

World War II Meets French 331: Using *Au revoir les enfants* to Discuss Religion, Ethics, and Values

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Abstract

This paper examines the treatment of religious and ethical themes in relation to the holocaust in Louis Malle's film Au revoir les enfants, and suggests ways in which the film can enable discussion of religion, ethics and values in the French classroom. The film raises issues of philosophical and spiritual significance as it forces the viewer to grapple with some of the most atrocious events in human history.

“Can we watch a movie?” Many college foreign language professors hear all too often some variation of this refrain. Whatever the response, it seems that more often than not, the request is followed by something like “my high school teacher let us watch *Beauty and the Beast* in French.” Already suspecting, perhaps fearing the answer, the instructor might respond “Oh, the beautiful black and white film by Surrealist director and poet Jean Cocteau?” The answer, too many times, is a perplexed “No, I mean the Disney cartoon,” at which point it’s time to move on.

This is not to argue against the use of film in the classroom. In fact, in the past few years I have added an increasing number of films at the Intermediate level and beyond, and even developed an entire course on film adaptations of literary works. Not only do films in the target language encourage development of linguistic skills, particularly listening, in some cases they also serve as valuable cultural and historical artifacts. As Brett Bowles

suggests, this does not necessarily mean that film is “a means of delivering historical truth;” however it does enable both filmmaker and viewer, each in his own way, to “interpret the past” (27). Viewing films from this perspective can be especially rewarding for the student of language and culture, for there exists the opportunity to learn something of a given culture’s history, as well as the chance to think critically about the way that history is portrayed.

The enterprise of incorporating film, however, is not as simple as it might sound. As any teacher knows, one cannot simply insert a DVD or videocassette and push play. Instead, instructors planning to use film must develop some sort of pedagogical goal, structure, and accompanying materials, not to mention the thorny task of choosing what films to show. French movies are not filmed in the same manner as American films and can be disconcerting to American audiences, especially college students accustomed to Hollywood-style blockbusters. As Jolene Vos-Camy points out, “French films risk being judged boring or even offensive by many students even when these films address universal human issues” (37). The question of selection is complicated by the greater acceptance of nudity and sexual content in Europe, which is problematic for many Americans, especially those whose values tend toward the more conservative. Finally, there is the influence of the French New Wave, *la Nouvelle Vague*, which led to the creation of films in which, particularly from a Hollywood-informed point of view, little or nothing happens. There may not be a happy ending, nor even closure, and while these issues are not always morally or spiritually disturbing, they do nonetheless make many French films less palatable to many American viewers, including college students.

That being said, film is a valuable cultural artifact and can make an excellent teaching tool. There exist a number of French films that can admirably suit pedagogical concerns, both cultural and linguistic. Of these, some have the added bonus of fostering excellent discussions of social, moral, ethical and religious issues. Film can be useful at virtually any level; for my purposes, I don’t start using film until the Intermediate (200-) level, mainly because I want the students to have enough linguistic and cultural knowledge to appreciate the films. It has been my experience that work directly related to the films, meant to reinforce as well as expand upon their present state of knowledge, is most effective for students already able to use the language to some degree. The first film my students see is *Argent de Poche*, in Intermediate French I; not too long after comes Louis Malle’s master-

piece, *Au revoir les enfants*, which I used to show in Intermediate French II but now use in Composition and Conversation. This essay will focus on Malle's film. It will address key aspects of the work that make it ideal for the Christian classroom, and, to a lesser extent, some of the activities to which the film gives rise.

In general, I use film in Composition and Conversation because it is such an effective catalyst for target language conversation and because students can be assigned compositions such as an in-depth written critical review, to be completed in two drafts. Conversation about each film takes place before, after, and during the viewing. For *Au revoir les enfants*, we do not do a lot of preparatory reading nor do we do a lot of accompanying exercises, although I have found excellent discussion topics in chapter 10 of Anne-Christine Rice's *Cinema for French Conversation* (129-143). At the same time, however, preparatory work cannot be entirely ignored, as it is essential that students understand the film's social and historical context: a Catholic boys' boarding school during the Nazi occupation of France in World War II. We brainstorm, and I ask the class to research if necessary, so that they have some sense of what it means to be in boarding school and the significance of war-related elements such as the Occupation, the black market, the Holocaust and the Resistance.

