Force Majeure: A Humorous Tale of Marital Tension on Vacation

Author: Chethana Srivatsa



Poster for *Turist*
Source: Beofilm (All Images for Reference)

Force Majeure (Swedish title: *Turist*) is a 2014 black comedy film written and directed by Swedish filmmaker Ruben Östlund, renowned for his award-winning black comedy and satire films like the Palme d'Or recipients *Triangle of Sadness* and *The Square*. The film depicts the story of a Swedish couple, Tomas and Ebba, and their two kids, Vera and Harry, on vacation in the French Alps. Initially making full use of the skiing facilities at their luxury resort and peacefully relaxing together, their vacation faces a major obstacle on the second day. While having lunch at a rooftop restaurant, they witness a controlled avalanche approaching them. Although initially convinced that they will be okay, the tourists on the rooftop deck begin to panic when the avalanche sends up a dense cloud of powder-like fog that looks like it's going to engulf the restaurant. Amidst the widespread panic at the restaurant, Tomas runs away, leaving Ebba and the children huddled together as they struggle to flee. This incident sets the stage for the rest of the story to unfold.







The Family on Vacation
Source: Medium, The New York Times & Roger Ebert



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UOul9D0ZD5o
The Avalanche in the Film



Guests of the Resort Panic as they Flee From the Avalanche and Tomas Running Away
Source: The Coproduction Office

Although initially seemingly nonchalant, Ebba soon reveals how upset she feels that Tomas fled without thinking about her or their children. She brings up this point especially during conversations with other people, like the dinner with Charlotte (Ebba's friend) and an American man she met at the resort, and the one with Mats (Tomas' friend) and his much younger girlfriend Fanny. Tomas firmly insists that he didn't run away, that Ebba is being dramatic, and that he doesn't agree with 'her version' of the event, which further infuriates Ebba as she pressures him to agree that he did run away. Their friends (especially Mats) try to defend Tomas and convince Ebba that nobody can control their instincts. Mats even gives (seemingly incomparable) examples like the 1994 *Estonia* ship sinking to claim that Tomas was not in the wrong in any way. These arguments also trigger an argument between Mats and Fanny, with the latter claiming that Mats would behave the same way as Tomas if they were in a similar situation.



Mats, Tomas, Fanny, and Ebba
Source: Blu-ray Authority

The rest of the trip is an awkward mess as Ebba goes skiing alone to cool off, Tomas and Mats go skiing together in an attempt to work things out, and Vera and Harry act out as they are worried that the constant fighting means their parents will get divorced. Tomas even breaks down when he tries to sort it out with Ebba, and the children rush over to comfort him. On the last day of the trip, Tomas, Ebba, and the kids go skiing together. Tomas gains redemption here when he goes to rescue Ebba after she gets lost in the dense fog and returns carrying her, with a triumphant and smug grin wide on his face. In the climax scene, the bus driver ferrying them down the mountain struggles to turn on the narrow hairpin-like bends down the winding road. Ebba panics and demands to be let out, triggering a mass panic as everybody except Charlotte flees the bus. The film ends with all of them walking down the mountain as the sun sets.





Stills from the Climax Scene
Source: We Minored in Film & Litro Magazine

From what we see of the couple in the later stages of their disagreement, it is quite possible that the avalanche didn't cause a rift between them but only widened a pre-existing one. Considering the film's focus on gender roles and family dynamics, paying attention to how these play out in the couple's story is a necessary observation here. In a conversation where they attempt to patch things up, Tomas tells Ebba that she's not the only victim, and he's a victim of his instincts. Ebba (and society) expects Tomas to value the safety of his children and wife over his own life, while Mats gives the example of an airplane to counter this (parents have to put their own oxygen masks on before putting them on their children). There are several comments in the film on how femininity is expected to be limited to only child-bearing and rearing, while masculinity is about protecting their family. The couple's arguments eventually reveal how pressured Tomas feels to be the perfect patriarch for the family, with him finding this pressure to reduce substantially when Ebba shows her not-so-perfect side as well. Ebba begins drinking wine more and more as they argue, and Tomas, now feeling freer, doesn't hesitate to borrow a smoke from a stranger. The film's English title, *Force Majeure,* is a legal term that appears to be synonymous with the avalanche in the film, and the contract it is applied to is the marriage of the couple and their family.

FORCE MAJEURE

Should either Party be prevented or *hindered* from complying with any obligation created under this Agreement, other than the obligation to pay money, *by reason of* fire, flood, storm, act of God, governmental authority, labor disputes, war or *any* other *cause* not enumerated herein but which is *beyond the reasonable control of the Party whose performance is affected*, then the performance of any such obligation is suspended during the period of, and only to the extent of, such prevention or hindrance, provided the affected Party exercises all reasonable diligence to remove the cause of force majeure. The requirement that any force majeure be remedied with all reasonable diligence does not require the settlement of strikes, lockouts or other labor difficulties by the Party involved.

Force Majeure Section in a Contract
Source: Zach Wolfe Law Firm

An interesting cinematographic choice in the film pertains to the dinner scene with Tomas, Ebba, Vera, Harry, Mats, and Fanny. They are all gathered around a round table, with a single light hanging overhead. Amidst their pleasant conversation with each other, Ebba is standing as she serves them. However, her head is cut out of the scene, as we are only able to see up to her neck in the frame. Later on, she sits down in the empty seat in front of the camera, visible only in silhouette. This could be interpreted as her not being heard or her perspective being invalidated, especially as the whole discussion with Mats and Tomas claiming she's being dramatic happens right after this scene. This kind of framing is also used in a scene when Tomas and Mats visit a bar after going skiing together. A woman comes over and talks to Tomas, claiming that her friend likes him, and later returns to apologize and say that her friend was referring to somebody else. This causes a huge fight between Mats and the woman as Tomas tries to tell him it's fine. Even in this scene, Mats and Tomas are shown in full, sitting on chairs, while the standing woman's head is out of the frame except for when she bends down to talk to them. This is thus an important scene about the representation of the gender gap in the film.





