *Los Angeles Times*, 'I was trying real hard to follow (my own) lessons of success and

look for something that would write itself – where the situation is so simple and strong that it will unfold naturally'.²⁶ Evidently, he managed to execute his plan successfully. The 'high concept' premise of *Home Alone* allowed Hughes to combine broad comedy, uplifting sentiment and themes of family unity, with a timely subject and 'built-in marketing hooks'.²⁷

Home Alone has a tight narrative structure and achieves a high level of formal unity. Following the norms of classical construction, the film has a goal-oriented protagonist and events unfold as a chain of cause and effect. Focalizing the narrative through eight-year-old Kevin (Macaulay Culkin) not only anchors the film's plot but also encourages identification with the boy. For children in the audience, suggests Caryn James in her *New York Times* review, there is a vicarious thrill in watching a fellow pre-teen 'indulging in every child's fantasy and becoming the hero of his own adventure'.²⁸ The scenes may also provide the 'nostalgia and delight' that many family films create for adults, through their evocation of festive traditions and common childhood experiences.²⁹ A second, more adult-oriented line of action features the attempts by Kevin's mother's to return home, which provides an effective comedic and emotional counterpoint to scenes involving the boy. Kate McCallister's quest to reach home, which gradually progresses despite numerous setbacks, also helps to reassure the audience that the film is building to a satisfying emotional conclusion in the form of a family reunion. This device clearly echoes the plot of an earlier Hughes comedy, *Planes, Trains and Automobiles*, as well as numerous other family-oriented Hollywood movies. It also fulfills the audience's expectations of the Christmas film, which typically culminates in a 'climactic and joyous scene that occurs as if by magic on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day', often focusing on scenes of family 'reunion and renewal'.³⁰

Although Hughes had not planned to create *Home Alone* sequel, the commercial incentives for making a follow-up to the highest-grossing comedy of all time were abundantly clear. In fact, the ‘unplanned sequel’ following a major hit was characteristic of Hollywood’s approach to sequelization during the late 1980s and early 1990s.³¹ Hughes, however, insisted that he would only participate in a sequel if all the key cast and crew members could be reassembled. In an interview with the *Toronto Star*, he explained the challenges he faced when creating *Home Alone 2* for his devoted young fan base:

It was more difficult because there was so much anticipation when a first picture is so big and is something people will judge it against. I’ve heard of stories of kids who’ve seen it 25 times on videotape. Oh my god, I’m going to have an extremely informed second audience. They are going to know everything. And it’s got to be funnier; it’s got to be bigger.³²

Unsurprisingly, *Home Alone 2* is, like most sequels, ‘highly self-conscious of audience expectations’.³³ Indeed, the narrative’s interplay between predictability and novelty provides the film’s primary strategy for creating audience enjoyment. As Carolyn Jess-Cooke observes, the sequel is ‘a framework within which formulas of repetition, difference, history, nostalgia, memory and audience interactivity produce a series of dialogues and relationships between a textual predecessor and its continuation, between audience and text’.³⁴ The sequel recycles numerous elements from the original *Home Alone* and reworks them slightly, allowing the audience to derive pleasure from their knowledge of the original film. As one critic put it, the film

'actually toys with the audience's expectation of a carbon copy'.³⁵ *Home Alone 2* thus fits within a wider trend of sequels which 'show a high degree of self-awareness'.³⁶

The narrative structure of *Home Alone 2* is fundamentally the same as the original, and it replays a large number of scenarios and jokes from its predecessor. The main differences between the films are created by an emphasis on spectacle and an intensification of various other textual elements. For instance, in the first film, Kevin's response to being home alone is to eat junk food while watching videos, and to play with his brother's air rifle. In the sequel, Kevin checks into the Plaza Hotel in New York and enjoys a limousine ride, during which he eats pizza and drinks Coca-Cola from a champagne glass. Jokes are also rehashed, with little attempt to conceal their similarities to those in *Home Alone*. For example, the tricks Kevin uses to deter the hotel staff, as Janet Maslin put it, 'are so similar to the first film's antics that some viewers may blink in disbelief'.³⁷ Even these scenes, however, invoke processes of sequelization through Kevin's use of the fictitious gangster film sequel, *Angels With Even Filthier Souls*, which is more violent than its *Home Alone* counterpart, *Angels With Filthy Souls*. Thus, while *Home Alone 2* prioritises consistency with the original film, using repetition extensively, it also embodies the 'excess' associated with sequels.