This preview work is necessary to fully appreciate the story, that of a young boy, Julien Quentin, who along with his older brother lives in a stark Catholic boarding school in 1944. He meets then slowly, warily becomes friends with another student, Jean Bonnet. Quite by accident, he discovers that the headmaster, le Père Jean, is hiding some Jewish boys at the school and that one of those boys is his new friend. Confused as to what this means, he ends up witnessing helplessly as the priest and Jewish pupils are denounced and the inevitable tragedy ensues.

I employ this particular film in part because it speaks to the viewer on an intense, emotional level. As Maurice Pons declares, "Il me semble que le germe du film de Louis Malle est contenu tout entier dans le choc émotif qu'il a reçu enfant en assistant, impuissant et torturé, à ce cérémonial atroce: la descente du gestapo dans son collège et l'arrestation sous ses yeux de son meilleur ami" (It seems to me that the Louis Malle's film was born entirely of the emotional shock that he sustained as a child when helpless and tormented, he witnessed the atrocious ceremonial of the Gestapo coming into his school and arresting his best friend) (5). In addition to its emotional impact, it is a true cinematographic masterpiece, as illustrated by

its numerous awards, for example seven Césars, including Best Picture, as well as the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival. The film's success appears all the more remarkable when one learns that studios initially told Malle that Occupation-themed movies had glutted the market. Contrary to what the studios' reaction might suggest, I have never failed to capture a student's interest with this film. This is doubtless due not only to the fact that it is a masterfully crafted drama, but also that it "testifies to the current, extraordinary revival of French interest in the moral paradoxes of the war years" (Audé and Jeancolas 35). Moreover, it raises issues that are relevant even today, including a host of ethical and religious questions to which I will return, as they form key focal points of student discussion.

The film is also noteworthy for the way it handles children, in that their performance is touching, yet never saccharine. As Pons points out,

D'une manière générale, lorsque les écrivains ou les cinéastes, qui sont de "grandes personnes" se penchent sur le petit monde des enfants, cela nous vaut souvent d'exaspérantes niaiseries, oscillant entre l'attendrissement bêtifiant et la vacitation [sic] horrifiée. Louis Malle échappe miraculeusement à ce double écueil. (5)¹

(Generally speaking, when writers or filmmakers, who are "grownups," turn their attention to the little world of children, we often get left with exasperating silliness that oscillates between childish, inane emotion and horrified nonsense. Louis Malle miraculously avoids both pitfalls.)

Pons goes on to offer an explanation for this "miracle," namely that this movie is based on an experience Malle himself lived through, though he did make modifications when bringing it to the screen some forty years later. Indeed, Malle has often asserted that it is because of this event that he became a filmmaker. In a 1987 interview with Françoise Audé and Jean-Pierre Jeancolas, he explains:

I told a class reunion this story and I realized it had affected me much more than the others. They remembered it as a dramatic episode, but they had no clear memory of Bonnet, whereas I remembered him very clearly. Let's say I took it personally. Which is why I made the film. (41)

In another interview three years later, this time with Jean Decock, Malle elaborates: “Je me suis trouvé en face d’une situation qui était incompréhensible, et je crois que c’est ça qui m’a encouragé à devenir cinéaste: j’ai éprouvé le besoin d’examiner ce qui me hante, ce qui me fascine et ce qui me dérange” (I found myself confronted with a situation beyond my understanding, and I believe that is what pushed me to become a filmmaker: I felt the need to examine that which haunts, fascinates and disturbs me) (675).

Malle’s personal connection to the material is one of the many sources of discussion in which students engage. This becomes even more interesting when they realize that he modified some of the facts to serve his goals as an artist: “L’imagination s’est servi de la mémoire comme d’un tremplin, j’ai réinventé le passé, au-delà de la reconstitution historique, à la poursuite d’une vérité à la fois lancinante et intemporelle” (My imagination used my memory as a springboard. I reinvented the past, going beyond historical reconstruction, in pursuit of a piercing, timeless truth) (*L’avant-scène* 6). The question of whether art, in this case cinema, should solely seek to transcribe reality or whether it is created in search of a higher truth especially enriches this part of the classroom conversation. Other topics treated, all of which relate to the film’s more admirable aspects, include the depiction of social realities, the attempt to communicate tragedy that eludes comprehension, the question of guilt, a certain obsession with looking and the gaze, the theme of friendship and other human relationships and the matter of good and evil.

