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Force Majeur: The Male Perspective

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Force Majeure, a film in Swedish, French and English with English subtitles, confronts deeply rooted gender stereotypes. To quote Stephen Holder of the NY Times, “This brilliant, viciously amusing takedown of bourgeois complacency, gender stereotype assumptions, and the illusion of security rubs your face in human frailty.”

It presents us with the aftermath of a seemingly life-threatening situation, juxtaposing the never-ending work involved in trying to tame nature, the setting off of booms to produce controlled avalanche, the constant grooming of the sloops, with the effort and cost of attempting to control and contain human emotion, to keep it under wraps so as not to get swept away.

to produce controlled avalanche, the constant grooming of the sloops, with the effort and cost of attempting to control and contain human emotion, to keep it under wraps so as not to get swept away.

Some have compared the film to Hemingway's short story, "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber", first published in 1936 in *Cosmopolitan Magazine*. In that story, a man on safari in Africa runs away in fear during a lion hunt, witnessed by his wife. The story narrates the aftermath of the impact on the man and on the couple.

In *Force Majeure*, we are presented with the picture perfect family: father Tomas, mother Ebba, daughter Clara and son Harry. Posed by the photographer, Harry cocks his arm (pun intended) just so, imitating his father's stance. In these opening frames, one or the other of the females is dressed in pink, and one if not both of the males, in blue. Harry and his dad stick together while Clara does her best to stay close to mother Ebba. Clara asks her mother for help. She is ignored and told to hurry along.

Checking into the hotel, Ebba chats with another woman at the counter, telling her that they are there because her husband works too much and needs these five days to focus on his family. This is news to Tomas, who exclaims, "Wow!" His statement, "good to know", hints at sarcasm and implies that Ebba has not until now



Theatrical Release Poster for Force Majeure

communicated her expectation for the holiday. Tomas is outwardly good-natured about it, but doesn't take it too seriously. For Tomas, it is "business" as usual. Later, when his cell phone goes off at inopportune moments, we wonder if it really is work, or if there is someone else, some other woman, distracting his attention. Later, Tomas admits that he has been unfaithful and Ebba does not react at all, does not even acknowledge it. Tomas appears to be understood by Ebba as a man who is focused on his work, to the neglect of his family.

Neither parent is much concerned about the children. Returning to the lodge from their first day on the slopes, little Harry fusses and is difficult. Ebba remarks that it is no wonder: he has not eaten all day. Tomas is defensive: "What do you want me to say?" He is not concerned to get some food for Harry. What matters to Tomas is that he should not feel attacked, and pointing out an oversight and a consequence means to Tomas that he is being judged and found wanting. He does not like it. Harry's needs get lost in the shuffle. It is all about Tomas. Later, Tomas takes the family out in blinding snow without a thought. As head of household, Tomas runs on autopilot.

They all fall asleep, beautifully, on the one big bed. Tomas' cell goes off. He says he will not take it, but as soon as Ebba leaves the room, Tomas reaches for the cell, reads the text and answers, even telling Ebba that he is not getting his phone while he is in the act of texting. She knows that he is lying, comes in and laughs at him. Tomas laughs with her: they are complicit. He lies, she knows, and neither one of them does anything about it.

We are treated to scenes of the family brushing their teeth with electric toothbrushes. They are instrumental about the activity: they get the job done, and done well. This is not a moment of shared intimacy. Each time we see them at this hygiene, they are more distant from each other and the strain is greater. Proximity is not a time for intimacy for this husband and wife. It is a challenge: can they keep up the charade at such close quarters for so many

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unbroken days.

