

Au revoir les enfants: Transcript

Today I will be talking about Louis Malle's 1987 film, *Au revoir les enfants*. Malle's film was a commercial and critical success. With 3.5 million spectators, the film was one of the most popular films in France in 1987 and won seven prestigious César Awards including Best Film and Best Director. Outside of France, the film won the Golden Lion at the 1987 Venice Film Festival and was also nominated for two Oscars and a Golden Globe.

In this presentation I'm going to focus on two core themes in the film: the portrayal of childhood and the setting of the German occupation of France, and consider how Malle brings these two themes together. I'll finish by evaluating the film by considering its strengths and weaknesses.

The Film

Au revoir les enfants is set in a Catholic boarding school in occupied France in January 1944. The film starts with the twelve-year-old boy Julien saying good bye to his mother at a railway station in Paris. This scene introduces several points which will be developed over the course of the film. Firstly, Malle stresses just how young Julien is. Julien is clearly upset that he has to return to boarding school and, by introducing Julien's older brother who appears much older and more mature than Julien, Malle stresses just how young his protagonist is. Secondly, the film subtly reveals the context of its setting. Just as Julien boards the train, we hear a platform announcement in German as well as French, revealing the film's setting to be occupied France. Finally, just as Julien leaves, his mother says: 'J'aimerais me déguiser en

garçon et te suivre dans ton college. Je te verrais tous les jours. Ce serait notre secret', thereby introducing the theme of hiding.

The film's setting then moves to the boarding school in a small town near Paris. One day, three new boys join the school including Jean Bonnet who joins Julien's class. Jean is considered an outsider by the other boarders because Jean says he is a protestant and all the other boys at the school are Catholic. Julien is initially quite hostile to Jean because the new boy's presence threatens his own status as top pupil. One day, Julien discovers that Jean is actually Jewish and his real name is Jean Kippelstein, not Jean Bonnet. When he confronts Jean, the boys fight, but Julien doesn't reveal his secret. In fact, after Julien is teased by the other boys for wetting the bed, the two 'outsiders' become friends.

The film's subplot involves the kitchen boy Joseph. A similar age to the school pupils, Joseph is much poorer and his lack of wealth, coupled with his limp, makes him a target of ridicule in the school. Joseph is involved in petty crime by trading goods on the black market with the boys. When his actions are uncovered, he is sacked from the school, whereas the boys go unpunished. Joseph gets his revenge on the school by becoming an informer and tells the Gestapo that the school is hiding Jewish children. The school is subsequently raided by the Gestapo and, as they look for the Jewish boys, Jean is inadvertently given away by Julien. Thinking the Gestapo officer's back is turned, Julien looks at his friend in an attempt to reassure him, but the look is seen by the officer who orders Jean to leave the classroom. Jean and the other boys are subsequently led away along with the school's headteacher, Père Jean. The film closes with a voice-over by Malle who informs the audience that the Jewish boys died in Auschwitz, the headteacher at Mauthausen Concentration Camp. The events depicted, says the director, have haunted him ever since.

Background to the Film

Au revoir les enfants is a loosely autobiographical film based on Malle's own childhood experiences. The character of Julien was based on Malle himself. The director said:

Au revoir les enfants is based on something that actually happened to me. The film is very close to my own experience. [...] For years I just didn't want to deal with it, but it had an enormous influence on the rest of my life. What happened in January 1944 was instrumental on my decision to become a filmmaker. It's hard to explain, but it was such a shock that it took me several years to get over it, to try to understand it – and, of course, there was no way I could understand it (Malle, 1993: 167).

However, not everything depicted in the film actually happened. Malle also acknowledged that:

There are some striking differences in the sense that when I wrote the first draft and checked it (I talked to other witnesses, my brother and other students and a teacher who was at the school at the time) I realised there were certain distortions, almost as if my imagination during those forty-five years had taken over and fertilised my memory (Malle, 1993: 167).

Some of the changes are quite insignificant. The protagonist, for example, isn't called Louis Malle but Julien Quentin, whilst the Jewish boy in the film is called Jean Kippelstein whereas

in real life he was called Hans-Helmut Michel. Some of the other changes were more profound. In real life, Malle wasn't particularly good friends with Hans-Helmut. The director acknowledged, 'The very intense relationship between the two boys in the film is more my imagination than my memory, in the sense that I wish it had been that way' (Malle, 1993: 179) However, the decision to present the boys as far better friends in the film than they were in real life might be a distortion of Malle's own past, but, as I will argue, it is important for the film's core theme of childhood and innocence lost.

The Theme of Childhood and Innocence Lost

The first theme I am going to look at is the theme of childhood in *Au revoir les enfants*. It might seem an obvious point, but it's important to stress the fact that the main characters in *Au revoir les enfants* are children. In film and literature, children are traditionally cast to symbolise innocence and *Au revoir les enfants* is very much a story about lost innocence. This type of film is frequently called a coming-of-age drama whereby a young character undergoes a series of events which causes him or her to leave their childhood innocence behind and become a young adult aware of the dangers the world can pose. This transition in film is usually linked to a traumatic or difficult event, and in *Au revoir les enfants* it is linked to the loss of Julien's friend, Jean.