Under the first heading, we have the film at its most historically accurate, an aspect hailed by many critics, including Jacques Valot, who refers to Malle’s “aisance à capter l’ambiance d’un lieu, à camper un univers” (skill at capturing the ambiance of a place, creating a universe) (*La Revue du Cinéma* octobre 1987, qtd. in *L’Avant-scène* 76). Serge Toubiana echoes this praise when he extols the film’s “réalisme du détail, la restitution patiente d’un climat” (“realism of the details, the patient reconstruction of an atmosphere”) (*Cahiers du Cinéma* novembre 1987, qtd. in *L’Avant-scène* 77). Malle himself acknowledges that the film “is truest in its re-creation of sociologically observed fact. The fact that the pupils all belong to the upper middle class. And the fact that despite the cold and lack of food—which were common to all—these children were very sheltered” (Audé and Jeancolas 36). Aside from the school, scenes in which the characters’ class is most evident include lunch at a restaurant whose upscale ambiance is

clear, even if it is governed by rations like everywhere else. The opening good-bye scene between Julien and his mother at the train station, and as Malle suggests, the character of the mother herself constitute two additional elements indicative of the characters' social standing and related mores.

The school itself, where the majority of the action occurs, is portrayed in all its stark reality, from the rows of beds in the dormitory, to the violence of the schoolyard at recess, to the strict discipline of the classrooms, and even to the shelters where students and priests hide from the air raids. Malle points out, "It mattered to me that the first part of the film should seem like a chronicle about what it was like to grow up and attend boarding school at that time" (Audé and Jeancolas 42). The depiction of the rather bleak conditions is further emphasized by the cinematography itself, which is very subdued and at times almost documentary-like. Malle draws the viewer's attention especially to the absence of color: "I recall a world of blues and greys and blacks. Times were hard. I do not recall warm colours. The children wore navy blue, the priests dark brown" (Audé and Jeancolas 45). The controlled yet natural cinematography also allows other aspects of life at the school to be conveyed with greater intensity, including its violence, a trait pointed out by Audé and Jeancolas and elaborated upon by Malle. Students are typically quick to pick up on this themselves with little prompting: they notice the brutal games on stilts, the relentless teasing and bullying, the scouting in the woods, all of which Malle alludes to in the passage mentioned above (37).

Moreover, Malle develops a related theme, namely that of the violence without versus the violence within. If life within the school walls is hostile, and in some senses perhaps a microcosm of the world beyond, then how much more so is it outside, where World War II is raging. Indeed, there is a compelling dichotomy between all the people who merely go about their daily business, whether as student, teacher, priest or servant, and the chaos of the world just beyond the seemingly protective school walls. As the film progresses, however, the exterior chaos cannot help but infiltrate the supposedly calm interior, and as it does, not only the children, but also the spectator, find themselves implicated in the tragic events of history.

These "tragic events," namely World War II and the Holocaust, connect directly to the theme of trying to grapple with the unfathomable in a world engaged in a struggle beyond comprehension. The element of incomprehensibility is highlighted by the point of view of the children, who

were “confrontés à des événements, à des ‘jeux,’ qui n’étaient pas de leur âge” (confronted with events, “games,” for which they were too young) (Pons 5). This discovery of what Malle refers to as the “monde absurde des adultes, avec sa violence et ses préjugés” (“the absurd world of adults with its violence and prejudices”) (*L’Avant-scène* 6) is especially poignantly rendered in Julien’s futile attempt to understand as he asks his elder brother the deceptively simple question, “What’s a Jew?” His sibling’s answer, as Malle points out, is “not satisfactory.” He continues the thought: “At the end of the day, the criteria by which people’s group identity is defined don’t amount to much. To someone aged eleven trying to make sense of the world, it really does seem very odd. Adults lead complicated lives” (Audé and Jeancolas 39). Like so many others of his time, Julien finds himself incapable of grasping a world in which such madness, such tragic and seemingly inexplicable violence could be taking place, especially one contiguous to and implicated in his own. Moreover, in some sense, he feels responsible. Malle declares as much at another point in the same interview: “My memories include the guilt which I’ve felt, which I’ve kept, which has influenced me all my life, my way of thinking, and my work. That guilt is a sense that what happened was profoundly unjust, that it should not have happened and that after all, we were all responsible” (34). The matter of guilt will be addressed in greater depth below.

