

Sentimental Value: We will have to take their word for it

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17 February 2026

From Norwegian director Joachim Trier (*The Worst Person in the World*), *Sentimental Value* follows the relations between a film director and his two daughters. The movie is nominated for nine Academy Awards, including Best Picture and Best International Feature Film.

Gustav Borg (Stellan Skarsgård) is a prominent figure, who divorced the girls' mother years ago and moved away. Now, following his former wife's death, Borg returns to Oslo and the family home (which he legally owns) and strives to resume or repair his connections with Nora (Renate Reinsve) and Agnes (Inga Ibsdotter Lilleaas) in the course of trying to get a new film off the ground.

Gustav attempts to interest Nora, a successful stage and television actress in Norway, into taking a leading role in his latest project, a film inspired by his mother Karin's life. The latter took part in the anti-Nazi resistance during World War II and endured imprisonment and torture. Years after the war, when her son was still young, she committed suicide.

Nora wants no part of the script or her father, whom she still blames for deserting her and her sister. Agnes, a historian, married with a son of her own, is more forgiving or accommodating.

Rejected by Nora, Gustav seeks out the participation of a celebrated American actress, Rachel Kemp (Elle Fanning), whom he encounters and charms at a film festival in France. If she agrees to the role, it will also help with the financing. In fact, the project with Rachel on board is taken up by Netflix.

Gustav and Nora remain at loggerheads. She accuses him of abandonment, he claims she can't find love because of her internal fury. Meanwhile, Agnes investigates her mother's role in the resistance and finds material on Nazi forms of torture. Nora breaks up with her married lover and seems more at loose ends than ever.

Eventually, Rachel comes to realize the role was written for Nora, and she should bow out. Gustav undergoes various crises, including physical ones. Will Nora come to terms with her father and with his film?

Skarsgård is always interesting and varied in his performances, and Fanning is convincing as an American "star" desiring to do more substantive work. The information on the Norwegian resistance is valuable. Other than that, the film is largely threadbare and banal.

Sentimental Value opens on two deeply unappealing notes.

First, over shots of a large, rambling house in a middle class Oslo neighborhood, the narrator pays anthropomorphic tribute to the Borg family home, the subject of a story written by Nora as a schoolchild:

She described how the house's belly shook as she and her

sister ran down the stairs and out the backdoor—the house's butt ...

She remembered wondering if the house preferred to be light and empty or full and heavy ... if it liked being trampled on, or that people crashed into its walls, that eager dog claws scratched the floorboards.

Trier and his colleagues presuppose their audience is composed of people who either inhabit such houses themselves or can at least appreciate their pleasures and drawbacks (in this case a symbolically cracked foundation—subtle stuff!).

As we suggested in regard to Trier's earlier film, *The Worst Person in the World*, "the filmmakers ... unreservedly accept the life-conditions and ideological assumptions of the Oslo petty bourgeoisie as the entire contents of their artistic and psychological universe." No need to change a word of that here.

We move on from the tribute to the family home to Nora backstage at the National Theater, where she is undergoing a terrible case of stage fright on an opening night. The scenes unfolds over several minutes, as Nora makes her way toward the increasingly restive audience and then retreats in terror.

DIRECTOR But it's like this every time, and it always turns out well.

NORA No, this isn't like that, this ... I can't ...

[The director grabs her and looks seriously at her.]

DIRECTOR You can use this. Take it out onstage.

Ultimately, Nora appeals to her fellow actor (and, as we discover, married lover) Jakob (Anders Danielsen Lie) to slap her in the face: "I just need to get out of this. Just a slap." He obliges, but that still doesn't do the trick. Only after more concerted efforts by the director, stage manager and technicians does Nora make her way slowly onto the stage.

Stage fright is a painful condition, but, honestly, if an actor at this level is so debilitated by the condition, she ought to go into another line of work. What counts, in the end, is *the play* and *what it means* and *not* the performer. Trier's film is strenuously letting us know how sensitive and damaged (by her father, of course) Nora really is. However, it mostly suggests a self-centered young woman who thinks what she does or doesn't do moves the universe. One thinks of the line in Brecht's *St. Joan of the Stockyards* about the

individual who eventually arrives boring us “with reports of difficulties.”