Faced with unavoidable comparisons with an original film, argues Todd Berliner, 'the makers of movie sequels tend to supply excessive amounts of whatever audiences seemed to have liked most about the original movies'.³⁸ In *Home Alone 2* this tendency is particularly obvious in the stunts that appear in the climax of the film, which are larger, more elaborate and more violent than in the first film. The sequence includes the use of projectiles, explosions and electrocutions, as

well as numerous pratfalls. The most self-aware gag in this sequence occurs when the intruders, Harry (Joe Pesci) and Marv (Daniel Stern), start to chase Kevin up the stairs then step aside to avoid two swinging paint cans, a moment which references a trap used in the first film. Their glee at tricking Kevin is short-lived, as they are immediately both hit with a large steel drainpipe, falling backwards through a hole at the bottom of the stairs and into the basement. Kevin then cuts the drainpipe loose and it bounces down the stairs onto them. The gag activates audience knowledge of the original film, but then surprises with an unexpected twist. By hitting the criminals harder and making them fall further, the gag also reflects the filmmakers' decision to amplify the physical comedy in the sequel. As the movie's stunt co-ordinator, Freddie Hice remarked, 'This time we did everything over the top.... We exaggerated everything we've ever done'.³⁹

Home Alone 2's mix of textual and commercial elements successfully appealed to a large audience and was a major box office hit, grossing just shy of \$359 million worldwide.⁴⁰ Predictably, some reviewers condemned the movie's lack of originality, including *Screen International*'s Ana Maria Bahiana, who labelled the film, 'contrived, formulaic and, in many instances, not at all funny'.⁴¹ By contrast, other critics were more positive about the balance between repetition and originality in the film. The *New York Times*' Marilyn Moss, for example, proclaimed that 'Hughes and Columbus manage somehow to keep the material both comfortably familiar and amazingly fresh'.⁴² While Hughes and his collaborators had managed to replicate the success of *Home Alone* by playing it safe, it seemed unlikely that they would be able to reprise such close adherence to the *Home Alone* formula.

Although John Hughes and 20th Century Fox hoped to complete a third *Home Alone* film with Macaulay Culkin in the lead role, this was not possible due to the

child star's contractual obligations and retirement from acting in 1994.⁴³ Consequently, the next sequel was not released until December 1997, seven years after the first movie debuted. Written and produced by Hughes, *Home Alone 3* (Gosnell, 1997) focused on a new set of characters and made no reference within the diegesis to the events of the previous *Home Alone* films. Alex D. Linz, who had previously appeared in *One Fine Day* (Hoffman, 1996) as Michelle Pfeiffer's son, stepped into the lead role after a nationwide talent search.⁴⁴ The absence of Culkin, while widely remarked on, was not seen as a barrier to the movie's box office success. As the *New York Times*' Stephen Holden observed, 'all the franchise really needs to keep going is a charismatic child with no great acting skills but loads of pseudo-innocent chubby-cheeked adorability'.⁴⁵ Although Chris Columbus declined to direct the movie, several key crew members who had worked on the earlier films were involved in *Home Alone 3*, including the director Raja Gosnell (who had edited the first two movies); cinematographer Julio Macat; and stunt coordinator Freddie Hice. Arguably, these appointments succeeded in creating an overall visual style similar to that of the first two movies.