From the outset, Malle is keen to establish Julien as an innocent young boy. He is very much sheltered from the outside world. We see Julien at the start of the film upset at having to leave home and looking forlorn out of the train window. At school, he immerses himself in books and, as an avid reader, he lives in his world of adventure books. Be it in where he is – a closed off and privileged boarding school – or in what he does there – the indulgence in escapist literature – there's a clear sense he's sheltered from the adult world around him.

However, there's a sense Julien isn't just a sheltered child, rather he's outright naive. He doesn't even know what is meant by the word 'Jew'. This point has come under criticism by several critics. For example, the scholar Naomi Greene has argued:

Marked by friendship and innocence, the schoolboy realm depicted in this film is one that seems to have been hermetically sealed against the bitter struggles and intense propaganda of the Occupation years. No one in this film seems to have heard of Jews, to say nothing of being anti-Semitic (1999:88).

The presentation of Julien as closed-off from the day-to-day difficulties of France under the occupation might seem unusual at first. For the vast majority of the film, the only conflict Julien experiences is the jealousy he feels towards Jean who challenges his position as top pupil. If you didn't know that the film was set in 1944 in occupied France, there would be nothing unusual about the two boys' subsequent friendship. And this is the very impression Malle wants to create. Julien is entirely unaware of anti-Semitism. The fact that Jean is Jewish has no greater significance for him than the fact his friend doesn't eat pork and is clever. Occasionally, the outside world creeps in – there are powercuts; at the public baths, the boys see German soldiers; and the pupils complain they don't have enough to eat (although, compared to the rest of the population they have little to complain about) – but the boys are certainly ignorant about France's political situation. This is certainly exaggerated, and critics at the time were quick to point this out, but in order to make the film's ending so powerful, Julien has to appear ignorant of the outside world and, more specifically, of Jewish persecution, up to that point.

The point at which Julien's childhood innocence is broken occurs when the outside world literally bursts into the school. When the German soldiers search the school for the Jewish

boys, Julien's world is no longer sheltered from the outside world and the harsh realities of German occupation. His best friend is taken away and the film's voice-over, the director, tells us that 'Plus de quarante ans ont passé, mais jusqu'à ma mort je me rappellerai chaque seconde de ce matin de janvier.' The film ends with a forty-three second long shot of Julien's face as he stares after his friend and tries to take in what has happened. This introduces the second theme of the film: the persecution of Jews.

The Persecution of Jews in the Second World War

You might have heard the phrase, 'The death of one man is a tragedy, the death of millions is a statistic.' It was purportedly said by Stalin, but has a clear resonance for the Holocaust. Filmmakers have often struggled to convey the enormity of the Holocaust on screen. How can the death of eleven million people including around six million Jews be depicted on screen without, as the aforementioned quote highlights, reducing the deaths to a statistic? Malle approached this question by focusing on the death of one boy, Jean, and showing the profound impact this had on one person. By telling the story of just one victim, Malle attempts to stop Jean becoming a statistic and instead shows the profound impact Jean's death had on Julien.

At this point, it's important to note that the film is heavily reliant on the audience's own knowledge. The ending is only upsetting if we, the audience, know what is going to happen to Jean, and that's what makes the ending so poignant. For Julien, he has lost his best friend. But for the audience, we know Jean is not just leaving the school friend, but will be transported to a concentration camp. By combining our knowledge of what will happen to Jean (a fact corroborated by Malle's voice-over) with a long shot showing Julien's sorrow,

Malle shows the impact of one death on one person, and how this continued to haunt him for decades afterwards.

France under Occupation

As I said at the start of this presentation, *Au revoir les enfants* was a worldwide success and the theme of lost childhood innocence is certainly a topic with international appeal. However, whilst it is important to understand why the film had – and continues to have – such widespread appeal within and beyond France, it is also important to understand how the film discusses issues specific to France.

To a certain extent, you don't need to know much about the history of occupied France to understand the film. But it's useful to have a background knowledge of both France during the war and how the period was subsequently remembered in order to understand the context of the film and of its release. The German invasion of France began on 10 May 1940 and ended on 22 June 1940. Defeat led to the division of France. The north and west of the country became the zone occupée controlled by the German Military, whereas the south of the country became known as the unoccupied zone, the zone libre, or Vichy France and was led by Philippe Pétain, although the German authorities retained ultimate control. Vichy France complied with National Socialist policy. The history of the Second World War in France was, and to a certain extent still is, a very controversial subject in France. After France was liberated in August 1944, the French General Charles de Gaulle assumed leadership of France. In an attempt to bring together a divided country, the question of French collaboration with the Germans was deliberately suppressed. Instead, the crimes committed in France were attributed solely to the Germans and a select number of traitors such as Pétain. Of course, the day-to-day realities were very different and people took decisions to make life more bearable at a time of severe food, clothing and fuel shortages. The discussion of

collaborators or *collabos* was very controversial in France because it is always easier to ascribe responsibility and guilt to a few high profile individuals than the wider population. Of course, collaboration doesn't necessarily mean actively helping, it can mean choosing not to prevent. This was a particularly thorny issue when it came to the question of what role the French played in the deportation of Jews. Only in 2012, did the French President François Hollande officially apologise for the mass round-up and deportation of the Jews in France, saying this was 'un crime commis en France par la France' (Lévy-Willard, 2012).

