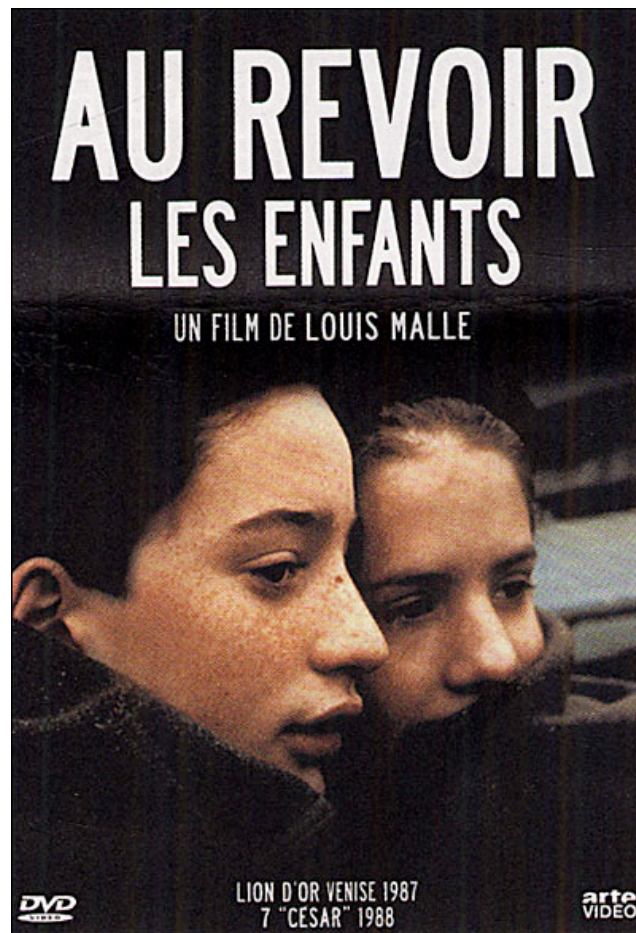


**Guilt & the Myth of the Innocent Bystander:
Louis Malle's *Au revoir les enfants***
Marie-Christine Jutras



Abstract

*This review studies the representation of director Louis Malle's experiences as a child in the Holocaust in the film *Au Revoir les enfants*. The film blurs the lines between the controversial categories of Holocaust participants as victims, bystanders, and perpetrators. This ambiguity and overlapping of roles in the film presents the question of treatment of Holocaust memory.*

When Louis Malle decided to release *Au revoir les enfants* in October of 1987, the French audience had already been primed by events related to the Holocaust and French guilt as bystanders and perpetrators. In 1985, Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* was shown on French television to millions of viewers and Lucien Bunel, also known as Father Jacques de Jésus, was posthumously recognized by Yad Vahem as "Righteous Among the Nations" for hiding Jewish boys in his Carmelite boarding school.¹⁸³ The trial of Klaus Barbie, 'the Butcher of Lyon,' began in May of 1987 and was closely followed by the media, as had been Eichmann's 1961 trial, immortalized by Hannah Arendt's 1963 *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. Then in September of 1987, France's extreme far-right Front National leader Jean-Marie Le Pen infamously declared that the Holocaust was a 'minor point' of the Second World War and was fined 1.2 million francs for a remark

· Editor's Note: *Yad Vashem*, an Israeli organization, is responsible for "Righteous Among the Nations," a program that seeks to recognize individuals who helped rescue Jewish victims during the Holocaust. For more information, visit their homepage: <http://yadvashem.org/>

¹⁸³ "Father Jacques," *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, <http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online/jacques/> (accessed March 31, 2010).

categorized as a form of Holocaust denial.¹⁸⁴ In this propitious period, *Au revoir les enfants* opened in France. Its director, Louis Malle, could not have orchestrated these events in a more favourable manner, had it been in his power to do so. The generation for which the film was geared was one that had grown up thinking of the French Occupation and the Holocaust as events belonging to antiquity but Malle brought back a complicated and troubling past to life in a deeply introspective fashion.¹⁸⁵ *Au revoir les enfants*, an oblique, understated treatment of the Holocaust, presents the semi-autobiographical account of the director's own experience as a rich Catholic schoolboy at Father Jacque's boarding school and of his relationship with one of the Jewish boys hiding there.¹⁸⁶ While Roman Polanski, himself a Holocaust survivor, adapted Władysław Szpilman's autobiography for *The Pianist* in 2002, Louis Malle, a witness of the capture of Jews, wrote, produced and directed *Au revoir les enfants* based upon his own recollection of the event.

