

Risky Business: Coming of Age in Reagan's America

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By Dave Kehr

When *Risky Business* premiered in the summer of 1983, it came at the end of a cycle of mostly disreputable comedies about teenage boys losing their virginity to older, experienced women—a cycle that included now largely forgotten films like Lewis John Carlino's *Class* (Andrew McCarthy and Jacqueline Bisset), Alan Myerson's *Private Lessons* (Eric Brown and Sylvia Kristel), and George Bowers's *My Tutor* (Matt Lattanzi and Caren Kaye).

There wasn't much reason to expect more than a similar blend of mild titillation and adolescent wish fulfillment (with an odd subtext of incest) from *Risky Business*, a first feature directed by the promising screenwriter Paul Brickman (Jonathan Demme's *Citizens Band*, *The Bad News Bears in Breaking Training*) and starring a young performer named Tom Cruise, who had made an impression a couple of years earlier in the ensemble cast of Harold Becker's *Taps*.

But from the film's opening sequence—a nighttime view of downtown Chicago, seen from a moving El train, slowed down by step printing and accompanied by the hypnotic pitter-patter and ethereal, synthesized tones of a Tangerine Dream score—*Risky Business* announced itself as something very different, less Bob Clark's *Porky's* than Robert Bresson's *Four Nights of a Dreamer*.

The Chicago night blends into the dark lenses of a pair of Wayfarer sunglasses, as the camera pulls back into a close-up of Joel Goodsen (Cruise), a cigarette dangling from his lips as he addresses the spectator. "The dream is always the same," he says, introducing a stylized teen fantasy in which he imagines a beautiful woman taking a shower. She invites him to join her, but as he moves into the mist, the scene shifts to a classroom and the reverie turns to anxiety. Joel is three hours late for his college-entrance exams, and his future is ruined.

By the end of the film, the dream is no longer the same. But Brickman suggests, by bringing the rumble of the opening El train back up under the closing credits, that Joel may still not be awake. The sexual fantasy has metastasized into something quite different, that gaudy mix of rampant materialism, unabashed self-interest, and entrepreneurial hustle that was Ronald Reagan's "Morning in America." As Joel now tells the spectator, "I deal in human fulfillment." He has learned to turn desire into a commodity, to be bought and sold on the open (free!) market.

The originality of *Risky Business*, as well as much of its beauty, lies in its unexpected marriage of fierce social satire and dark, dreamy eroticism. Each strain feeds and

undermines the other, in a cycle of desire and denial that leads to a richly ambiguous climax—more rich and more ambiguous than ever with Brickman’s original ending, which has been restored for this edition.

Much of *Risky Business* is set in the posh North Shore suburb of Glencoe, though the film was largely shot in the slightly less exclusive neighboring community of Highland Park, where Brickman grew up (as the son of the syndicated newspaper cartoonist Morrie Brickman). As a product myself of a Chicago bedroom suburb, I can testify to the grip that the great urban mass by the lake held on our adolescent imagination.

Here was the repository of everything repressed in our homogeneous world: not just the cultural monuments of museums, bookstores, and first-run movie theaters, but also people of different races, classes, and ethnicities, varieties of human experience not available to the sheltered, mostly white youth of the outer ring. It was a world that could at first only be accessed with parental supervision, which automatically made it feel dangerous and very alluring. A rite of passage for every suburban teen was the first trip to the city without Mom and Dad. As intimidating as downtown could be, it also offered a glimpse of autonomy and freedom. It was, in short, a sneak preview of the pleasures of being a grown-up.

Risky Business is structured around this metaphor, as was John Hughes’s later, and much more benign, *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* (1986). But where Hughes offers a fantasy of total domination, with the city surrendering to Ferris’s charm and self-assurance, Brickman is characteristically much more elliptical and ambivalent. By the end of the film, Joel will have found his place in the city, but it is a precarious, morally dubious one that requires him to sacrifice as much as he has gained.

Left home alone when his parents go on a trip (another Hughes borrowing), Joel takes advantage of the absence of authority to uncork his dad’s Chivas Regal and commandeer his precious hi-fi equipment to blast Bob Seger’s “Old Time Rock & Roll.” It’s the scene that made Tom Cruise a star, as Joel bounds around his parents’ living room as if he were Mick Jagger tearing it up at Madison Square Garden, and it perfectly depicts the pent-up sexual energy of late adolescence, not least in Brickman’s suggestion that teen sex is largely a solitary pursuit. To get any further is going to require some outside assistance.

Said assistance arrives—a sex worker summoned as a practical joke by Joel’s friend Miles (Curtis Armstrong) from the back-page ads of a weekly newspaper (as it happens, the one I was writing for at the time). Nervously answering the door, Joel finds Jackie (Bruce A. Young), a Black cross-dresser or trans woman. This is a bit more than Joel can handle, but the sympathetic Jackie does Joel a favor and gives him the number of a coworker more in line with Joel’s desires. And Brickman gives Rebecca De Mornay her star-making moment as well, building up to her entrance with a low, sweeping camera movement and a swirl of dead leaves, as if she were a dark wind blowing into Joel’s life, a supernatural figure with the powers of a witch or succubus. She has no last name or backstory; like her namesake

Lana Turner (introduced by director Tay Garnett in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* with a similar floor-level tracking shot), she is presented at first as a purely sexual creature, the fulfillment—and then some—of Joel's shower dream.