The theme of struggling with unthinkable tragedy and the related feelings of guilt is directly connected to that of the gaze; as Malle says, “the screenplay is entirely about looks” (Audé and Jeancolas 45) and later, “*Au revoir les enfants* est un film de regards,” (Decock 672). This approach can doubtless be attributed, as Malle himself says, to the fact that he filmed documentaries such as *Calcutta* and *L’Inde fantôme* (Decock 672). Elisa New elaborates on the theme from her own critical stance:

Malle explores the watching that faces up to history versus the watching, prurient, that spies on horror. He shows us the activist watching, pacifist watching, the vigil’s watch, the sentry’s watch, and the watch of the avid child—all the manifold permutations and iterations of sight as it is aesthetic, social, and moral at the same time. (125)

Indeed, as the spectators watch the film, they follow the camera as it watches the boys, the boys as they watch each other, and the teachers and at times

even the Nazi occupation forces as they watch the boys. In the school, especially, we become acutely aware that the boys are always watched, that there is no privacy. Jean Bonnet, as a newcomer, is particularly conspicuous and so is watched even more than most, especially as he distinguishes himself through academic and musical ability. On a more individual level, Julien, himself gifted, observes Jean and vice versa until eventually the two become friends.

Ironically, though, it may be this friendship that causes Julien to feel he betrayed Jean: as the Gestapo enters the classroom and asks for Jean Bonnet, Julien cannot help but look at his friend. The camera, like the eye of the arresting officer, follows the protagonist's gaze and so Jean is apprehended and taken to get his belongings. While this apparently did not happen in Malle's "real" life, and it is doubtful that even in the film version of events Jean would have remained safe had Julien not glanced his way, the gaze transmits for the viewer the sense of guilt alluded to above (Audé and Jeancolas 34-35; Decock 673). The spectator should realize however that this is not guilt in the sense that he could have changed anything, but rather guilt for both witnessing and living in a world where such atrocities as the Holocaust could occur. In fact, Malle gets quite angry at certain interpretations which insinuate that he feels responsible for the entire Holocaust: "S'il y a une responsabilité collective, oui, je la partage, mais après tout j'étais ce petit Français comme les autres, un petit garçon de 11 ans dont la famille était active dans la résistance aux Allemands" (If there is any collective responsibility, then yes, I share it, but after all I was only a little French boy like the others, a little boy of 11 whose family was active in resisting the Germans) (Decock 674). Instead, Malle identifies his guilt as having assumed "two separate forms." The first resembles that identified above, "a general sense of guilt, at having belonged to a world where such things could happen" (Audé and Jeancolas 43). The second is linked more to his vocation as filmmaker, which he says "was a kind of guilt that is rooted in my sense of curiosity, of knowledge" (Audé and Jeancolas 43). His desire to understand, to seek the higher truth mentioned above, meant that he had to allow himself to be implicated in the events. As he says plainly, yet profoundly, "It's a question of ethics" (43). If the scene of the betraying gaze was strictly fictional creation, it was doubtless necessary, born of Malle's need to focus the spectator's attention beyond the events themselves and onto the plane of inquiry, both ethical and aesthetic, that drove him to make this film and indeed to make movies at all.

One might be tempted to assume that Julien's attempt to steal a glance at Bonnet, as well as his subsequent sentiments of guilt and betrayal, came from a common source, the friendship between the two. While this is true, they had not always been close, and another important aspect to the film is watching the connection between the two boys establish itself and grow. From uneasy, aggressive initial exchanges, it evolves into shared moments of complicity like hiding from the others to play the piano during an air raid, or reading *1001 Nights* by flashlight. As New points out, "the friends' happiest moments together have the rich and rounded quality of favorite chapters from boys' books, of exploits laid up in adventure fiction" (131). The portrayal of the two boys is never overly sentimental but instead acutely real and insightful. This is particularly true of the element mentioned by New, that the boys act as though they are in an "adventure fiction" (emphasis mine). Unfortunately, the adventure all too quickly becomes real, and it is in large part this transformation, combined with the careful way their friendship is depicted and developed, that causes the movie to have such a powerful impact on the viewer.