In one such scene, Tomas tries to engage Ebba with a deeper kiss, but she keeps it perfunctory. Perhaps, having been alerted by Ebba that she wants him to be more attentive during their holiday, Tomas is ready to increase foreplay. Perhaps attention means sex and maybe romance to Tomas, not a time to confront problems. He reads Ebba's body language as she rejects him, realizing that she is not pleased with him and wondering what he is in for. Ebba has not verbalized, but she has communicated her displeasure.

their seeming brush with death overshadowed by his desertion: the "force" of the family dynamic even more impactful than an avalanche

On Day 2, Harry, the youngest and the least-as-yet indoctrinated into the family code of silence, is the first to express alarm at the approaching wall of snow. Tomas restrains him and keeps Harry from running, until that moment when Tomas releases Harry's arm, grabs his gloves and cell and runs, almost bowling over another adult man in the process. Ebba grabs the two kids and remains behind. As the fog lifts, the first utterance from the three is "where is daddy?" His disappearance has taken prominence over the

avalanche itself, their seeming brush with death overshadowed by his desertion: the "force" of the family dynamic even more impactful than an avalanche. Tomas returns with an embarrassed laugh. He tries to distract from his behavior, grumbling about those who set off the avalanche in an effort to focus his family's blame on them, not on him. No-one says anything more. Tomas has given the cue that he does not intend to talk about what he did and the elephant in the room is too big to allow for anything else. As they return to the lodge on the moving walkway, Tomas looks back apprehensively at Ebba, dreading what she may be thinking. He seems to be waiting for it, steeling himself against it. Tomas seems to have been shocked into a mentally frozen state, keeping things at a reserve, closed to information or reflection whether from his family or from himself: everything is fine. He wants a united front about it. Ebba is silent. Both children look back questioningly at their parents, but they have taken their cue and they, too, are silent.

Back at the lodge, the kids demonstrate their anger at Tomas for the first time,

leaving him to deal with the tangle of their skis and poles, the tangle of their unspoken feelings. Ebba rushes ahead of them all, abandoning them despite the children calling out for her to wait. She shakes her head “no” when Clara tries to catch up. Ebba has been injured by what Tomas has done and what she fears that it implies. Absorbed in her own shock, fear and anger, she has little empathy for her children. Ebba creates an opportunity to be alone with Tomas, that they might talk openly. Harry in particular tries frantically to intervene, fearing what his mother might say or do to his father, but neither Ebba nor Tomas open up and really talk. Tomas tells Ebba that she seems angry and has no reason to be angry. Tomas has imposed massive repression on himself and wants to impose it on his family. Ebba complies with Tomas’ frame, at least for the moment, that everyone is fine.

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Back in the room, the children want nothing to do with either parent. This provides Tomas and Ebba a perfect opportunity to bond, united against the common enemy of their children. They are wordless, still too afraid to say anything, but they look searchingly into each other’s eyes. Tomas is hopeful that he will not be called to account.

Tomas flies the drone and lies about practicing with it. We see that lying is a common feature for Tomas, one that he expects others to tolerate and not to challenge – and they comply.

Over dinner with “The Woman Who Has Shameless Affairs” – I didn’t catch her name and wonder if she is nameless in the movie – and her partner for the day, Tomas brings up the avalanche, needing to talk about it and hoping for safety in the company of others. Ebba bursts out, as if she feels that by introducing the topic Tomas has given her permission, and accuses Tomas of abandonment in a life-or-death situation. His reaction is immediate and instinctive: he denies it. But Tomas refuses to offer an alternative explanation. Tomas has not found a way to frame it for himself, and perhaps he is afraid that if he gets specific, he could get tripped up. Perhaps it is still too overwhelming, too traumatic, for him to really think about what he did. He must avoid thinking. Tomas tries to make something light of it, holding it at arms distance. After a few near hysterical tries, Ebba gravely, baldly, states that

Tomas deserted them. Her serious tone is not to be trifled with despite Tomas' attempts to trivialize: he states that they are still under the influence, implying that what Ebba says cannot be taken at face value, it is somehow distorted. He asks if he should take away her wine. Ebba cannot hold her ground against him and succumbs to comic relief with the disruption of birthday singing and candles at another table. She giggles and Tomas is spared to live another day.

The two of them meet in the hallway and Tomas defends with aggression, berating Ebba for embarrassing him in front of others. Ebba suggest that they concoct an alibi – a script for both of them to stick to like thieves agreeing on a story to tell police. Tomas is thrilled and shakes Ebba's hand. This is a business arrangement, after all. But is he safe? Tomas shoots glances at Ebba while they are brushing teeth, trying to read her. Nothing is acknowledged. Truth is buried.

