



Lincoln Film Society

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Friday March 11th, 2016, 7.30pm

## Force Majeure

(Sweden, France, Germany 2014. Cert 15)

dir: Ruben Östlund

starring: Johannes Bah Kuhnke, Lena Lovén Kongsli

sponsor: Dr Roderick Ørner Ltd and Michelle Allen,

Psychological Therapies and Consultancy Services

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Swedish writer-director Ruben Östlund specialises in scenarios of embarrassment, or rather of something more than embarrassment. His films, such as 2008's *Involuntary*, depict situations in which social lines are crossed irreversibly, making it almost impossible for people to go on living as they did previously - at least without having to summon all their resources of denial. Östlund is also a specialist in spectacle and appearance, in what happens when painful intimate situations are exposed to public view: in *Play* (2011), an extended incident of teenage bullying is captured by a dispassionate camera evoking that of a surveillance system,

Östlund's new film *Force majeure* acutely tracks the distance between public appearance and private truth. It begins with a scene in which a holidaying family have their photograph taken - an official picture of stability and togetherness - and continues with the moment at which this stability is radically fractured, perhaps forever. That moment, suitably, is depicted as a spectacle on a massive scale - a thunderously symphonic flourish which sets a contrasting tone for the series of chamber pieces that follow, tracking the gradual disintegration of a family man's psyche: an avalanche unexpectedly rolls down the side of a mountain, suddenly engulfing the characters in the foreground - and eventually the whole screen - in dense whiteness. It's a startling bravura episode, shown in a continuous four-and-a-half minute shot. It is here that Tomas - his instinct seemingly working faster than his brain - performs the inadmissible act that will henceforth torment him, as he ducks away to safety while leaving his wife and children behind (more scandalously still, he nevertheless thinks fast enough to grab his mobile phone.)

No-one is hurt in the incident and Tomas soon returns to his family. It's easy to miss his actions in this scene, and that's the point: he initially denies having done it, while his wife Ebba insists the opposite, although it's by no means certain she saw him clearly. Viewers certainly know the truth, if they've been paying attention. Nevertheless, a snowy haze of ambiguity continues to surround the event's status, and Ebba has to establish her case by referring to footage captured on Tomas's phone. Still, the best anyone can say in Tomas's defence - as he and his friend Mats argue - is that in the heat of the moment his survival instinct made him lose control.

Control becomes a key theme throughout the film, beginning with the avalanche scene itself, a spectacular example of the filmmaker's mastery of imagery through CGI (the scene



comprises footage of an actual avalanche composited with real actors, all stitched together by a digital snow cloud that finally fills the screen.) The film also depicts attempts to control nature, to fabricate a wild-seeming but safe snowscape for holidaymakers to enjoy, a perfectly managed theme park of the peaks. In a series of sinister leitmotifs, we see cannons, snowsprays and snowmobiles, all there to groom this perfect environment. But nature, both geographic and human, will follow its course. Even if the fateful avalanche was of the 'controlled' variety, as everyone insists, it appears to have gone badly wrong, sending Tomas's compass ruinously awry in a sort of chain reaction.

**Synopsis:** The French Alps, present day. Swedish couple Tomas and Ebba are on a ski break with their two young children. While the family is breakfasting outdoors, an avalanche erupts. Tomas runs, leaving his family behind. No one is hurt and Tomas quickly returns. That evening, Ebba mentions the incident during dinner with another couple, but Tomas denies his actions. The next day, Ebba skis alone and talks to a woman who challenges her views on marriage and monogamy. Tomas's friend Mats arrives at the ski resort with his much younger girlfriend Fanni. Ebba tells them about the incident and the subsequent discussion causes friction between the other couple. The next day, Tomas and Mats go skiing, but their trip ends in an uncomfortable confrontation with some younger holidaymakers. Locked out of his hotel room, Tomas is caught up in a frenzied male party crowd: returning to his family, he breaks down. When the family go skiing on their last day, Ebba gets lost - or feigns to - and Tomas rescues her, thereby saving face. Leaving the resort, the assembled holidaymakers decide to abandon their recklessly driven coach and instead walk down the mountain road.

### Credits

<b>Tomas</b>	Johannes Bah Kuhnke	<b>Director</b>	Ruben Östlund
<b>Ebba</b>	Lisa Lovén Kongsli	<b>Screenplay</b>	Ruben Östlund
<b>Mats</b>	Kristofer Hivju	<b>DoP</b>	Fredrik Wenzel
<b>Harry</b>	Vincent Wettergren	<b>Editing</b>	Jacob Secher Schulsinger
<b>Vera</b>	Clara Wettergren	<b>Music</b>	Ola Fløttum
<b>Fanni</b>	Fanni Metelius	<b>Sound</b>	Jérôme Aghion

Sweden/France/Norway/Germany/Denmark/Italy 2014. 119mins

*Force majeure* sees Östlund audaciously moving on to a much bigger canvas than in previous work. What's impressive about this film is not that he uses the vast snowscapes to such striking visual effect, their swathes of whiteness alternately reassuring and troubling, but that the film so confidently moves between interiors and exteriors, between the slopes and the ostensibly cradling confines of the comfortable but impersonal hotel and its warm timber walls. Often, those interiors are more menacing than the outside world, not least in the family's bathroom, where Tomas and Ebba seem to be under permanent surveillance from a seeing-eye camera mysteriously invisible to us despite the room's mirrors. It is in the hotel that Tomas has his meltdown, on an outside corridor, in full view of a hotel worker staring from the floor above (a further humiliating comic twist is that Tomas and Ebba then have to ask the man to let them into their room.) Enclosure is never more terrifying than in the nightmare-like sequence in which a bewildered Tomas finds himself trapped at a club among a mass of sweaty, bare-chested male revellers, a strobe-lit dark night of the soul.