The main similarities between *Home Alone 3* and *Home Alone* were the film's setting (Chicago's suburbs during the festive season) and its 'vintage Hughes' slapstick climax, in which eight-year-old Alex Pruitt repels thieves from his house with homemade booby traps.⁴⁶ By comparison with the earlier films, however, the underlying premise of *Home Alone 3* is incredibly far-fetched: young Alex accidentally acquires a \$10 million missile cloaking chip, which was stolen by a group of international criminals working for North Korea. *Home Alone 3* also lacks a key element of the first two movies, as there is no genuine separation between the child and his family. Alex is actually only 'home alone' once, when his mother attends a

business meeting and leaves him at home with chicken pox, while the other family members are at work or school. The film therefore does not offer any sequences of the boy enjoying his new freedom or fending for himself. Moreover, there is little in the way of a secondary storyline, beyond a few cutaways to the Air Force and Alex's mother rushing to rescue him from the criminals in the film's climax. Thus, by prioritising spectacle and physical comedy, *Home Alone 3* subordinates, or omits, key elements of the original *Home Alone*.

Despite being international supervillains, *Home Alone 3*'s antagonists are cartoon-like and the actors' performances are much less realistic than those of Pesci and Stern. The absence of any intimidating moments between the villains and Alex means that they never feel like a genuine threat to the boy. While the first two *Home Alone* movies offered adults the opportunity to identify with Kevin's mother, as well as the child, *Home Alone 3* is aimed squarely at the children in the audience. Ridiculous premise aside, the film struggles to appeal to adults due to the lack of well-developed adult characters and the absence of charismatic performers like Catherine O'Hara, John Candy, Tim Curry or Brenda Fricker. Thus, *Home Alone 3* demonstrates how, as Cary Bazalgette and Terry Staples have argued, the casting of adult stars and the inclusion of adult concerns plays a crucial role in distinguishing cross-generational family films from children's films.⁴⁷

Home Alone 3 was not the last *Home Alone* sequel, however. In 2002, Fox Television Studios produced the television movie *Home Alone 4: Taking Back the House* (Daniel, 2004), which aired as a 'movie of the week' on ABC during the festive period. A decade later, in 2012, the same studio created *Home Alone: The Holiday Heist* (Hewitt, 2012), which debuted on ABC Family during Thanksgiving weekend. John Hughes had no involvement in either of these productions, nor did

any of the creative personnel who had worked on the first three *Home Alone* films. This was not entirely unexpected because, broadly speaking, processes of serialization ‘work to render narratives and characters ever adaptable and, thus, give them relative autonomy from the authors who created them’.⁴⁸ From a marketing perspective, these TV movies relied on the same logic as the B-series of the 1940s, which ‘often subsumed the appeal of any single film release within the broader notoriety of the series and its most identifiable elements’.⁴⁹ Because *Home Alone 4* and *Holiday Heist* lacked any other pre-sold elements, publicity emphasized the basic ‘concept’ of *Home Alone*, with the assurance of relative quality associated with the brand. To attract audiences familiar with the original movies, both productions used the *Home Alone* logo and mimicked the marketing imagery from the first film.

Figure 1. The poster for *Home Alone* (20th Century Fox) and publicity for *Home Alone 4* and *Home Alone: The Holiday Heist* (ABC/Disney).

Made on a tight budget in South Africa, *Home Alone 4* starred an entirely new cast and was set in the early 2000s, although it recycled elements from the original movies. The characters were named after those in the first two films, despite the fact that the actors bore no physical resemblance to their original counterparts. The movie was also set in Chicago during the Christmas period and focuses on Kevin McCallister (Mike Weinberg), who defends his father’s girlfriend’s house from Marv the burglar (French Stewart), while the family copes with the aftermath of the McCallister parents’ divorce. *Home Alone: The Holiday Heist* has slightly higher production values and focuses on a new group of characters located in Maine. The movie is, nonetheless, set during the Christmas period and its ten-year-old

protagonist, Finn Baxter (Christian Martin), has to protect his house from a gang of professional thieves. Although these TV movies follow the same basic plot structure of the original *Home Alone*, they are far less unified. Relatively little time and effort is dedicated to narrative exposition and character psychology, which creates significant gaps in plausibility. Moreover, the decision to base the movies' plots around ridiculous 'prizes' for the criminals – a royal family to kidnap in *Home Alone 4* and an Edvard Munch painting to steal in *The Holiday Heist* – distances them from the more believable, albeit highly affluent, setting of *Home Alone*. Thus, while these films rely on the replication of certain elements of *Home Alone*, they lack the realistic grounding provided by more mundane domestic settings.