Stills from the Dinner Scene and the Bar Scene
Source: IMDb & Curzon



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tNIGKqoK2SA
The Bar Scene

The film has garnered much critical acclaim and several awards, like the Jury Prize at Cannes, the Critics' Choice Movie Award for Best Foreign Language Film, and the Bodil and Robert Awards for Best Non-American Film. It was screened at the Toronto International Film Festival, selected as Sweden's entry for the Academy Awards, and nominated for the Nordic Council Film Prize and Best Foreign Language Film at the Golden Globes. The film swept the Guldbagge Awards with wins for Best Film, Director, Supporting Actor, Screenplay, and Cinematography, and nominations for Best Actor, Actress, Supporting Actress, and Sound Editing. Named one of the best films of 2024 by various publications, it was remade in English in 2020 as *Downhill,* and it also had a stage version performed in London in 2022.



A Still from the English Film Remake
Source: Hindustan Times



An Image of the Stage Adaptation
Source: The Arts Desk

Östlund handles this interesting film by generously sprinkling in some dry comedy in serious scenes. He uses body language and non-verbal communication to convey the story as much as he does dialogue. *Force Majeure* also shares many thematic parallels with Östlund's previous work, *Triangle of Sadness*, like a small disagreement having a larger and more tragic fallout, incidents of mass panic, the events occurring in a remote place with little to no scope for escape, and a broader perspective on gender disparity. Despite following in the pattern that appears most characteristic of his directing style, *Force Majeure* is still quite an interesting film that has made international waves. At its core, the film is about how even a small thing, or a split second, can be the pea under the mattress and cause massive ripples. To this end, it seems befitting when the characters are shown as specks against the backdrop of the breathtaking snowy scenery of the French Alps. The sound score also includes several sudden intense bursts of Vivaldi peppered in throughout the film, which could be making fun of how serious these characters take small things. Despite the sometimes snail-like pace, this is an interestingly made and thought-provoking film that makes you feel uneasy through the laughs.



A Still of Tomas, Harry, and Vera in the dense fog
Source: X

References:

- Cheshire, Godfrey. “Force Majeure Movie Review & Film Summary (2014) | Roger Ebert.” *Roger Ebert,* 24 Oct. 2014, www.rogerebert.com/reviews/force-majeure-2014.
- Das, Abhimanyu. “Review: Force Majeure - Slant Magazine.” *Slant Magazine*, 20 Oct. 2014, www.slantmagazine.com/film/force-majeure.
- Edelstein, David. “The Swedish Drama Force Majeure Is a Quiet Avalanche.” *Vulture*, 24 Oct. 2014, www.vulture.com/2014/10/movie-review-force-majeure.html.
- Holden, Stephen. “‘Force Majeure’ Explores Couples’ Expectations as Gender Roles Shift.” *The New York Times,* 20 Aug. 2015, www.nytimes.com/2015/08/21/movies/force-majeure-explores-couples-expectations-as-gender-roles-shift.html.
- Mam, Yehudit. “Force Majeure - I’ve Had It With Hollywood - Medium.” *Medium*, 1 Jan. 2018, https://medium.com/ive-had-it-with-hollywood/force-majeure-4481448f52a.
- McDowell, Eric. “Ruben Östlund’s ‘Force Majeure.’” *Michigan Quarterly Review,* 13 Feb. 2015, https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/mqr/2015/02/ruben-ostlunds-force-majeure.
- Rainer, Peter. “‘Force Majeure’ Is a Superb Exploration of the Consequences of Male Weakness.” *The Christian Science Monitor,* 24 Oct. 2014, www.csmonitor.com/The-Culture/Movies/2014/1024/Force-Majeure-is-a-superb-exploration-of-the-consequences-of-male-weakness.
- Romney, Jonathan. “Force Majeure Review – Compelling, Intelligent and Grimly Entertaining.” *The Guardian*, 12 Apr. 2015, www.theguardian.com/film/2015/apr/12/force-majeure-film-review-ruben-ostlund-avalanche.
- “Start the Week With a Film: ‘Force Majeure’ Is a Chilly Satire About Modern Marriage.” *Scroll.in*, 29 Jan. 2023, https://scroll.in/reel/1041613/start-the-week-with-a-film-force-majeure-is-a-chilly-satire-about-modern-marriage.

Image Links:

- https://images.app.goo.gl/GVh8biu8pXikbU9EA
- https:/images.app.goo.gl/3EjEdYA5siHF4DhCA
- https:/images.app.goo.gl/6fp9F7VbFf9nLcBk9
- https:/images.app.goo.gl/571sXQ9RLv1HqeRw9
- https:/images.app.goo.gl/ydGtZMtfvYsvEkiz7
- https:/images.app.goo.gl/V49KBz1L2SsvRCQj9
- https:/images.app.goo.gl/8yRTdKBG2fVfB4PA9
- https:/images.app.goo.gl/Udb3tL4VxLZ8BBCG9
- https:/images.app.goo.gl/eyr2y4PrYQHHXePw7
- https:/images.app.goo.gl/UcwwYTqkozHnXot7A
- https:/images.app.goo.gl/8uVRFFgzkNAPxERS8
- https:/images.app.goo.gl/7t4n8ooVHUvZdHes5
- https:/images.app.goo.gl/WvdnYVxkUsXnGJAYA
- https:/images.app.goo.gl/xD2CX3o112jqKXS6A
- https:/images.app.goo.gl/i4qviuf4qGo5TSpX9