¹⁸⁴ "Jean-Marie Le Pen renvoyé devant la justice pour ses propos sur l'Occupation," *Le Monde*, http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2006/07/13/jean-marie-le-pen-renvoye-devant-la-justice-pour-ses-propos-sur-l-occupation_794895_3224.html#ens_id=776560 (accessed November 18, 2010).

¹⁸⁵ Philip French, *Conversations avec... Louis Malle*, translated by Martine Leroy-Battistelli (Paris: Éditions Denoël, 1993), 214.

¹⁸⁶ Elisa New, "Good-bye, Children; Good-bye, Mary, Mother of Sorrows: The Church and the Holocaust in the Art of Louis Malle," *Prooftexts* 22, no. 2 (2002): 125; Stanley Hoffmann, "Neither Hope Nor Glory," *The New York Review of Books* 35, no. 8 (1988), http://www.nybooks.com/articles/article-preview?article_id=4423 (accessed April 1, 2010).

Starting with the final scene of the film in mind, when Father Jacques is arrested along with three Jewish boys by the Gestapo and bids the children goodbye, Malle worked backwards to create a storyline from the vivid memories of that “violent, brutal and barbaric” event which he had witnessed as an eleven year old.¹⁸⁷ On the morning of January 15th, 1944, a group of about seven Gestapo men arrived at 1, rue de la Charité in Avon, the site of the Carmelite boarding school Sainte-Thérèse de l’Enfant Jésus, located about sixty-five kilometres south of Paris. A former student who had joined the French resistance



Figure 1 Hans-Helmut Michel and his classmates

through the encouragement of the headmaster Father Jacques, had been captured and tortured by the Germans and had given away the hiding place of three Jewish students. The head of the school was arrested along with his Jewish protégées, and the establishment was closed down.¹⁸⁸ Anti-Nazi activist Serge Klarsfeld’s mammoth work on French children of the Holocaust identifies the three Jews, among 11,000 others, as

¹⁸⁷ “Plateau: Louis Malle,” interview, *ina.fr*, October 6, 1987, <http://www.ina.fr/art-et-culture/cinema/video/CAB87034441/plateau-louis-malle.fr.html> (accessed March 31, 2010); Philip French, *Conversations avec... Louis Malle*, translated by Martine Leroy-Battistelli (Paris: Éditions Denoël, 1993), 217.

¹⁸⁸ Susan Zuccotti, *The Holocaust, the French, and the Jews*, (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 244-245.

having been aboard Convoy 67 which departed from the assembly point of Melun on February 3, 1944, for the gas chambers of Auschwitz.¹⁸⁹ Hans-Helmut Michel, alias Henri Bonnet, on whom the character of Jean Bonnet/Kippelstein (Raphaël Fetjö) in *Au revoir les enfants* is based, was a German-Jew. His mother had been taken during the Paris Vélodrome d'Hiver roundups of foreign Jews in July of 1942.¹⁹⁰ As for Father Jacques, he perished on June 2, 1945, a few weeks after Mauthausen-Gusen was liberated, from tuberculosis and malnutrition which he had sustained during his incarceration there.¹⁹¹ It is of interest to note the similarity of his actions with that of the priest Bernhard Lichtenberg who prayed for the Jews and was sent to Dachau, perhaps the only member of the Catholic orders to be presented in a positive light in Gerald Green's script for the wildly popular *Holocaust* 1978 miniseries.

The task of retelling a story which concerns a few individual victims of the Holocaust allows Malle to create a very personal, touching and deeply thought-provoking film which brings into question the director's own involvement or lack thereof in the Holocaust. As his

¹⁸⁹ Serge Klarsfeld, *French Children of the Holocaust : a memorial*, edited by Susan Cohen, Howard M. Epstein, Serge Klarsfeld, translated by Glorianne Dupondt, Howard M. Epstein (New York & Paris: New York University Press, 1996), 322.

¹⁹⁰ Serge Klarsfeld, *French Children of the Holocaust : a memorial*, edited by Susan Cohen, Howard M. Epstein, Serge Klarsfeld, translated by Glorianne Dupondt, Howard M. Epstein (New York & Paris: New York University Press, 1996), 411.