Although Hughes and the studios focused on capitalizing on the films' successes in the short-term, it is worth noting that the original concept for *Home Alone*, which inspired all of the filmmaker's subsequent family comedies, proved to be incredibly durable and versatile over the years. The *Home Alone* films' transposition of the same basic premise to new but familiar settings and to altered social contexts over a period of over twenty years, to some extent, reflects what Kathleen Loock has termed a 'serial desire' to 'revisit the story and characters' of a well-known film in different contexts.⁵⁰ While the nostalgic aesthetic of the original *Home Alone* gives the movie a timeless quality, the film's depiction of childhood and family life is firmly rooted in the early 1990s. Primarily objects of commercial opportunism, the more recent additions to the *Home Alone* films, nonetheless respond to social changes and, in this sense, offer updated versions of the original story. The movies' depictions of divorce, generational differences, and children's relationships with technology create a sense of timeliness, which was part of the appeal of the original *Home Alone*. Despite variations in quality, the *Home Alone*

series could potentially run for decades, reworking key elements of the original in order to resonate with children's experiences.

As well as serving as the inspiration for a string of sequels, *Home Alone* also became an 'originary film' that provided 'images, plot formulas and themes' that formed the template for a number of movies in the 1990s family film cycle.⁵¹ It spawned numerous imitators that exhibited varying degrees of indebtedness to Hughes' work. Films such as Touchstone Pictures' *3 Ninjas* (Turteltaub, 1992) and Disney's *Blank Check* (Wainright, 1994), for example, contain sequences that replicate the film's 'home invasion' scenario, with children fending off hapless criminals using homemade booby traps. The *New York Times*'s Stephen Holden described the former as 'a half-pint imitation of *Home Alone*'⁵² and the latter as 'a film that aggressively tries to rework the basic concept of *Home Alone*'.⁵³ *Getting Even With Dad* (Deutch, 1994) and *Richie Rich* (Petrie, 1994), both of which star Macaulay Culkin, also draw heavily on the *Home Alone* films, with the latter including a stunt-filled, high-action finale. While not as overtly similar, numerous other family films of the period share similar scenarios to *Home Alone*, such as precocious children coping with being home alone, for example in *Matilda* (DeVito, 1993), and children outwitting thieves, in movies such as *Monkey Trouble* (Amurri, 1994) and *Dunston Checks In* (Kwapis, 1996). In fact, *Home Alone*'s status in American popular culture is such that it continues to be an intertext not only for family films, but also for a broader range of comedy texts. Through this 'serial sprawl', the basic premise of the movie is reworked, repurposed and renewed.

Dennis the Menace and Baby's Day Out

Dennis the Menace (Castle, 1993) and *Baby's Day Out* (Johnston, 1994) provide a useful counterpoint to the *Home Alone* films because their excessive reliance on comic spectacle demonstrates the pitfalls of adopting an overly formulaic approach to production. Although *Dennis the Menace* and *Baby's Day Out* had many of the ingredients associated with Hughes' earlier hits – including young protagonists, plenty of slapstick and nostalgic aesthetics – they failed to pull in the crowds at the American box office. The fact that both baby boomer parents and their children were familiar with the character was a major part of the commercial rationale for making *Dennis the Menace*.⁵⁴ The film also benefited from a strong adult cast that included Walter Matthau, Joan Plowright and Lea Thompson. By contrast, *Baby's Day Out* was an original screenplay and the film's marketing relied almost entirely on John Hughes' name and the association with his previous hits. While not a success of the same magnitude as the first two *Home Alone* films, *Dennis the Menace* generated respectable box office grosses both in the domestic and foreign markets, with a worldwide gross of \$117 million.⁵⁵ Somewhat embarrassingly for John Hughes and 20th Century Fox, *Baby's Day Out* was a box office flop, taking less than \$17 million at the domestic box office against a production budget of \$50 million.⁵⁶