In other aspects of the film, the question of human relationships inevitably becomes more complex, to the point where the delineation between good and evil becomes murky and unstable. On the one hand, there are scenes in which the Nazis are harmless. In one notable scene, they are even shown as the "good" guys, as they order the French *milice* to let a Jewish gentleman finish his lunch in peace. Their reasons for doing so, however, depend entirely on circumstance, namely the Nazi officer's desire to impress Madame Quentin (New 136), as well as Malle's desire to avoid the cliché of showing "all Germans as brutes" (Audé and Jeancolas 37). On the other hand, it is a nun working in the school infirmary who gives away the location of the last Jewish child, the only one who had a chance to escape. When asked why he portrayed her thus, Malle responds, "Maybe that's my old anti-clericalism coming out. Let's just say that I thought it would be a good idea if Joseph weren't the only bastard in the film" (Audé and Jeancolas 42). This cannot be read as a blanket condemnation of the Church, however, for the headmaster, Père Jean, is an unequivocally good character, one for whose depiction "Malle risks cliché to offer a cinematic saint's life" (New 133). He truly lives by Christ's standards and sacrifices himself by helping the Resistance to save others' lives, regardless of faith or other circumstances. In fact, he holds himself and his faith to such a high standard that he dares preach against worldly gain and status to the pupils'

wealthy families, and refuses to give communion to an apparently semi-converted but improperly prepared Bonnet. Although one could argue that doing so would have helped protect Bonnet's secret, and moreover, that Père Jean could have easily forced Bonnet's conversion given the circumstances, he abstains. New gives an explanation for this move: "Refraining to press the advantage that many of his church did not scruple to press, Father Jean reminds us of the *quid pro quo* of baptism extracted from numerous helpless Jews by their rescuers. He refuses to exploit worldly circumstances for otherworldly gain" (134). In other words, Père Jean's faith and standards are absolutes to which few adhere in a world where so much has become relative.

At the other extreme from Père Jean is Joseph, the disabled young man who works as a servant at the school and who has received a lot of hard knocks in life. After being fired, some might say unjustly, for dealing student property in the black market, an activity in which Julien and his brother, along with other students, were complicit, he decides to betray the school to the Gestapo. As the entire school witnesses the arrest of the Jewish pupils and Père Jean, the spectator sees Joseph dressed in an ill-fitting but warm and reasonably stylish coat, obviously a reward for his services to the occupying forces. Julien runs into him dressed thus, and yet again finds himself struggling to understand the complex, cruel events unfolding around him. One might argue that Joseph was a victim of circumstance, that his marginalized position drove him to do something morally unacceptable, but the film does not seem to accept that conclusion. Rather, as New declares, "We are agents of choice, Malle stresses in Joseph" (135). Indeed, especially if we compare and contrast his actions with the actions of those of the other characters, we discover that Malle is asserting that we are all agents of free will and that regardless of religion, ideology, social class, nationality or other potentially mitigating factors, it is ultimately each individual's decision as to how he or she copes when confronted with even the hardest choices.

It should now be clear that this film contains various features that make it an ideal vehicle for target language discussion of religion, ethics, and values. There are the specifically religious themes of communion and conversion, as well as the larger question of whether the decision to do good is born of religion, ideology, personality or some other source such as individual or social circumstances. In a related vein, we can ask ourselves and our students if we have to let ourselves or others become victims or if

we are called to act, and if the latter is true, what can we do as individuals in a world gone horribly awry. To those unfamiliar with the film, the focus on children might lead to the supposition that such “heavy” or serious material is not involved. Yet as has been shown, the opposite is true, particularly as, to cite Malle, “Today’s eleven-year-olds must ask themselves the same questions we did” (Audé and Jeancolas 41). *Au revoir les enfants* raises issues of philosophical and spiritual significance as it forces the viewer to grapple with some of the most atrocious events in human history. Not only does the film help the viewer to understand a key time in France’s past, its themes remain relevant even today. As François-Régis Barbry says in his review, “Louis Malle parie sur l’actualité de cette menace qui pèse à tout moment sur l’enfance, sur toutes les enfances” (Louis Malle stakes his film on the relevance of this threat that continually hangs over childhood, everyone’s childhood) (*Cinéma* 87, qtd. in *L’Avant-scène* 77). Our students, confronted with the “War on Terror” and the war in Iraq, must ask themselves much the same questions as Julien, the film character, who can be identified with Malle, the “real-life” Julien turned *cinéaste*. The query “What’s a Jew?” is easily transposed into “What’s an Arab?” or “What’s a Muslim?” Such questions not only strengthen linguistic skills, but also critical, ethical and spiritual thinking as well. For all these reasons and more, *Au revoir les enfants* is eminently suitable for raising ethical and religious issues in the French classroom.

NOTES

¹ In fact, this very issue comes up in my Intermediate class with regards to *Argent de poche*, a film about children often accused of being “too” charming and sentimental.

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