



Force majeure

Director: Ruben Östlund

Country: Sweden

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A review by Jonathan Romney for *TheGuardian*:

The common wisdom about moments of high spectacle in cinema is that they're best built up to, saved till last: hit your viewers with a closing whammy, whether it's a Busby Berkeley dance finale or the apocalyptic slamdown in an action movie, and send them home shaking. In *Force Majeure*, Swedish writer-director Ruben Östlund does it differently. He delivers a (literally) earth-shaking show-stopper some 10 minutes in, and for the rest of the film leaves us – and, crucially, his traumatised characters – getting to grips with the event and its consequences.

The incident is an avalanche that happens during a middle-class Swedish family's ski break in the Alps. Suddenly erupting in an extraordinary four-and-a-half-minute single shot while they're having lunch on a panoramic balcony, the phenomenon leaves them physically unscathed. But it has immeasurable psychological impact. In the heat of the moment, dad Tomas (Johannes Kuhnke), whether because of an instinctive momentary lapse or a fatal character flaw, seems only to be looking out for himself, at the expense of his wife Ebba (Lisa Loven Kongsli) and their two young children. What follows is a different kind of avalanche – the dramatic subsidence of the couple's seemingly stable relationship and of Tomas's entire being.



Östlund has developed a reputation as something like Sweden's answer to Michael Haneke, with a streak of caustic social observation à la Mike Leigh. He specialises, with utter coolness and control, in twisting the knife in the psyche of his characters – and by extension that of his nation. His 2008 film *Involuntary* was an ensemble comedy about everyday humiliations; *Play* (2011) followed a case of teenage bullying, the camera observing from a distance in surveillance style.

Force Majeure also carries echoes of Ingmar Bergman's dissections of marital hell, but laced with sardonic comedy. Östlund not only burrows into his characters' emotions but also, to deeply uncomfortable effect, takes us into their intimate habitat. The scenes in the couple's hotel bathroom are all the more troublingly invasive because, rather as in Haneke's *Hidden*, you can't work out where on earth the camera is concealed in this tight, mirror-lined space. This makes Östlund's characters seem like prisoners, or lab rats, under observation, and their constant visibility subtly raises the stakes throughout. Tomas, undergoing a meltdown in a corridor, is watched with silent curiosity by a hotel worker from an upstairs balcony.

No less eloquent than the drama is the depiction of place: inside, the cosy but impersonal hotel, with its faux-natural caramel walls; outside, the ski slopes, themselves a theme-park idealisation of nature, with the snow artificially generated by cannons and groomed to smooth perfection by ploughs in the night.

The atmospheric scene-setting – which includes the surreal use of a toy drone and a recurring Vivaldi flourish played on accordion – is mischievously nerve-jangling. And the calm detachment of Östlund's overall approach makes it all the more explosive when the moments of crisis erupt – notably a strobe-lit dark night of the soul as Tomas finds himself caught up in a wild stampede of booze- and techno-crazed holidaying males.

Force Majeure loses some dramatic concentration with the arrival of Tomas's friend Mats (Kristofer Hivju), wearing an immense beard in a style best described as "Mid-Life Crisis Mountain Man". There's a rather jarring scene in which Mats and his much younger hippyish girlfriend Fanni (Fanni Metelius) muse on Tomas's moment of truth, and how it reflects on their own relationship. Suddenly Östlund's agenda for discussion – "OK, guys, what would you have done?" – becomes clumsily overt. The film is much more effective when it lets the situations speak for themselves, as in a moment of excruciating comedy when Tomas seems to get a compliment from a younger woman, only for things to turn crushingly sour in an instant.



The acting is impeccably controlled, with leads Kuhnke and Kongsli sympathetically establishing the genteel, only slightly self-satisfied blandness of their characters, then tracing the cracks that spread in their makeup. And the artfully sheened chill of Fredrik Wenzel's photography highlights a key theme – the clash between our attempts to control nature, whether of landscapes or feelings, and the inevitability with which the world, and our own fallibility, confound and leave us stranded. That, I think, is the point of a coda that feels a little superfluous.

For all its flaws and slightly overstretched length, Force Majeure is compelling, intelligent and grimly entertaining – and while tough on its characters, never gratuitously cruel. I'd recommend it wholeheartedly – although I'd add serious caveats if you were considering it as a date movie.

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