Hughes' *Dennis the Menace* adopts similar textual strategies as other 1990s remakes of postwar TV shows such as *The Addams Family* (Sonnenfeld, 1991) and *The Flintstones* (Levant, 1994), many of which 'are heavily imbricated – like the tele-series that inspire them – with patterns of repetition'.⁵⁷ *Dennis the Menace* mostly consists of a collection of loosely organised vignettes, primarily involving scenes of Dennis playing and interacting with his retired neighbour, Mr Wilson (Matthau). John Hughes suggested that this structure aimed to evoke the spirit of the comic strip, which 'was about incidents, really wonderful observations about family life and life at

five years old'.⁵⁸ The film's lack of a psychologically developed protagonist who has mid- or long-term goals, in addition to the loose structure of the first half of the movie, makes the few turning points in the plot that seek to create forward momentum feel somewhat contrived.

Baby's Day Out has an even looser structure than *Dennis the Menace* and makes relatively little effort to integrate gags into the narrative. *Baby's Day Out* largely consists of a string of standalone comic set pieces showing the kidnapper's attempts to recapture the baby, with few causal links between these scenes. The movie's lack of formal unity is, to a large degree, consistent with Donald Crafton's assessment that 'the frequent intrusions of [gags and] spectacle produce a kind of narrative lurching that often makes the plots of slapstick comedies distinctively incoherent'.⁵⁹ The plot is organized around the baby, rather than the kidnappers or parents, which means that the narrative lacks the drive given by a goal-oriented, psychologically developed protagonists. A couple of cutaway scenes of the baby's parents and nanny attempt to show the passage of time in the film, but these have no direct bearing on the scenes involving the baby. It is only when Baby Bink's nanny explains that he is following the story from a children's picture book that the audience is offered an explanation for the sequencing of events. This post-hoc attempt at narrative integration does little to unify the film's action and, arguably, draws attention to the largely arbitrary arrangement of the comic set pieces.

Dennis the Menace and *Baby's Day Out* both offer audiences even bigger and more violent stunts than the first two *Home Alone* films. The elaborate and expensive ways in which stunts were set up for these films reflects the creative ambitions of Hughes and his collaborators, as well as increases in production budgets. For the climactic scene in *Dennis the Menace*, which takes place around a railroad bridge,

the movie crew erected 'one of the biggest sets ever constructed in Chicago', which covered '10,000 square feet of soundstage, rising to a height of 30 feet'.⁶⁰ For *Baby's Day Out*, Hughes and his team upped the ante even further, building an actual construction site at a military barracks (General Jones Armory), which 20th Century Fox described as 'one of the biggest sets ever built – and certainly the largest in Chicago'.⁶¹ The sheer scale of both productions made increases in budget and the spectacle offered to audiences highly visible. This evidence of the movies' budgets acted as a form of product differentiation that elevated Hughes' productions above most other family films released in this period, many of which were low-budget affairs destined to generate the bulk of their revenues in the home video market.

More than any of Hughes' other movies, *Baby's Day Out* encourages associations with older comedy texts. As one *New York Times* review put it, 'this soap bubble of a movie with a slapstick heart would like to be a contemporary version of a two-reel silent comedy'.⁶² Notably, a sequence set on a construction site pays homage various silent 'thrill comedies', such as Harold Lloyd's *Never Weaken* (Newmayer, 1921), *Safety Last* (Newmayer, 1923) and *Feet First* (Bruckman, 1930), and the Laurel and Hardy short *Liberty* (McCarey, 1929). In these films, 'suspense and excitement are essential elements' of the comedy because audiences are encouraged to release the tension created through laughter.⁶³ Although *Baby's Day Out* mimics some of the intricately choreographed set-ups for gags used in these slapstick comedies of the 1920s and 1930s, the film primarily encourages the audience to laugh at stunts that culminate in injury to the kidnappers. In this respect, Hughes' movie perhaps has more in common with the brutal gags in the Three Stooges short *How High Is Up?* (Lord, 1940).

