Critique

Kaushik Nath

The Architecture of Family Conflict in *Sentimental Value*

Joachim Trier's *Sentimental Value* is a profound meditation on fractured family dynamics, premiering at the 2025 Cannes Film Festival where it claimed the Grand Prix award. Co-written by Trier and Eskil Vogt, the film orchestrates a reunion between estranged siblings Nora and Agnes with their father Gustav, setting this intimate drama within the confines of a decaying family estate.

The production has garnered significant international recognition, securing nominations at the 83rd Golden Globe Awards and the 98th Academy Awards, with Stellan Skarsgård winning Best Supporting Actor at the Golden Globes [1]. The film's architectural approach to representing internal family ruptures through physical space and symbolic detail has been praised by many including myself. Something which has inspired me to write and share among film lovers of the world of cinema.

The narrative structure unfolds around a generational house that serves as far more than mere setting. Opening with a panoramic cemetery view before establishing the family residence, Trier invites viewers into a world where environmental decay mirrors emotional deterioration. The visible cracks and fissures in the structure function as visual manifestations of the broken relationships within its walls.

This mise-en-scène recalls Shakespearean tragedy, particularly echoing

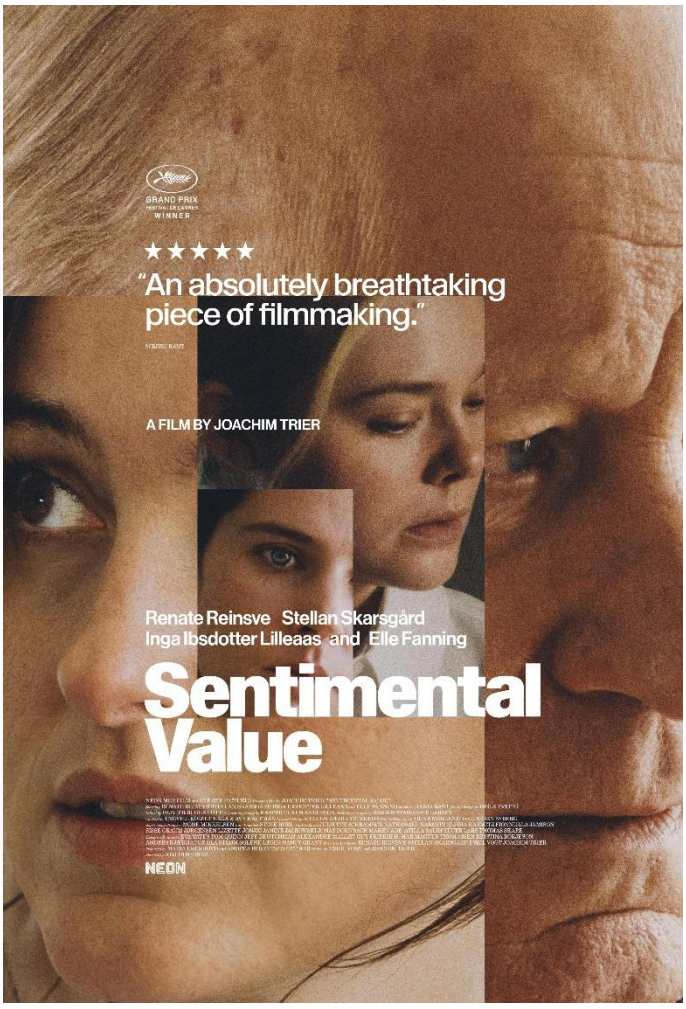
the dynastic collapse in King Lear, where architectural and familial integrity intertwine. The house becomes a character unto itself, its deterioration inseparable from the psychological states of those inhabiting it [2].

King Lear's storm scene is rendered a modern outlook as well in the climax of the movie we are discussing. Both the fathers are seen to be tormented by the idea of their personal decisions that somehow were mistakes in their own eyes. In the present film, the father lands up in the hospital at the moment when Nora realizes that she is the central character of her father's new movie and her suicide attempt was clearly portrayed in the project.

At the film's emotional core lie two sisters whose relationships with their father diverge dramatically. Agnes demonstrates greater attachment and receptivity toward Gustav, while Nora exhibits protective emotional distance. Nora's refusal to perform in her father's film project represents more than simple career hesitation; it symbolizes her resistance to collusion in her father's artistic endeavors and a rejection of superficial reconciliation.

This dynamic introduces ethical complexity absent from conventional family dramas. Rather than presenting her withdrawal as merely defensive pathology, the film suggests Nora's emotional guardedness as a legitimate response to years of household instability. Her childhood insomnia induced by constant parental conflict becomes a somatic manifestation of psychological trauma [2].

