

# French filmmaker Olivier Assayas' *Suspended Time*: Did “time stand still” during the height of the pandemic?

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*Suspended Time (Hors du temps)* is a 2024 film by veteran French writer-director Olivier Assayas, now available for streaming. It takes place during the height of the COVID lockdown in 2020. Two brothers and their girlfriends are confined to the brothers' family home in the charming countryside southwest of Paris.

The fiction film has distinctly autobiographical features. The house is Assayas's father and mother's house. The books, the furniture, the pictures on the wall and so forth are his family's. Assayas is the narrator of the film as well. The filmmaker and his brother were quarantined together in 2020.

But the brothers in the film are characters played by actors—Paul Berger (Vincent Macaigne), a stand-in for the director, and Etienne Berger (Misha Lescot). Their partners are Morgane (Nine d'Urso) and Carole (Nora Hamzawi), respectively. Paul also has an ex-wife Flavia (Maud Wyler), with whom he shares custody of a charming, talkative, slightly manipulative daughter Britt (Magdalena Lafont).

*Suspended Time* begins ominously enough. At first, it seems to suggest that, after all, the pandemic has a “silver lining,” at least for Paul. “Here time had stopped.” He has the opportunity to confront “too many memories,” a house “too loaded, too dense” with emotional baggage and work through his feelings about his father and grandfather, in particular. “Time stood still,” we are told again, as the camera examines the volumes, bound in different colors according to subject matter, in the father's library. Paul enjoys the hours spent in isolation and in nature.

According to one admiring critic, “It's a film about a ‘miraculous time-out’ that coincided with COVID, which, despite some people's unraveling from the experience, allowed others to take stock of their lives.”

France experienced one of the highest total number of COVID cases in the world, more than 40 million (third after the US and India) and some 168,000 deaths (tenth-highest globally). Behind these statistics lies immense suffering, first of all, physical but also psychological and economic. If *Suspended Time* did nothing other than suggest that the pandemic was useful as a “time-out” and the opportunity “to take stock” for

the complacent upper middle class, one could only regard it with disdain.

Indeed, early on, one wonders to oneself in the face of the idyllic images of a well-appointed house and lush grounds during a horrifying pandemic: truly, is there a social layer anywhere more conservative, national-parochial than this self-satisfied, superficially and eclectically cultured French petty bourgeoisie, which must have the right colored book covers, the proper wine for the region, season and time of day, the most fashionable clothing, etc., but has important thoughts and feelings about almost nothing?

The film improves, however, or at least in sections. Paul does acknowledge the wider suffering and pays tribute to workers taking “the biggest risks.” He also admits that current world realities are painful for many people. “Right now, nothing gives me hope,” he blurts out. The earnest, slightly fumbling Macaigne is a likeable performer, a little bit like someone out of a better Woody Allen film. He speaks to his therapist on a video call, with his cellphone or iPad leaning against the trunk of a large tree. At the end of the session, referring to their next online time together, he jokes: “Same time, same tree.” He and the equally down-to-earth d'Urso bring something human and sincere to the work, which definitely needs that element.

The brothers bicker over COVID regulations. Paul follows them rigorously, leaving packages outside for hours, regularly wearing gloves and stripping off and laundering his clothes after every excursion outside the home. Etienne, a music journalist, pays tribute to musicians who have died in the pandemic, including John Prine, but is the more selfish of the pair.

The most revealing sequence, whether the filmmaker realizes it or not, occurs during one of the siblings' numerous spats. As noted, Paul is meticulous about hygiene and health, while Etienne spends much of his time making crepes and grousing about the quarantine. Finally, the latter boils over, denouncing the lockdown as an intolerable, unbearable attack on his “freedom.” Here one sees dramatized the social and psychological link between the 60s' bohemian anarchistic type and the far-right “anti-vaxxer.” It is a valuable, telling moment.

Unfortunately, however, to repeat, *Suspended Time* between middle class obliviousness and awareness of graver, widespread difficulties. Despite the anxieties, Paul muses, “I liked the confinement.” And “It felt like a utopia, and that utopia has to end.” But later, “Stillness is not a utopia. Stillness is nothingness. ... I am terrified of living in a pandemic world.”

Paul muses about the need for a new kind of cinema under these conditions, but what kind of cinema? Assayas’s history does not suggest that he has the most profound answer to that question.

The writer-director came to international prominence in the 1990s with a series of films, including *Cold Water* (1994), *Irma Vep* (1996) and *Late August, Early September* (1998). In a generally bleak time for French and world cinema, Assayas’s intelligent but chilly films were greeted with praise by certain critics.

On the other hand, we argued in 1999, that what distinguished Assayas’s films was

their almost complete lack of spontaneity. Assayas ... knows what a good film looks like. Instead of making a work that really means something to him, unfortunately, he seems to want to be thought highly of. His films, where everything is arranged for effect, sink under the weight of their self-consciousness.

A decade later, we commented that Assayas was a

product, or victim, of a difficult cultural period. The director began making feature films in the late 1980s and came to prominence in the mid-1990s. ... The director and many of his generation in the French film industry rejected political engagement—they were “beyond all that.” These clever youngsters saw through (in other words, thought they saw through) everything, repudiated both Left and Right, only the personal and intimate concerned them, etc.

In an interview Assayas once explained how his family developed a virulent anticommunism. His father started out political life as a Stalinist but then turned against the Communist Party,

became a Gaullist, and after that became extremely anti-Stalinian. My mother was Hungarian. Her family fled Hungary once the Communists took over; they left everything behind. There was not much love for the Communist system in my family.

In other words, *Time* break from and critique of Stalinism and later Maoism, *in a right-wing direction*. Assayas made his way to Guy Debord, the postmodern ideologist and author of *Society of the Spectacle* (1967). Debord, one of dozens of superficial anti-Marxist “left” commentators on postwar society, argued that media, television and advertising had produced a situation where “all of life” now presented itself “as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation.”

In the same interview, Assayas asserted, following Debord,

that the reality of oppression—of the power within modern society—is invisible and unformulated. It’s a way of understanding the world and not putting politics where movies usually put them. Like some kind of class struggle, which still exists to extremely brutal levels, of course. But the reality of the oppression is not there. That’s the visible side of it. *The deeper truth of it is invisible and has nothing to do with everyday phenomena.* (World Picture)

This amorphous double-talk helps explain the non-committal character of his films. The filmmaker’s neglect of social reality is explained away on the basis that “visible” phenomena, like wars, poverty and inequality, are superficial—“the reality of oppression is not there”—and beneath the attention of the serious artist, attuned to “invisible” vibrations.

Nonetheless, COVID and other contemporary events seem to have shaken Assayas somewhat. Despite everything, the film is more genuine and lifelike than some of his earlier, dangerously pretentious works.



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