In fact, several critics compared the three incompetent kidnappers to Larry, Moe and Curly. 'The three kidnappers are inspired by the Three Stooges,' suggested Roger Ebert, 'They're not really evil, of course, simply stupid and incompetent'.⁶⁴ Apart from the 'climactic' scene on the skyscraper, the criminals are subjected to all manner of physical trauma, much of which focuses on their genitals. Probably the most brutal and memorable gag in the film involves the baby setting Eddie's (Joe Mantegna's) crotch on fire and Veeko (Brian Haley) stamping it out. These kinds of physical gags are present in *Home Alone* but they are part of the rising action of the film's climax. *Baby's Day Out's* loose structure and relatively interchangeable parts mean that the gags seem much more gratuitous.

As this discussion of *Dennis the Menace* and *Baby's Day Out* suggests, Hughes' family films use a variety of strategies, with varying degrees of success, to link gags together and to integrate them into the narrative. In their discussion of the relationship between gags and narrative, Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik suggest that 'running gags' and 'articulated gags which extend the number of variations on action' can, in theory, be extended 'to feature film length and beyond' through the 'structuring principles of serial repetition'.⁶⁵ In the case of Hughes' family comedies, the degree of narrative coherence and the extent to which stunts and gags are integrated into the narrative varies significantly from film to film. The relatively weak box office performances of *Dennis the Menace* and *Baby's Day Out* suggest that *Home Alone's* formal unity was probably a factor in the latter film's success. Even in the age of high concept moviemaking, over-reliance on the repetition of spectacular set-pieces, at the expense of narrative coherence, could be a risky strategy.

Conclusion

John Hughes' mantra in the 1990s was: 'give people what they expect'.⁶⁶ In effect, through Hughes Entertainment, he replicated elements of the producer-unit system of studio-era Hollywood. By holding ongoing contracts with major studios, Hughes Entertainment functioned like a unit, with relative autonomy in the production process but access to the finances and facilities of a larger company. In his role of producer, Hughes oversaw a small roster of films each year and built up a team of personnel to whom he could delegate key roles on his productions. By specializing in family comedy, Hughes was able to reuse formulas and build on expertise that he and his collaborators had acquired on previous movies. As is the case with genre film production more generally, the ability to combine similar characteristics with a certain degree of variation, enabled the filmmaker to 'minimize the risks inherent in difference and to maximize the possibility of profit' by facilitating 'cost-effective production' and the regulation of demand.⁶⁷

As I have discussed, the interplay between repetition and novelty was key to the successes and failures of Hughes' family films of the 1990s. In 1994, John Silbery of *Box Office* suggested that '[h]e's the Mozart of the popcorn movie, finding unending variations on the simplest themes'.⁶⁸ Beyond superficial changes to characters and the basic narrative premise, the reworking and development of gags is the main way that Hughes introduced novelty into his films. Children in the audience were apparently more receptive to this style of storytelling than adults. Citing children's positive responses to *Home Alone 2*, a *Washington Post* critic observed, 'evidently, the younger you are, the more you'll enjoy this. Just don't expect your older companions to laugh'.⁶⁹ Similarly, a *Montreal Gazette* critic wryly observed that 'while this elderly critic found the film repetitive, contrived, corny and too damn cute, younger members ... came away captivated'.⁷⁰ These apparent

generational differences in reception of Hughes' films are not necessarily the product of children's naiveté. Arguably, much of the enjoyment created by Hughes' family films, especially for children who have close familiarity with similar texts, is observing the mechanics of the gags and stunts, as well as delighting in their excesses. The same is true of Hughes' family comedies. What makes each film unique is *how* the gags are set up. In this way, Hughes' films of the 1990s offer some pertinent insights into how the logics of serial production and textual seriality in the New Hollywood shaped production agendas and film form.

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