The pillow emerges as a particularly potent symbol throughout the film. As Nora's childhood refuge, it represents both comfort and resistance, muffling the sounds of household turbulence. This humble object encapsulates her survival strategy, creating barriers against emotional intrusion while desperately seeking rest and peace. Such symbolic economy reflects Trier's directorial sophistication, where every element carries thematic weight. The pillow functions as what film theorists might term a "transitional object," representing the psychological boundary between intolerable reality and necessary illusion [3].



Another powerful symbol highlighted in the movie is the story of the Footstool. The father refers to the footstool as the device that was used in a family suicide long ago. The symbol repeats itself at the end of the movie when Nora watches it pensively when Erik leaves the room.

Literary Resonances and Artistic Aspiration

Central to understanding *Sentimental Value*'s thematic architecture is its deployment of Anton Chekhov's The Seagull (1896). Within the film, Nora attempts to recite lines from the play, specifically from the character Nina. We can recall that Chekhov's work explores unrequited love, the tormented pursuit of artistic recognition, and the devastating consequences of disillusionment [4].

The play depicts characters ensnared in cycles of envy, disappointment, and failed ambitions, perpetually confronting the chasm between their romanticized aspirations and mundane reality [4].

The parallels between The Seagull and Trier's film are striking and intentional. Both works examine how artistic ambition can corrode familial bonds, how romantic ideals collapse beneath life's pressures, and how individuals become trapped repeating destructive patterns.

Gustav's character is a filmmaker presumably pursuing artistic vision and it mirrors the narcissistic self-absorption found throughout Chekhov's dramatic universe. The father figure's demand that his daughter participate in his creative project echoes the play's exploration of how artistic pursuits often demand personal sacrifice from those closest to their practitioners [2].

The literary reference deepens the film's emotional and philosophical dimensions, suggesting that this specific family dysfunction participates in universal patterns of human struggle and failure.

In a particularly revealing scene, Gustav questions his daughters about matters of faith and religious belief. This moment carries autobiographical resonance through Skarsgård's own documented skepticism regarding organized religion, a position he has publicly maintained throughout his career [5].

The conflation of actor and character underscores how performance and identity blur within the film's framework. Skarsgård's embodiment of a spiritually skeptical father becomes inseparable from his own publicly articulated philosophy, adding layers of authenticity and complexity to the character's spiritual interrogations [5].

Recognition and Cultural Impact

The critical and institutional reception of *Sentimental Value* demonstrates significant cultural resonance. At the Academy Awards, the film secured nine nominations, establishing it as a major contender across multiple categories [1]. Most significantly, it

became the first Norwegian film to win the Best International Feature Film award, a milestone reflecting both the film's quality and broader recognition of Scandinavian cinema's artistic contributions [1]. This achievement carries particular weight in cinema history, representing Norwegian film industry maturation on Hollywood's most prestigious stage.

The film's nomination for Best Picture places intimate family drama alongside spectacles and blockbusters, validating character-driven storytelling at a moment when such films face considerable commercial headwinds. Renate Reinsve's nomination for Best Actress underscores the nuanced performance required to embody a character like Nora, someone whose emotional complexity involves resistance, vulnerability, and hard-won authenticity. The dual nominations for Best Supporting Actress alongside Skarsgård's competitive position across major awards ceremonies illustrate the ensemble's strength and the film's multiperspectival approach to family narrative [1].

It is worth mentioning that such narratives should pervade through the cinematic aspirations of regional industries which fail to address mainstream issues properly. Say for example, in contemporary times, film makers from Assam, India are not successful in delineating the family dynamics in their cinema. This is in contrast to Assamese family movies of yesteryear where such subjects were dealt with meticulously.

In the movies of Bhabendra Nath Sakia, the family architecture was very strong and each character is so evocative in nature that few dialogues would do wonders instead of monotonous array of word-stock.

Family Reunion as Narrative Architecture

The reunion structure itself carries profound significance. Rather than depicting an idealized family reconciliation, the conventional endpoint of family drama, *Sentimental Value* treats reunion as a catalyst for revealing deeper fractures and confronting unresolved trauma. The gathering becomes an occasion for examining why estrangement occurred and whether reconnection is actually desirable or merely habitual. This approach demonstrates maturity in contemporary drama, resisting simplistic narratives of forgiveness and healing in favor of honest assessment of damaged relationships [2].

