

## **Force Majeure (2014)**

“We’ve got it all on film.”

### **Credits**

Director: Ruben Östlund

Screenplay: Ruben Östlund

Cinematography: Fredrik Wenzel

Principal Cast: Johannes Kunke (Tomas), Lisa Loven Kongsli (Ebba), Kristofer Hivju (Mats), Fanni Metelius (Fanny), Clara Wettergren (Vera), Vincent Wettergren (Harry)

### **Production Background**

Östlund began his career directing ski films and required his actors to be accomplished skiers.. The outdoors sequences were shot on location in the French Alps, the indoor scenes in Sweden. The two crucial locations—mountains and resort—are skillfully conjoined via special effects (green screen) on the dining room balcony in Day Two.

Aside from his prior professional experience, Östlund drew upon YouTube sources for several crucial scenes, including the setup for the avalanche and Tomas’ psychological breakdown. “Force majeure” is a legal term for an act of God that liberates both parties from the terms of a contract.

### **Cinematic Aspects**

1. Acting: Johannes Kunke is a well-known actor in northern Europe. His performance involves an emotional range that transports his character from self-complacency to fear, shame, repression, breakdown, and self-restoration. When he finally breaks down, Ebba regards his confession as insincere: a caricature created by a good actor performing the role of a bad actor.
2. Shot composition: Östlund foregrounds the importance of composition in the very first shots in the narrative, when a professional photographer carefully organizes the four figures into a family portrait, a harmonious image that the director repeats at the conclusion of Day One in the resort suite. Take note of how the 4-shot gradually devolves, first using *shallow focus* to depict the family walking down the hallway, two by two, in Day Two and, most dramatically, during the extended dinner scene with Mats and Fanny in Day Three, when Tomas becomes isolated in a series of 1-shot close-ups. In fact, the grouping of characters within the frame marks the thematic development throughout the film.
3. Cross cutting: The extension of the philosophical implications to the audience is expressed at the end of Day Three when Fanny forces Mats to consider the thought experiment (“What would you do?”) while, back in his room, Tomas collapses under the weight of his shame.

### **Questions for Discussion**

1. Like all good philosophical narratives, *Force Majeure* imposes the ethical problem of its characters on the audience: what would *you* do? To what extent is Tomas morally guilty of neglecting his family? What is the ultimate source of his shame, as expressed in his “confession”? Is he alone the object of the film’s scorn?

2. Your response to the previous question probably depends upon your understanding of universal gender roles, a topic the film also deliberately investigates. The ethical dilemma pits *nature* (Mats' reference to "the survival instinct") against *nurture* (socially defined gender roles).
3. The film might bring to mind two classic American texts not yet noted by reviewers: Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, with its "terrifying atheism" of Whiteness, and Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*, with its terrifying dissolution of the nuclear family. Indeed, the film's two locations—the mountains and the ski resort—represent untamed nature, on the one hand, and vulnerable nurture on the other, with the "controlled" avalanche as the precipitating mediator. What other narratives does this seemingly original film also recall?
4. The denouement on the mountain switchback road (which, incidentally, may be easy to forget as one remembers the film after some time passes) seems to complicate the depiction of Tomas' parental responsibility. How does this additional scene affect your understanding of the film's thought experiment? Put another way, how would the film's project seem different if it concluded with the apparent denouement on the snowy mountainside in the previous scene?
5. From the opening sequence with the photographer to the revelation of the "evidence" on Tomas' phone to the recurring moments of sustained whiteness when the movie screen resembles the light of the projector before the film has begun, *Force Majeure* seems concerned with reminding viewers of its own status as a visually designed construction, a projection of the filmmaker's vision. What purposes are served by this conscious *self-reflexivity*? Why is the audience not allowed to see the images on Tomas' phone?