

Super-Temporality and “Phantom Thread”

Few days ago, I had a chance to watch a new film by Paul Thomas Anderson titled *Phantom Thread* (2017). The initial comment I want to make is that the film is on par with *The Master* (2012) and *There Will Be Blood* (2007), both directed by Anderson, in terms of its cinematic excavation that exposes the depth of human psyche with a super-temporal touch. What do I mean by “super-temporal touch”? It is when a film is set in a certain period of time in the past that exists outside the realm of our history.

Super-temporality is a type of science fiction, for it ultimately showcases an alternate or an imagined world. Imagery could be based on the past, present, or future. For example, Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Stalker* (1979) is set in a fictional future but the world within the film *looks* as though it is in the present time (well, present time in the 1970s Russia).

Super-temporality is not unique to cinema. It is rather a method of artistic presentation. A novel *Never Let Me Go* (2005) written by Kazuo Ishiguro is set in a dystopian future but the objects presented in the novel are those that belong to 20th century, our past. So, what does super-temporality do in cinema specifically?

Let’s go back to *Phantom Thread*. Because the film is super-temporal, the audience is thrown into a realm of fantasy that looks familiar. Such familiarity allows the audience to expect some sort of a story based on history. However, the beauty of super-temporality is that it does not play out the expected story because it simply is not based on history we know. In turn, it allows the film to dig deep into the psychological workings of the characters. In short, super-temporality dresses up the psychological examination of the camera with historical images that evoke expectations for a dramatic narrative.

The challenge with super-temporal films is that many audience are frustrated, or even let down, by the lack of dramatic narrative in the film. *Phantom Thread*, in particular, had huge expectations from the audience that it was going to be about a period piece based on a famous fashion designer, which the film did not turn out to be. What the super-temporality allows the film to do instead is that it takes a character who is introduced as a fashion designer and takes him out of the historical backdrop and places him in his own realm. As such, a super-temporal film gives the audience an experience. Particularly, an experience into the psychological landscape where we get to ‘encounter ourselves’. There are many films that make us reflect our lives but super-temporal films allow us to *encounter* our lives through the frame.

As super-temporality is an experience rather than reading a paper on it, I shall recommend here few super-temporal films that you might enjoy if you enjoyed watching *Phantom Thread*:

- *Stalker* (1979) directed by Andrei Tarkovsky
- *Dogtooth* (2009) directed by Yorgos Lanthimos
- *The White Ribbon* (2009) directed by Michael Haneke

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