To top everything off, Trier *twice* includes a monologue from Borg’s new film that ends with prayer and God and a family home. The Nora/Rachel character delivers it:

But then I had this crisis. ... Someone said that to pray is not to talk to God, but to realize despair, to throw yourself down on the ground because that’s all you can do ... a bit like having a broken heart and thinking over and over: call me, you must regret, take me back ... And I was there, I had ruined everything and was alone and I lay there crying. And then, for the first time ... I sat down and prayed. It’s hard to explain ... I don’t know who I prayed to, but I just said: “Help me, I can’t do this, I can’t do it alone, I want a home, I want a home.”

It is not even clear what despair is threatening Nora, or why. In any case, it is not a convincing scene. Like the World War II material, it seems thrown in quasi-arbitrarily to add gravitas to an otherwise flimsy work.

There are oddly symmetrical and revealing similarities between *Sentimental Value* and Noah Baumbach’s *Jay Kelly*, which we wrote about last month. The latter is a bit more light-hearted and breezy, but both films focus on an egotistical veteran artist (Kelly is a movie star) who has two estranged daughters. The grown-up women generally feel sorry for themselves because they were neglected. They can’t seem to get over that. It’s tedious. There is little sympathy for the father figure in either film, no hint that the family problems of “celebrities” might be connected to the corrosive nature of the bourgeois film industry apparatus, which produces *objective* difficulties. The two films largely confine themselves to handing down indictments of “bad, selfish men.”

Moreover, each movie treats a “revered” performer or director but provides no indication of what his artistic accomplishments have been. In the case of *Jay Kelly*, we pointed out that

we learn next to nothing about what the fictional actor has *actually been doing* for 30 or 40 years. What were his movies like, what did they do or say, how did they make people feel or think?

The same might be repeated, almost word for word, about Skarsgård’s Borg. We learn at one point that no Borg film is likely to be found on Netflix. “It’s not that kind of film?” But what kind is it then? (For that matter, we also have no special reason to think highly of Nora’s talent since we hardly see any of it.)

In each film, additionally, the father-artist undergoes a career retrospective, again, with very little indication of what any of the films under review were about or how they might be significant. An online version of the *Sentimental Value* screenplay includes this initial description of Borg:

“Gustav is a well-known film director with his heyday behind him. On a good day, he still has the energy and charm that once made him a force of nature.”

Later, he and Nora discuss his retrospective, and it seems they like

his films in France where he is rated “*un grand réalisateur scandinave*.” Rachel is very taken by one of his films, *Anna*, in which younger daughter Agnes played a role when quite young. The American actress is moved to tears (“Your film ... it really struck me ... it was so touching,” “I want to make films like you do, you know. So simple and ... real”), but the rest of us are not let in on the secret of Borg’s artistic ability, aside from catching a glimpse of one brief scene from *Anna*.

As for Borg’s new script, we learn from him: “It’s about this young woman, a young mother ... Everything just unravels for her ... And she does the unthinkable.” That’s all. But, universally, everyone agrees (including Nora, ultimately) it’s his “best work.” We will have to take their word for it.

Borg is more of a stereotyped, European “free spirit” than the tanned, slick George Clooney-Kelly. He complains, for example, that nowadays, “artists have to be like everyone else, equally dull and bourgeois. You can’t write *Ulysses* if you have to drive to soccer practice and ... compare car insurance, right? [Pause] Artists must be free.”

In any case, neither *Jay Kelly* nor *Sentimental Value* concretely examines the contemporary film world and industry in a penetrating or intriguing fashion. Both take the financial-commercial-structural circumstances of filmmaking *entirely for granted*. Sharp or angry criticisms of what exists are nowhere to be found.

Neither work, unhappily, and this is perhaps the worst aspect, genuinely takes film artistry and effort *seriously*. The neglect of the content of Kelly-Borg’s films collectively is not accidental. It doesn’t matter terribly to either filmmaker. Film and art in both cases are primarily means to various ends, making a prosperous or semi-prosperous living, becoming famous and maintaining a certain socio-cultural status, attracting sexual partners, avoiding family and personal obligations, etc. Both films are about fatherly neglect and daughterly resentment, considered rather superficially and glibly. We went through a phase a few years ago in which sexual abuse was the key to every present-day psychological and even *social* question, now it seems to be parental *absence*.

In both *Jay Kelly* and *Sentimental Value* the modern film industry is merely a frame within which to pursue a superficial psychological study. By and large, the stories could be taking place in the worlds of psychiatry, book-selling or hardware.



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