¹⁹¹ "KZ Mauthausen-GUSEN Info-Pages: Father Jacques (Lucien Bunel)," *Mauthausen Aktiv GUSEN* <http://www.gusen.org/pers/bunel01x.htm> (accessed April 7, 2010).

biographer declares in an interview, “Malle realized that he had been a witness, had practically participated in an event of the Holocaust. He was troubled for not having grasped the significance of the event and for not having prevented it.”¹⁹² Therefore *Au revoir les enfants* partly takes on the role of making sense of that fateful January day and thus a “petit Louis Malle,” the character of Julien Quentin (Gaspard Manesse), is created as the main protagonist of the film so that the audience may follow the filmmaker’s recollection of the event more than forty years later. The film serves to ‘correct’ the event by having Quentin be much more aware of the Jewish boy than Malle ever was and the friendship which blossoms between the two boys is added quite clearly with the purpose of making a commercially successful film.¹⁹³ Another aspect of the story which Malle completely invents is that of the informer, who in the film is the extremely ill-treated, lame kitchen boy Joseph (François Négret), rather than a former student.¹⁹⁴

Yet the film strives to remain accurate in the historicity of its settings; many aspects of *Au revoir les enfants* casts the period of Occupation France rather admirably. The colours of the film are dark and muted, as we see

¹⁹² “Interview with Pierre Billard,” *The Supplements: 3 Films by Louis Malle*, DVD, produced by Kate Elmore, 2005, (New York: The Criterion Collection, 2006).

¹⁹³ “Interview with Pierre Billard,” *The Supplements: 3 Films by Louis Malle*, DVD, produced by Kate Elmore, 2005, (New York: The Criterion Collection, 2006).

¹⁹⁴ Philip French, *Conversations avec... Louis Malle*, translated by Martine Leroy-Battistelli (Paris: Éditions Denoël, 1993), 204.

the priests dressed in dark brown monks' robes and the students in navy breeches, the sky in northern France perpetually gray. Malle had in fact envisioned a color film devoid of colors.¹⁹⁵ The overall effect of this realism is to give the viewers a glimpse of a frigid, hostile environment which in retrospect is filled with a gloomy sense of impending catastrophe. The students and teachers of the Petit Collège are portrayed as the "innocent bystanders." Still, by comparing them with the usual perpetrators, the Germans and the French collaborators, I believe that it is possible to come away with an understanding of *Au revoir les enfants* which places it among the exceptionally complex treatments of the Holocaust in film. It is significant that there are no scenes of concentration camps and the violence of the actual events is excised from the film. When the Jewish boys made their exit through the courtyard in which the boys were assembled and where Father Jacques bid them farewell, "Bonnet appeared bruised from a beating that he had already received at the hands of his captors."¹⁹⁶ This real detail is omitted from the film and it may serve to heighten the false sense of security that the boys felt at the boarding school, a point which is an important aspect of Malle's retelling of the event.

¹⁹⁵ Philip French, *Conversations avec... Louis Malle*, translated by Martine Leroy-Battistelli (Paris: Éditions Denoël, 1993), 209.

¹⁹⁶ Hugo Frey, *Louis Malle*, (New York and Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 117.

At the beginning of the film, eleven year old protagonist Quentin is shown as a clingy, petulant mommy's boy when his mother drops him off at a train station after the Christmas holidays. Quentin presents a different façade altogether at the school, where he pretends to be tough and is the smartest kid in the class – that is, until Jean Bonnet arrives on the scene – but he is in fact a bed wetter and suffering from

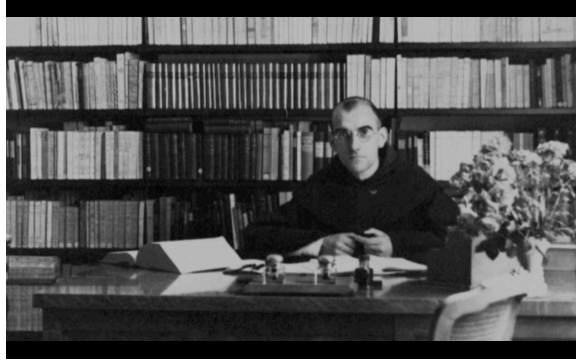


Figure 2 Father Jacques de Jésus

a vitamin deficiency and frostbite. We learn of these ailments when he has trouble kneeling at confession with Father Jean (Philippe Maurier-Genoud), the fictionalized character of Father Jacques de Jésus. Malle's "love of ambiguity is really the rejection of any absolute, definitive truth, of defining people as either good or bad, black or white"¹⁹⁷ and this affinity is made evident throughout the film, where each character presents a surprising side which is supposed to remain hidden from view. Instead of relying on clichés, Malle creates specific situations which lend weight to the characters which he depicts. The Carmelite priests are stern figures who must maintain discipline among the ninety or so students and they, perhaps unjustly, fire the kitchen boy Joseph. Yet

