

Why the Oscars Had to Look to Norway

By Bruce Bawer

The Criterion Collection, which issues DVDs of classic films from around the world, has in its New York City offices an outsized closet containing floor-to-ceiling shelves of those DVDs. It also has a YouTube channel featuring brief videos on which well-known actors and directors select some of their favorite films from that library. Earlier this month, the veteran Swedish actor Stellan Skarsgård [made](#) his picks, including *The Seven Samurai*, *La strada*, and *Enfants du paradis*. He called the closet a “fabulous gold mine of collective memory,” and added: “I love melodrama, but I hate sentimentality.”

That’s kind of funny, given that his current movie is entitled *Sentimental Value*.



'Sentimental Value' Official Trailer (NEON/YouTube)

Directed by Joachim Trier from a script by Trier and Eskil Vogt, *Sentimental Value* (*Affeksjonsverdi* in the original Norwegian) is the second Trier film to gain major international attention in recent years. His 2021 movie *The*

Worst Person in the World (*Verdens verste menneske*), also co-written with Vogt, was nominated for the Oscars for Best International Feature Film and Best Original Screenplay. The latter nod stunned Trier and his colleagues, given that films from countries like Norway rarely get nominated in categories other than Best International Feature Film. So imagine how Trier and company reacted the other day when *Sentimental Value* received no fewer than nine Oscar nominations – for Best Picture, Best Director, Best Original Screenplay, Best International Feature Film, Best Actress, Best Supporting Actor, Best Supporting Actress (two nominations), and Best Film Editing. (Actually, you don't have to imagine it: it was [recorded](#) on video and posted on YouTube.)

In a way, this extraordinary reception was a shock. No, it's not the first European film ever to rack up so many Oscar nominations – *Emilia Pérez* (2024), that horrible musical about a Mexican cartel leader who decides to have sex-change surgery, received 13 nods, followed by *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) and *Roma* (2018), both with ten apiece. But *Sentimental Value* now comes next on that list. And this is big news in Norway, because no Norwegian film had ever garnered more than the two nominations received by *The Worst Person in the World*. Moreover, the list of foreign-language movies to be nominated for Best Picture is a short one, heavy with genuine classics (*Grand Illusion*, *Cries and Whispers*) and with only one winner (*Parasite*).

Does *Sentimental Value* merit such acclaim? Let's start with this. Like *The Worst Person in the World*, it stars Renate Reinsve as a neurotic, offbeat, withdrawn young upper-class Oslo woman with relationship issues. This time around, she's Nora Borg, an actress who's semi-estranged from her father, Gustav (Skarsgård), a famous film director who put her in one of his movies when she was a little girl and who now wants her to star in his next one. Nora resents Gustav for being a largely absent, aloof father; her sister Agnes (Inga Ibsdotter

Lilleaas) does too, although she's more understanding of the old man. (Passing thought: how did this movie pass the newfangled rules for Academy Award nominations? Absolutely everybody in it is white and straight.)

Eventually the viewer realizes that Gustav does love his family; it's just that his principal way of expressing love is through filmmaking. He speaks of his film crew as a family. (There are echoes here of *Fanny and Alexander*.) Besides, he has good reasons for being bad at family intimacy. His mother, we learn, was a member of the Norwegian Resistance, was tortured by the Nazis, and ended up committing suicide in the family home (which is itself a major character in the film). Now Gustav wants to make a movie about a suicidal woman, although he insists – unconvincingly – that it's not based on his mother's life. When Nora turns down the role, [he](#) hires an American movie star, Rachel Kemp (Elle Fanning), whose name is curiously similar to that of the Redgrave sisters' mother, Rachel Kempson (is that supposed to mean anything?), and whom he bonds with on a beach in a sequence that seems deliberately reminiscent of the closing scenes of Visconti's *Death in Venice*.

In recent years, Trier has come to be seen as Norwegian film's answer to Ingmar Bergman and as someone who has almost singlehandedly created a golden age of Norwegian film. But on the privileged west side of Oslo – a city he has made his own, as Woody Allen did to New York (Margaret Talbot's *New Yorker* [profile](#) of him is entitled "Joachim Trier Has Put Oslo on the Cinematic Map") – he has more than his share of enemies. After the Oscar nominations rolled in, Bernhard Ellefsen, culture editor of *Morgenbladet*, Oslo's counterpart to the *New York Review of Books*, who had already [slaughtered Sentimental Value](#) in print – [twice](#) – told an [interviewer](#) that he found it inappropriate that "such a film about love and family relations should get so much attention in a time when the world is burning."

In short, he's the same kind of left-wing critic who gives Jane Austen a thumbs-down for paying insufficient attention to the Napoleonic Wars and British imperialism. Yes, Trier could possibly be criticized for ignoring the fact that Oslo has been heavily Islamized during the last twenty years. But Trier's part of Oslo is still pretty much Islam-free. I could fault him for that. I choose not to, for the same reason that I wouldn't condemn Austen for not writing *War and Peace*. In any event, if Trier were to try to deal with Islam as a problem in Oslo, Ellefsen would be one of the first critics to go after him, not for addressing Islam as a "burning" issue but for being an Islamophobe.

I've said that in a way, the Oscar nods for *Sentimental Value* are a real shock. But in a way they aren't. For one thing, even though there's a language barrier here for most Academy members, there's one way in which this film isn't alien to them: it's about moviemaking, and Hollywood has always loved movies about moviemaking – from *Singin' in the Rain* and *A Star Is Born* to *The Player* and *Once upon a Time in Hollywood*. But there's a lot more to it than that. This is a movie about three-dimensional people and credible relationships. It's about family, and all the heavy baggage and the heartbreaking beauty that accompany it, across the generations. And there aren't a lot of those coming out of Hollywood these days.

Yes, the studios love raking in the profits from the car chases and animated features and explosions and special effects and superheroes, but even they usually know better than to give themselves awards for that crap. When the Oscar nominees were announced on January 22, the woman who introduced the broadcast said: "We live in a time of limitless technology that enables us to push the boundaries of our cinematic experience." But she added: "Our profound belief is that the heartbeat of film is and will always remain unmistakably human."

And the simple fact is that this year, in order to find an unmistakable human movie to fill out several of the leading award categories, the Academy had to reach across the pond to Norway. And yes, even though its title is *Sentimental Value*, and even though both the opening and closing sequences may bring a tear to your eye, it can't quite be accused of sentimentality, if only because Scandinavians don't do sentimentality: what they do is feeling, at its best deep but restrained and even unspoken feeling; and it's Trier's genius for capturing the precious delicacies of human feeling in that distinctively subtle Scandinavian way that makes *Sentimental Value* so very dear.

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