

The European Film Awards favour films celebrating family (*Sentimental*) values and “dancing in the face of oblivion”

Stefan Steinberg
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In comparison with the bombastic and commerce-oriented US Golden Globes and Oscar ceremonies in Hollywood, the European Film Awards (EFA), whose 38th edition took place this year in Berlin January 17, is a more sober affair offering somewhat more room for political and social commentary.

Nonetheless, tellingly, the date of this year’s ceremony was moved forward from early December to mid-January evidently in an attempt to better position European films for the Academy Awards ceremony in mid-March.

The most notable political issue addressed at this year’s 38th awards ceremony was the situation in Iran. After a brief opening announcement, the stage was given over to the veteran Iranian director Jafar Panahi who was greeted with a standing ovation. Panahi has a lengthy history, having directed a number of remarkable works in the 1990s and early 2000s: *The White Balloon*, *The Mirror*, *The Circle*, *Crimson Gold*, *Offside*.

Speaking about the current developments in Iran, Panahi declared: “When truth is crushed in one place, freedom is suffocated everywhere [...]. That is why no one is safe anywhere in the world. Not in Iran. Not in Europe. Not in the United States. Not anywhere on this planet. And that is precisely why our task as filmmakers and artists is more difficult today than ever before. If we are disappointed with politicians, we must at least refuse to remain silent.”

Panahi, 65, has already served two terms in prison in Iran and most recently received a third sentence of one year on charges of creating propaganda against the political system. Panahi’s latest film *It Was Just an Accident* (set in Iran but classified as a French production) was a candidate at the awards ceremony and will be reviewed below.

Iranian filmmaker Sara Rajaei won the best short film award for the Iranian-Dutch *City of Poets*, which features a fictional Persian town whose streets are named after poets. After war breaks out, new neighbourhoods spring up to accommodate refugees where streets are named after deceased combatants. Addressing the audience at the awards ceremony, Rajaei dedicated her award to her dead brother, declaring that normally she would have celebrated but under current conditions in Iran she could only express her pain.

In contrast to the Cannes and Venice film festivals last year, where large, angry protests took place opposing Israel’s genocide in Gaza, the response at the EFA ceremony was distinctly muted—and largely restricted to a protest by the film team from *The Voice of Hind Rajab* who carried a banner on the EFA red carpet reading “From Berlin to Gaza, we rise up against all those who defend an ideology of death.”

The two films detailing with the situation in Gaza and the Middle East, *With Hasan in Gaza* (Kamal Aljafari) and *The Voice of Hind Rajab* (Kaouthar Ben Hania), failed to win any awards—nor did Panahi’s work.

Panahi is an important filmmaker and critic of the reactionary Iranian

regime, but the readiness of the EFA to provide him a stage for his comments should give pause for thought. German chancellor Friedrich Merz has made clear his own support for a regime change orchestrated by the Trump government, and in a recent interview Panahi shamefully refused to criticise a return to power by the late Shah’s son Reza Pahlavi.

It should be noted that while Panahi criticised Israel for its massive bombardment of Iran in June 2025, calling for the intervention of the United Nations, he has failed publicly to condemn the Zionist genocide in Gaza. Panahi’s outrage is selective. Following previous mass mobilisations against the regime, Panahi and other dissidents threw their weight behind the bourgeois Green movement. The danger remains that following the latest mass movement against the regime, Panahi and related dissidents could support either the return of the Shah’s son or even a regime change operation organized by the Trump government.

In 2011, writing in unequivocal defense of Panahi and fellow filmmaker Mohammad Rasoulof and other victims of the Iranian government’s “barbaric treatment,” we noted that such a defense “should not be taken, however, as an expression of agreement with those who champion the [upper middle class] Green movement.”

Unfortunately, the Iranian film artists’ general lack of perspective, as well as their relatively privileged social position, has rendered many of them susceptible to the siren song of the Green forces. ... Abstract and empty calls for “democracy,” without reference to either the socio-economic conditions of the working population or the imperialist conspiracies, become all too easily absorbed as part of a propaganda campaign suiting the interests of the Great Powers.

We added:

Iranian filmmaking will only build on its past achievements on a different basis, which has to include the emergence of a left-wing critique of the Islamist elements and open partisanship of the cause of the oppressed. The filmmakers at present have very little to go on.

Indeed, well-known Iranian writer-director Mohsen Makhmalbaf (*A Moment of Innocence*, *Gabbeh*, *The Silence*, *Kandahar*) recently authored an opinion piece calling for the Trump administration to intervene decisively in Iran, warning that if

the US fails to act after widespread reports of bloody repression, the message sent to Tehran will be that the cost of violence remains manageable.

Makhmalbaf urged American imperialism to provide

a decisive response aimed at the apex of power and the main instruments of repression—an option that could significantly shift the balance of power in favour of the people.

Makhmalbaf may be an extreme case, but in judging contemporary Iranian films by other figures like Panahi, Rasoulof and Rakhsh?n Banietemad, one also has to be somewhat cautious. To what extent is their concern for ordinary Iranians and their humanism sincere and a matter of good faith? What do they propose as an alternative to the reactionary Iranian regime?

All that being said, Panahi's *It Was Just an Accident* is no doubt a serious attempt to come to grips with certain aspects of Iranian social and political reality. The film is based on his own experiences as a prisoner in Tehran's dreaded Evin prison. Throughout his incarceration, Panahi, like other prisoners, was blindfolded and never able to see the face of his interrogator/torturer.