¹⁹⁷ "Interview with Pierre Billard," *The Supplements: 3 Films by Louis Malle*, DVD, produced by Kate Elmore, 2005, (New York: The Criterion Collection, 2006).

their heroism comes from the care that they display towards the Jewish boys by taking them in, and, in the case of Father Jean, sharing their fate. Even though the non-Jewish students are from high bourgeois families, the Petit Collège lacks warm water and showers, the food is deplorable and the teachers keep their coats on while giving the lessons because of the cold. The school's fat boy faints during mass because he is anaemic. It is significant that the state of spoiled rich boys is reduced to such circumstances, which only serves to emphasise the deplorable existence which other members of French society must have been enduring over the same period, even to say nothing of the Jews. A central paradox of the film is of course brought to light when Quentin snoops into his classmate's closet and realizes that Jean Bonnet is not Bonnet but rather Jean Kippelstein.

If one chooses to compare *Au revoir les enfants* to other cinematic treatments of the Holocaust with regards to the depiction of Nazis, in Malle's film the occupiers are far from stereotypical trigger-happy monsters. The Wehrmacht soldiers in Malle's movie come to see the priests at the school for confession and in a particularly arresting scene, they even act as rescuers of lost boys. Dusk is falling as Quentin and Bonnet have gotten lost in the Fontainebleau woods while playing a game of capture the flag. Before the boys find each other, Malle presents his audience with a long sequence of Quentin running through the woods, his gasping breath clearly

audible, as he escapes the other team of boys. The scene is reminiscent of Jan Nemec's frantic and tense 1964 *Démanty noci*, "Diamonds in the Night," yet whereas Quentin is running away from his own classmates in a child's game, Bonnet, as a Jew in hiding, is being hunted by people who want him dead. When the two boys finally meet up, Bonnet asks Quentin if there are wolves in the woods. It is a question that is typical of the overly imaginative child's mind, but it is also symbolic. As a child living undercover, Bonnet is constantly at risk. His perpetual state of being, that of constant anxiety, is as ragged and anxious as Julien's breath was heard a few moments previously. When they finally come to a road, the boys meet up with a German patrol car. Quentin at first remains standing, relieved to have found some adults who will take care of him, but Bonnet runs frantically into the woods, an act which clearly shows that he associates the image German soldier with that of the hunter, the 'wolf' who is looking for him. The scenario of running into the woods while being pursued by Nazis is certainly a nightmarish scene, as evidenced in Nemec's *Démanty noci*. While the two boys in Nemec's film are likely shot after having been captured by a group of geriatric Jew hunters, Quentin and Bonnet are rescued by young Nazi soldiers. The Nazi soldiers in this scene of *Au revoir les enfants* are shown as humane and decent fellows; they bring the two boys back to the boarding school and tell them that "we Bavarians are Catholics too, you know." Even when one of the other boys at the school call them 'Krauts' (les Boches), the

soldier is unfazed by the slur and he simply reminds Father Jean of the curfew laws, also asking for his blanket back, which he had wrapped caringly around the two cold boys.

If anything, it is rather the collaborating Frenchmen who are made to look most culpable in Malle's movie. In a pivotal scene, that of the Sunday lunch where Quentin's mother takes him, his brother and Bonnet out to the restaurant, the Luftwaffe men have a verbal confrontation with the French Militia when the latter ask a Jewish gentleman for his papers. Madame Quentin is thoroughly impressed by the dashing soldiers who stand up to the Militia, but this event serves to underline that according to Malle, the French collaborators were more aggressive and zealous than the Nazi soldiers.¹⁹⁸ Much more upsetting than the nameless militiamen is Joseph, the boy who betrays Father Jean and the three Jews after he is fired for black market activity by the headmaster and chooses to take his revenge by acting as an informant to the Gestapo.