Neither of them has respect for others. The cleaner who is having a smoke in the hallway, who was there first, is seen as intruding on their privacy and should know to yield the space and go away. Tomas calls out aggressively, "What's your problem?" Ebba, on the chair lift, does not acknowledge or apologize to the couple whom she hits when she raises the bar of the lift, not even acknowledging that she understands their English: even though hers is pretty fluent. Only she and Tomas matter.

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Tomas can't believe when Ebba does it again and tells the story to Mats and Fanni. He smiles like he wants to kill her. She has betrayed him. This time, Tomas listens and thinks – he is sufficiently recovered from the trauma of the avalanche itself that he can now think. He absorbs what Ebba is saying and feels shame. Each of them seems to be thinking to themselves what a sham their marriage is. There is a moment of introspective honesty. It does not last. Tomas collects himself and shakes his head,

“no”: he will not acknowledge what Ebba is saying. As things get serious, and it looks like there is going to be some very heavy discussion, they are interrupted with comic relief again, the drone flies among them, sent by Harry, who does not want his parents having a conversation that may lead to divorce. This breaks the ice for Tomas and he reverts to his diversionary tactics, trying to “gaslight” Ebba and make it sound like she is crazy. With her viewing of the video on his cell, he is undeniably caught. He can’t look at the video. More than he does not want to admit it to Ebba or anyone else, Tomas does not want to admit it to himself.

Harry is wide-awake with worry. Vera is not to be seen. Tomas broods alone and cries. He is so very ashamed. This is the situation of someone who does not know himself but has held a certain unexamined image of himself; now forced to reconsider.

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I want to talk a bit about our second male, Mats. The entrance into the scene of Mats and Fanni shifts the narrative to a war of the sexes, not just an individual couple. The demographic of the couple emphasizes gender stereotypes: the older divorced man and the 20-year-old girlfriend. But Mats seems to have more at risk than Fanni, who may simply be having an adventure. Mats seems to have the deeper emotional involvement. He is horrified when Fanni is sure that he

would run off like Tomas did; and when she confronts him with her view that he does not really take care of his kids: that their mother does by living with them day to day. Mats is alarmed when Fanni says that she knows why his wife left him: now he surely can’t sleep. Mats becomes acutely aware that he wants to be perceived as worthwhile, worthy of receiving and giving love, capable of caring deeply and acting protectively.

When Tomas is toyed with by the two girls on the deck, who tell him that he is the best looking man around, and then that he isn’t, that female praise puffs them both up like peacocks. Deflated, Mats is ready to fight for Tomas. Tomas, in turn, holds out a protective hand and is able to wave off the encroaching male who seems ready to challenge Mats on behalf of the girls. Men fighting over women. Men

protecting each other.

Skiing together, Tomas wants to talk with Mats instead. But he doesn't know what he wants to talk about. He wants connection but does not know how to go about it.

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Is Tomas' uncontrollable sobbing real or a manipulation? Ebbe certainly thinks it is fake and at first Tomas concedes, but he continues to cry anyway, and escalates. Does it really go to an authentic place in him? It is too perfect, in my view, how the children are called to him by his sobbing and how they in turn insist

that Ebbe enact nurturing, comforting behavior with Tomas. I believe that he has used the children to steer Ebbe back where he wants her. In my view, her staging of damsel in distress on the slopes is the outward display that she will slip into her slot again and that the family, marching triumphantly out of the resort, is picture perfect again, as they were. Nothing learned, little gained.

What was the intention of the last 15 minutes of the film? Tomas becomes the one left behind with the children in potential danger, but he is not angry, he brings them and follows Ebbe out of the bus. He just accepts. In my view, Tomas is ceding Ebbe the opportunity to take her turn and even things out, so that they face the future on an even, unexamined keel. An unconscious assumption that by enacting the same sort of thing that he did, Ebbe accepts him. Perhaps he will be more accepting of Ebbe stepping out a bit from her role, sometimes taking the lead. Perhaps Tomas will share more of himself with Harry, male to male, admitting now to Harry that he smokes. But I doubt that Tomas will think very deeply about himself, the marriage, or change much if any of his behavior. After all, "a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do" and if he doesn't, well, better avert your gaze.

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