The first major shift in how the past was depicted in France occurred in the 1970s when the first generation to have been born after the war reached adulthood and began to question the way the past had been told in France. Historians and filmmakers began to discuss the question of collaboration and the extent of French participation in National Socialist crimes, and Malle's earlier film, *Lacombe Lucien*, was very important in this regard in its portrayal of a collaborator as the main character. It was, unsurprisingly, a very controversial film.

However, *Au revoir les enfants* is a film far more interested in victims than perpetrators, and when the film was released in 1987, public debates about France during the Second World War were more common, so the film wasn't by any means as controversial as *Lacombe, Lucien*. Nonetheless, Malle doesn't shy away from highlighting the role of French men and women in Jean's deportation in *Au revoir les enfants*. Ultimately, German soldiers are responsible for the deportation of Jean. They raid the school and with great pleasure, almost like they are playing a game of hide and seek, hunt out the Jewish children in the school. But Malle is careful to show that whilst it may be the German soldiers who take Jean away, he wouldn't have been found if it weren't for French men and women. Firstly, it is the kitchen boy Joseph who informs the Gestapo of the Jewish boys' presence in the school out of petty revenge after he is sacked from the school. When Julien later confronts him, Joseph seems to enjoy his new power by lighting a cigarette – something he couldn't afford when he was

working at the school. Secondly, a nun in the school's sick bay points out where a Jewish boy is hiding. When Julien looks at her in shock, she looks away in shame.

It's also worth noting that the French *milice*, a paramilitary force, are depicted in a far worse light than the Germans. Julien's mother takes him, his older brother and Jean to a restaurant at which German officers are also eating. Half way through their meal, the French *milice* arrives and starts to harass the diners. A German officer stands up and reprimands the group leader for his behaviour, telling him to 'foutez le camp'. The scene serves not only as an opportunity to show the French paramilitary as far more unruly and threatening than the Germans, but also shows the extent to which the French public chose to look away when a Jewish man is harassed. Although a few people raise their voices in defence of the Jewish man, most choose to look away and if they do complain, it's because of the disruption to their meal as opposed to the treatment of the Jewish man.

Evaluating the Film

Malle's film is undoubtedly a powerful film. It shows how the deportation of one Jewish boy shattered Julien's world and encourages us to consider the Holocaust on a personal level by putting a face to the statistic of eleven million. There are three principal problems with the film, however. Firstly, just like Julien, we learn very little about Jewish persecution from the film. The power of the ending is almost entirely dependent upon the audience already knowing about the Holocaust. True, Malle's voice-over tells us that the Jewish boys and the headteacher died in Auschwitz and Mauthausen, but Malle never looks at questions of why they were persecuted and deported. The nearest he gets is when Joseph defends his actions by saying, 'Fais pas le curé, je te dis. C'est la guerre, mon vieux'. But, although a significant number of people did collaborate for personal gain and out of opportunism, Jews were also

persecuted in France because of anti-Semitism. However, anti-Semitic prejudice is strangely absent in the film.

Secondly, there is little getting away from the fact that Julien is incredibly naive. He doesn't seem to know what is meant by the word 'Jew', and he is so shielded from the outside world one wonders what exactly he did during his school holiday in Paris. As the critic I quoted earlier, Naomi Greene, points out, over four years of propaganda seems to have completely passed him and his family by. His friendship with Jean is also problematic. The boys only become friends after Julien is teased for wetting the bed. The film seems to suggest that only when Julien becomes an outsider can he become friends with Jean. There is no attempt to make Jean part of the class and he remains an outsider throughout the film.

This links to the final problem. Just as Julien is a character who is underdeveloped and lacks nuance, the character of Jean is also quite exaggerated. In a review published in 1988, an American reviewer wrote:

[Jean] is photographed as if he were a piece of religious art [...].
There's something unseemly about the movie's obsession with his exotic beauty – as if the French-German Jews had come from the far side of the moon. And does he have to be so brilliant, and a gifted pianist, and courageous? Would the audience not mourn him if he were just an average schmucky kid with pimples? (Kael, 1988)

Whilst this comment seems to be exaggerated for comic effect, the reviewer does have a point. Jean is celebrated for his academic brilliance, his ability to play the piano and he never seems to put a foot wrong. He stands out from the other boys so much that inadvertently, the film does make him appear different to the other boys.

However, there is something very down to earth about *Au revoir les enfants*. There is nothing particularly heroic about Malle's protagonist. He is not a brave soldier and a heroic rescuer. Rather, he is someone who loses his best friend. The long shot of Julien's face at the end of the film lets us reflect on what he could be thinking. Was he responsible? What will happen to Jean? Why is Jean being taken away? Even if Julien doesn't have the answers yet, these questions encourage us to think about the implication of Jewish persecution and, in doing so, help us to understand the tragedy of millions through the story of one.

References

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