From the earliest scenes in the movie, the young Catholic boarding school students are shown to be very rough with each other but it is Joseph that they treat worst of all, telling him that he stinks, that he is a creep, jeering "Down, Joseph, to your kennel!" in one

¹⁹⁸ Philip French, *Conversations avec... Louis Malle*, translated by Martine Leroy-Battistelli (Paris: Éditions Denoël, 1993), 207.

especially cruel sequence. Though Malle still presents the children as vulnerable and fragile when he films the boys shivering under their blankets in the dormitory and having nightmares during the night, he refuses to indulge in the trite fiction of innocent childhood. One of the themes of *Au revoir les enfants* may well be that of complicity in guilt, for involvement in the Holocaust does not even escape the youngest members of society. A few of the children, including Quentin and his older brother, trade their personal food storages for black market cigarettes, collectable stamps and marbles instead of sharing them with their fellow hungry classmates. The black market go-between is the lame Joseph. It is in part because of their activities that he gets fired from his job as a kitchen help, which then motivates his collaboration with the Gestapo. The injustice of the priests' decision to fire Joseph and refusal to expel the complicit boys "because it would cause their parents grief" is hard to take for the audience has grown to empathise with Joseph. The kitchen boy is shown as a member of the working class, a person who suffers unjustly while the rich children are simply grounded until the Easter holidays. It is thus interesting to place *Au revoir les enfants* in the category

of what Harvard scholar Stanley Hoffmann believes is “a familiar French genre: bourgeois self-criticism, if not self-hatred.”¹⁹⁹ Because of his class and standing as the son of a wealthy industrialist,



Figure 3 Julien Quentin (Gaspard Manesse) steals a glance at Bonnet/Kippelstein (Raphaël Jejtö)

Quentin is let off easily by the priests, while Joseph is turned away, destitute. When he chooses to take his revenge by betraying Father Jean and the three Jewish boys, it is seen as a heartbreaking perpetuation of unfairness. I would however like to stress the fact that Joseph is a character that is made up by Malle, perhaps to account for the guilt that he feels in having been a helpless witness to a crime of the Holocaust. In his review of the film, Stanley Hoffmann writes that

The outcome has haunted Malle for forty years: the non-Jewish boys survived, the Jews died in Auschwitz and the good priest in Mauthausen. Clearly, he still feels guilty, if not for the part he played, at least for the failure of so many of the French, and of the members of his class in particular, to save the victims of the Nazis.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁹ Hoffmann, “Neither Hope Nor Glory.”

²⁰⁰ Hoffmann, “Neither Hope Nor Glory.”

The need to explain the feeling of being indirectly responsible for the death of his classmate is further depicted in the climax scene where



Figure 4 Louis Malle directing Jean Bonnet/Kippelstein (Rapha  l Je  t  ) in the scene where the boy waves his final goodbye.

the Gestapo enters Quentin's classroom and asks which of the boys is Jean Kippelstein. The camera moves from the Gestapo officer who appears distracted by a map on the wall, to Quentin who steals a fateful backward glance at Bonnet/Kippelstein. The officer catches the glimpse and moves directly to Bonnet/Kippelstein, telling him to get up without further ado. The effect of this scene, which is also fictional, serves to explain, to place Malle's guilt in the story of betrayal and inexplicable unfairness which is presented through *Au revoir les enfants*. Literary critic Lynn Higgins believes that through the scene of Quentin's furtive backwards glance, which unintentionally gives away Bonnet/Kippelstein's identity to the Gestapo, "Malle's film not only *portrays* a mechanism of involuntary complicity but also *enacts* it."²⁰¹

Therefore in the grand scope of Holocaust films, *Au revoir les enfants* may be seen as a director's attempt to

²⁰¹ Lynn A. Higgins, *New Novel, New Wave, New Politics: Fiction and the Representation of History in postwar France*, (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 200.

come to terms with a troubling incident which marked his childhood. As a child, it is difficult to imagine what Louis Malle could have done to prevent the capture of Hans-Helmut Michel. In his film, he tries to cushion the event of his sacrificial headmaster's arrest along with that of the Jews in a fictionalized story which places more blame on himself than could possibly be appropriated if he had not added the character of Joseph or the classroom incident where he gives away Bonnet/Kippelstein to the Gestapo. Perhaps it is a way of accusing his society, that of Occupied France, which allowed for both conscious and unthinking collaboration to happen. In essence, *Au revoir les enfants* is a work of self-incrimination. If such a horrendous conclusion can in fact be attributed to a young boy, the degree to which Malle is responsible for the deaths of his classmates is unclear. But through the filter of the director's imagination, *Au revoir les enfants* makes the point of marking the category of innocent bystander as null.

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