His newest film opens with a mechanic and former prisoner of the clerical regime, Vahid, working in his auto shop. When a customer enters his shop Vahid is convinced he can hear the unique sound of the wooden leg of the man who tortured him in prison. Vahid wants revenge. He kidnaps the man, knocks him unconscious and drives him out into the desert in order to bury him alive. As sand is being shovelled over his body the alleged torturer pleads his innocence.

Stricken by doubt, Vahid hauls the man out of his intended grave and commences a journey through the city, seeking out other victims of the torturer to confirm his identity. We are treated to a broad cross-section of Iranian men and women who opposed the hated regime and were punished terribly for doing so.

There are flashes of humour in the film. Vahid and his cohorts find out that their victim's wife is about to have a baby. They take a detour (with the alleged torturer still bound up and hidden in their truck) to take the prospective mother to the hospital to ensure the safe birth of the baby—and then share amongst themselves the cakes traditionally given by the hospital to close relatives of the family.

The final 15 minutes of the film is devoted to a confession by the man that he was indeed a torturer who seeks to justify his work by the need to put bread on the table for his family.

Panahi's film still bears witness to humanitarian instincts, which are no doubt shared by wide layers of Iranians. Taking into account the provisos raised above, *It Was Just An Accident* stood out favourably in comparison with most of the EFA prize winners.

Other films and issues

The Norwegian filmmaker and actress Liv Ullmann was honoured for her career with a lifetime achievement award and, with US president Trump obviously in mind, declared in her acceptance speech: "I am Norwegian, we give a Nobel Prize to someone who deserves it, and suddenly it goes to someone else. It's so strange ... and that's why I'm happy that we have laws that say that if you misuse the Nobel Prize, it can

be taken away from you. Someone with power in the US may be disappointed. He will lose it, and I am happy about it."

In her rather smug statement, what Ullman failed to point out, however, was that the actual recipient of the Norwegian peace prize, the right-wing Venezuelan war hawk and CIA stooge María Corina Machado, was just as unqualified to receive the prize as the US president.

In addition to the failure of the films mentioned above to receive awards, a number of other publicly well-received and penetrating German documentaries and feature films such as *Late Shift*, *Amrum* and *Riefenstahl* also failed to win recognition at the ceremony.

The prize for best film went to *Sentimental Value* from Norwegian director Joachim Trier. The film centres on the figure of an older, egocentric Norwegian filmmaker Gustav (Stellan Skarsgård) who tries to reconnect with his adult children whom he largely neglected as their father. One of his daughters, Nora, is an actor.

Instead of seeking to genuinely reconnect with his daughters after the death of his ex-wife and their mother, Gustav strives to persuade the Nora to take over the lead role in his new film. Nora turns down the opportunity, declaring her unreadiness ever to work with her father.

In *Sentimental Value* we are treated to a number of scenes dealing with the inside workings of both the theatre and film industries—the stresses and strains behind the scenes of leading theatre and film productions. This clearly went down well with the over 4,200 film professionals who decide which films should receive the EFA prizes.

Two short scenes deal with the historical roots of the traumatised family. The second sister, Agnes, discovers that her grandmother was tortured by the Nazis, thereby explaining the erratic behaviour of the daughter's mother and in turn the behaviour of Gustav who quit the family home. Another scene reveals that Agnes, played a role in one of her father's earlier films as a young girl fleeing the Nazis.

In both cases references to Germany's fascist past are used to explain anomalies and problems in the relationships within this hermetically sealed middle-class family. On this reading, Nazism is a mere plot device, a thing of the past. There is no indication in the film that fascism and the ultra-right, for example in the form of Norway's neighbouring anti-immigrant Danish Social Democrats, pose a real danger today.

In common with other EFA award winners, the head-in-the-sand approach toward reality adopted by *Sentimental Value* director Trier lacks any sense of social urgency. His stress on the significance of home, family and personal self-realisation is indicative of a turn away by some intellectuals from the type of genuine social engagement necessary in a complex world confronting crises on multiple fronts.

The second biggest EFA prize winner was the apocalyptic road movie *Sirât* by French director Óliver Laxe. *Sirât* (according to Islamic faith, the road to paradise) deals with the raver scene in Morocco where European social outcasts gather to escape the stress of modern society by dancing to trance music in the middle of the desert.

Laxe admits one of his inspirations to make the film was the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche: "One of the first ideas that I had for this film was a sentence from Nietzsche: "I won't believe in a God who doesn't dance.""

According to one critic Laxe admitted that "he didn't spend years perfecting a script or sharpening dialogue. Rather, he took the images that stuck with him—trucks speeding into the dusty desert, fuelled by the rumble of their own speaker systems—and brought them to the free parties, where his cast coalesced on the dance floor."

This is not a promising approach for a work dealing with any aspect of social life, or for any film for that matter.

The same critic, who gushes about the film, continues: "The vibe is exuberant and anarchic and very much in tempo with the joy-craving fatalism of today. (related: I've heard the club scene is crushing it in Tel Aviv and Kyiv.)"

Against a background of war and genocide Laxe's film pays tribute to a group of people who seek, in the words of the director, "transcendence" rather than coping with reality.

Apparently stuck for an ending the impressionable Laxe lands his trance-seeking company in the middle of a field of land mines where half of them come to a sticky end. The price paid for, once again citing the above critic, "dancing in the face of oblivion."

A final mention should be made for the film *On Falling*, which did win the ceremony's Honorary Discovery Award. Made by Portuguese director Laura Carreira and produced by Ken Loach, the movie deals with the extreme exploitation of workers in an Amazon-type warehouse, reflecting the experiences of countless workers all over the world.



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