*Force majeure* is especially unsettling when speaking through images, and it's perhaps the weight of his country's psychodrama tradition (Strindberg, Bergman) that makes Östlund opt for some talky scenes which don't quite pack the weight of the rest, like the moments with Mats and his girlfriend Fanni, who feel just a little *de trop* in this otherwise perfectly controlled drama. It's what *isn't* said throughout *Force majeure* that is so eloquent and deeply troubling.

#### **Another view**

*Two hours with Force Majeure is like playing tagalong with a deeply dysfunctional rich family on vacation: the friction and awkwardness is often unbearably painful, but, boy, is there going to be some very nice scenery to distract yourself with. The family in this case is a Swedish foursome spending five days in a palatial ski resort high up in the French Alps. With an ominous title card signaling the start of each day, accompanied by Vivaldi's "Four Seasons," the trip is marked for disaster.*

*All it takes is one small, split-second action, and an unspoken lynchpin holding the whole family together gets pulled. And like any family, the real stress comes not from addressing the incident, but by trying to work around it. Rationalizations and denial are used to cover up frightening realizations about assumed marital and gender responsibilities. Whether cooped up in their resort room or out on the slopes, tensions between family members only grow the longer "the thing that happened" goes ignored.*

*What makes Force Majeure such a treat isn't just the slow teasing out of the marital drama, but the fact that it can do so believably, while also being screamingly funny. Director Ruben Östlund imbues cringe comedy with technical precision and*

*resplendent visuals that usually have no place within the genre. He doesn't have to undercut his characters by having them deliver punchlines. Force Majeure wryly explores matters left unspoken in a family, so careful staging and cutting is all Östlund needs to twist what should be tragedy into comedy.*

Sam Woolf (We Got This Covered)

#### **Programme Update**

The 3 films chosen to fill the gaps left in April and May for new titles released after the programme went to press, are:-

##### **April 22nd. The Lesson (Bulgaria/Greece, 2014)**

Margita Gosheva is excellent as the initially uncompromising Nadezhda, a teacher in a small Bulgarian town who's troubled by petty thefts in her classroom and is trying her best to uncover the culprit. But financial woes are stacking up in her own life, after her unemployed and hapless husband spends money they don't have, and she must utilise all her energy to ensure that their house isn't repossessed.

##### **May 6th: Tangerines (Estonia, 2013)**

A deeply affecting anti-war movie, *Tangerines* takes a simple story and weaves it into a rich drama; deftly balancing pathos, black humour and a pacifist critique of unnecessary violence, Zaza Urushadze's assured direction is completed by the tremendous performance by Lembit Ulfsak, a veteran actor all too rarely seen on UK screens.

##### **May 27th: The Wolfpack (USA, 2015)**

In New York, the six Angulo brothers and their older sister live with their parents in a Lower East Side apartment that they are not allowed to leave because their parents feel the world beyond is unsafe. Home-schooled, they go outside only once or twice a year under strict supervision. Film is their shared passion and, unable to explore the world themselves, they do so via the medium of cinema, making endless lists of films & staging elaborate recreations of their scenes Reminiscent of *Capturing the Friedmans* in its portrait of familial dysfunction, this astonishing, haunting and favourites very moving documentary won the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance 2015.

#### **Our next screening - Friday March 18th, 7.30pm Theeb (UAE/Qatar/Jordan/UK 2014. Cert 15)**

Set in western Arabia in 1916, using mostly non-professional Bedouins. *Theeb* (meaning "wolf") tells the story of two brothers Hussein (Hussein Salameh) and Theeb (Jacir Eid) from a family of pilgrim guides, who live a traditional Bedouin life. Their days are spent in the beguiling ritual of nomadic life, with Hussein, the elder brother teaching Theeb the skills and practices of surviving the environs of the Arabian Desert.

One evening a British soldier and his Arab escort appear out of the blackness of the desert and, ask to be guided to a well near the Ottoman train tracks. The rules of Bedouin hospitality demand that the guests be treated with kindness and respect, and Hussein agrees to guide the strangers to the well. But, as the journey unfolds, Hussein soon realises there is more to the soldier's plans than first disclosed.

*Theeb* is a coming of age film that also has much to say about custom, loyalty and trust. It was Oscar & BAFTA nominated for Best Film (Not in the English Language) this year and also won BAFTA's Outstanding Debut award this year.