The film's title itself carries ironic weight. "*Sentimental value*" typically denotes objects cherished for emotional rather than economic worth—items retained not because they function well but because they connect us to the past. Applied to family relationships, the phrase suggests bonds maintained primarily through nostalgia and obligation rather than present affection or respect. The film interrogates whether familial ties possess genuine value beyond sentiment, whether relationships should continue simply because they once mattered, and what individuals owe

to those who share their biological heritage [3].

Trier's Directorial Vision

Joachim Trier brings distinctive sensibility to *Sentimental Value*, building upon his reputation for exploring psychological interiority and social fracture. His previous films have consistently examined how personal trauma intersects with broader social contexts, how individuals navigate between authenticity and performance, and how relationships deteriorate under pressure. In this drama, Trier demonstrates masterful control of spatial composition, temporal rhythm, and emotional calibration. The house functions simultaneously as realistic setting, symbolic architecture, and psychological landscape—a multimedia representation of internal states made manifest [2].

The cinematography and production design work in concert with performance to create an atmosphere of managed despair. The generational house with its cracks, its declining furniture, its accumulated history becomes increasingly claustrophobic as the film progresses, suggesting how family spaces can transform from settings of safety into chambers of confinement and control. Trier's direction manages the tension between intimacy and isolation, between moments of connection and the inevitable withdrawals that follow failed attempts at reconciliation [3].

According to Roger Ebert , "*Sentimental Value*" succeeds because its family dynamics feel authentically lived-in. Skarsgard, Reinsve, and Lilleas inhabit their roles with remarkable specificity, grounding the film in genuine moments rather than emotional exposition. A standout scene captures this perfectly: when Gustav buys inappropriate DVDs for his grandson, Reinsve's knowing laugh feels earned and intimate. [6]

The pair shares a cigarette afterward, their unspoken connection more powerful than any confrontation. This is the film's central insight strained family bonds aren't defined solely by conflict, but by the smaller moments when old affection resurfaces.

Director Trier understands what Hollywood often misses: fraught relationships contain multitudes. When families are reduced to a single emotional note, melodrama results. Here, characters exist outside their greatest crises, which paradoxically makes those crises resonate more deeply.

Gustav's film ostensibly concerns his mother, yet it's equally about his daughter, grandson, and himself. That two women anchor the narrative—one an actress, one a historian—proves thematically significant. They embody the interplay between artistic expression and historical consciousness, showing how artists inevitably draw from lived experience. Fanning's performance illustrates this tension perfectly. She portrays a well-intentioned performer who cannot

fully inhabit her role because she hasn't lived it. During a rehearsal, she delivers a heartbreaking monologue in English, yet the same passage proves far more potent when spoken in its original language. The authenticity of lived experience creates a truth that technical skill alone cannot replicate. Her character reaches her limits precisely because she's operating outside her own history. This layering where form mirrors content, where language matters, where experience shapes artistic truth elevates the film beyond simple family drama into something more searching and profound.

Conclusion

Sentimental Value achieves artistic distinction by resisting easy resolutions to its family drama while maintaining genuine emotional engagement with its characters' struggles. Through symbolic economy, literary resonance, and precise performance direction, Trier crafts a film that honors both the specificity of these particular relationships and the universality of family dysfunction.

The film's Cannes triumph and major awards recognition reflect its quality and timeliness—audiences and critics recognize in this work a serious artistic engagement with questions about filial obligation, artistic complicity, and the possibility of authentic connection across years of accumulated hurt.

As Norwegian cinema's first Best International Feature winner, *Sentimental Value* marks both a personal achievement for Trier and a validation of Scandinavian cinema's capacity to achieve major cultural impact through intimate, psychologically acute storytelling that refuses sentimentality while remaining profoundly sentient to human experience.

References

[1] Academy Awards and Golden Globe Awards databases. Sentimental Value (2025): Official nominations and awards records, 2025-2026 awards season.

[2] Trier, Joachim and Vogt, Eskil (screenwriters). Sentimental Value. Film festival premiere materials and production notes, Cannes Film Festival 2025.

[3] Film analysis based on narrative structure, symbolic deployment, and thematic resonance in contemporary family drama as explored in cinema studies literature regarding space, performance, and psychological representation.

[4] Chekhov, Anton. The Seagull (1896). Dramatic examination of artistic aspiration, romantic disillusionment, and generational conflict as foundational themes in Russian literature and theater.

[5] Skarsgård, Stellan. Public interviews and biographical materials regarding personal philosophical positions on religion and spirituality, 2010-2025.

[6] Roger Ebert Website

Kaushik Nath is a film critic from Assam.