

Critique

N Vidyashankar

Sentimental Value – Private Pain into Public Art



Sentimental Value (2025)

Joachim Trier's Norwegian film, *Sentimental Value*, was the surprise winner of the Grand Prix award at the prestigious Cannes Film Festival this year. Not that it is not deserving of it, but the fact is that Cannes has historically been a platform to recognise films of socio-political significance and cinematic experimentation, rather than personal existential conflicts. That too, when it had stronger contenders like Oliver Laxe's *Sirât*, a post-apocalyptic Moroccan desert saga, *Two Prosecutors*, by Ukrainian director Sergei Loznitsa, and Kleber Mendonça Filho's *The Secret Agent*, all of which had shown far more urgency in dealing with the contemporary crises of society. In contrast, *Sentimental*

Value is an introspective, emotionally textured film that explores grief, artistic legacy, and the complex dynamics of a fractured family. Following the critical success of *The Worst Person in the World*, Trier reunites with Renate Reinsve to create a work that explores the tension between personal history and creative expression.

The film centres on Nora (Reinsve), a successful yet emotionally burdened stage actress, and her sister Agnes (Inga Ibsdotter Lilleaas), following the death of their mother. Their estranged father, Gustav (Stellan Skarsgård), a once-acclaimed filmmaker, returns after a prolonged absence—not to mourn, but to present Nora with a screenplay

based on their family's history. The film he wishes to make is autobiographical, drawing from the suicide of his mother and set in the family's ancestral home—a creaky Victorian house filled with generational memories.

Nora, still reeling from years of emotional neglect, rejects his offer. The rejection is not just of a role, but of the man and what he represents: a father who prioritised his career over his children. Gustav, undeterred, casts American actress Rachel Kemp (Elle Fanning) in Nora's place. Rachel, eager for artistic depth, immerses herself in the role to the point of mimicking Nora's appearance and demeanour, creating an uncomfortable doppelgänger dynamic. This substitution exacerbates the familial rift, raising questions about authenticity, appropriation, and the ethics of turning private pain into public art.

The film-within-the-film structure blurs the line between performance and reality, memory and fiction. Scenes unfold as discrete vignettes, often punctuated by abrupt fades to black, marking emotional ellipses that give the audience space to reflect. These stylistic choices reinforce the theme that healing is a fragmented, nonlinear, and rarely complete process.

The film is anchored by the family home, a character in its own right. Through Nora's childhood perspective—introduced via a school essay that imagines the house's point of view—we see the building as a repository of both trauma and tenderness. It has witnessed marital conflict, parental estrangement, and sisterly solidarity. Trier's images reflect the tension between nostalgia and pain, the house's dual nature: shelter and prison.

Performance is at the film's core. Reinsve excels as Trier's muse, portraying Nora with aching vulnerability and quiet resilience. Veteran Skarsgård brings gravitas to Gustav, infusing the character with equal parts charm and egotism. His motivations remain ambiguous: is his film a sincere attempt at reconciliation or another act of self-centred myth-making? Fanning impresses as Rachel, a Hollywood outsider who tries to inhabit a role far removed from her own experience. Rather than villainising her, Trier allows her nuance—she is not trying to replace Nora, but to understand her.

Agnes, the quieter sister, serves as a grounding presence. While more forgiving of Gustav, she bears her scars, having once been a child actor in his films. Her pragmatic warmth contrasts with Nora's fragility, and their evolving bond becomes one of the film's emotional linchpins. A late scene where Agnes encourages Nora to read the role aloud—her voice trembling with recognition—is a moment of catharsis, bridging the chasm between performance and truth.

Sentimental Value is deeply concerned with the ways trauma echoes across generations. The suicide of Gustav's mother—implied to be linked to wartime trauma—is the emotional nucleus around which the narrative revolves. Gustav's attempt to confront this legacy through cinema becomes a mirror for his daughters' attempts to reconcile their pasts.

The film's conclusion is deliberately ambiguous: Gustav finds brief solace directing his grandson, while Nora and Agnes sift through their mother's belongings, trying to make sense of what to keep and what to

leave behind. The objects in the home—photographs, journals, heirlooms—carry not just sentimental value but emotional weight. Letting go becomes a metaphor for growth.

Thematically, for cinephiles, the film echoes the work of Ingmar Bergman, where familial estrangement and artistic identity collide. Yet Trier injects his voice, balancing introspection with humour and warmth. Jokes about Netflix deals and film retrospectives poke fun at the industry, while Rachel's efforts to understand Nora through Instagram are oddly tender, not satirical.

There is also commentary on the commodification of pain. Gustav, consciously or not, exploits his family's suffering for artistic capital. This is most evident in Rachel's casting, projecting Nora's truth through a more bankable proxy. The ethical murkiness of this act is never resolved, but Trier invites us to sit with the discomfort.

Stylistically, *Sentimental Value* is elegant and restrained. The house's ambient

sounds—the creaking floorboards, the hum of pipes—form a sonic tapestry of memory. Editing-wise, the film avoids melodramatic swells, except in one sequence where the sisters merge into a single emotional state, opting instead for a subdued, theatrical rhythm that reflects its themes of performance and concealment.

While the film can feel slightly overlong and indulgent in places—especially during the film-within-a-film sequences—it ultimately delivers a poignant meditation on the limits of communication. Forgiveness is not always possible, but mercy, as the film suggests, might be. The final moments hint at restoration, not through grand gestures, but through small, shared silences.

Premiering at the 2025 Cannes Film Festival, *Sentimental Value* received a long-standing ovation and won the Grand Prix. It is a film about the stories we inherit, the roles we refuse to play, and the homes we carry inside us—whether we like it or not.

N Vidyashankar is a member of FIPRESCI-India.