But once again, the dream is followed by a rude awakening. In the morning, a suddenly pragmatic, down-to-earth Lana is asking for just recompense for her services, and in a sequence that resonates with many Americans of a certain generation, Joel is forced to cash in the precious savings bond his grandparents gave him as a child. Lana has not only introduced Joel to sex; she has also introduced him to its real-world companion, commerce. Before long, he's rounding up his friends as clients for Lana and her associates, drawing on the lessons he has learned as a member of his school's Future Enterprisers club.

Risky Business is hardly the first film to treat sex work as a metaphor for capitalism, yet Brickman develops the parallels with uncommon insight and sensitivity, moving beyond satire to find human complexity and moral ambiguity (something that director William Friedkin failed to do with Brickman's screenplay for *Deal of the Century*, which appeared a few months after *Risky Business*).

Lana opens a new world for Joel, but she also opens a breach in the border, allowing all kinds of urban anxiety and even violence to enter the closed society of Glencoe. Suddenly, a bit of Scorsese-land erupts into Joel's suburban existence, in the form of the angry pimp Guido (Joe Pantoliano), who rightly sees Joel as competition. With his East Coast accent, gold chains, and insistent profanity, Guido is an affront to all the WASPY virtues of Glencoe. It may be morning in America, but it is still the dead of night for Guido, who subscribes to an older order of business, a one-man shop rather than a corporation.

Throughout the film, Brickman employs two visual reminders of Joel's conflicting desires and the tension between his sheltered past and the more complex world he finds himself drawn into—the crystal egg that is Joel's mother's dearest possession, and the Porsche that belongs to his father.

The egg can be seen as representing Joel's suburban innocence and his emotional attachment to his family, particularly his mother. When Lana steals the egg, it represents the beginning of Joel's corruption and his willingness to risk and even sacrifice his innocence for the sake of his sexual and entrepreneurial desires. (When his mother says, "There's a crack in the egg . . . My egg is ruined," it can be interpreted as referencing her most prized egg, her biological egg, her son.) At the same time, the egg's fragility and sentimental value signify Joel's fear of letting go of his innocence completely.

The Porsche, on the other hand, evokes wealth, status, power, and masculine privilege. Driving the car after he has been expressly forbidden from doing so (Mom suggests taking her station wagon instead) is the first rite of passage for Joel, marking his transition into adulthood and his increasing sense of independence from his family.

But the Porsche is also a powerful source of anxiety, as Joel fears damaging it and losing his father's trust. This mirrors Joel's own internal conflict as he grapples with his newfound power and the potential consequences of his actions. Joel is initially reluctant when Lara proposes that they get their friends together and make some money—effectively turning Joel's home into a bordello—and is only persuaded when the car rolls down a pier and into the dark waters of Lake Michigan. He'll need money to fish it out and repair it; sudden need trumps moral qualms.

The scheme works, the money is raised, and, as a reward, Lara takes Joel on the film's third and final excursion into dreamy eroticism. In a magnificently executed sequence (thanks in no small part to the superlative night cinematography of Reynaldo Villalobos and Bruce Surtees and the rhythmic cutting of editor Richard Chew), the couple board the El train that we have already seen under the opening credits, and make love as it rumbles through an eerily deserted downtown Chicago, famously accompanied by Tangerine Dream's electronic bolero as it circles the Loop. It is Joel's top-of-the-world moment, the fulfillment of an adolescent fantasy but somehow also its transcendence—not just an adult pleasure but a pleasure most adults will never know.

This time, the rude awakening is devastatingly harsh. Has the dream been only the ultimate deception, intimacy only another betrayal, romantic fulfillment just another con? To which the film answers, courageously and forcefully: maybe.

By the end of *Risky Business*, both the egg and the Porsche have been returned to their rightful places, apparently unscathed (in a nice touch, Joel's mother says she sees a crack in the crystal, though Joel can't see it himself). Joel's extracurricular entrepreneurship has even, hilariously, impressed an Ivy League admissions officer ("Princeton can use a guy like Joel"), and his future seems secure.

When we last see Joel, he is dining with Lana at the 95th, the exclusive restaurant at the top of the John Hancock building, surrounded by murmuring businessmen in dark suits. The audiences of 1983 were denied the beauty of Brickman's last shot, which was removed in favor of a more reassuring closing. But the film now ends as its author intended, with an image of such profound precariousness that I can only compare it to the final shot of *The Birds*, as Alfred Hitchcock sends his characters off into a future that balances innocence and experience, security and danger, hope and fear. I leave the lucky audiences of 2024 to discover it for themselves.