

# UNCONTROL ON RUBEN ÖSTLUND'S *FORCE MAJEURE*

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## ABSTRACT

Ruben Östlund's film *Force Majeure* (2014) was mostly received as a depiction of the crisis of masculinity. And it is, but that particular theme is also placed within a larger context concerning questions of value, understanding, order, and control, questions asked not only on a thematic level but also through cutting, framing, and the use of camera views. Not accepting any simple dichotomy between form and meaning, *Force Majeure* places itself firmly in an avant-garde and modernist tradition.

Thereby the film is also related to this tradition's ambition of investigating Western thought, knowledge and art anew, problematising given forms of rational thinking in order for something new to emerge. In the wake of World War II it was, for thinkers like Adorno, Foucault, Stockhausen, and Boulez, seen as unavoidable and urgent to deconstruct the conventions and norms that had made Auschwitz possible. It is still urgent. This article takes its starting point in the connections between avant-garde serialism in music, Foucault's serialist methods of research and Deleuze's theories of modernist film, in order to grasp how the aesthetics of *Force Majeure* continues to deconstruct.

## KEYWORDS

Ruben Östlund, *Force Majeure*, Modernism, Critique, Serialism, Control

When Karlheinz Stockhausen, Pierre Boulez, and others of the so-called Darmstadt School stated in the 1950s that music from now on had to be based upon Weberian serialism and the way it broke with tradition, this has to be seen in light of an essential question for their generation. The one that Michel Foucault formulated as a choice between, on the one hand, analysing how fascism was part of "the ideas and the devices of our political rationality" and how it could not only reach power, but be something that we longed for, or, on the other hand, shutting ourselves up in self-righteous goodness by passing fascism and communism off as incomprehensibly evil and unexplainable and then carrying on as before. Foucault's work can be seen as a choice according to the first alternative, as

an investigation into what in the Western tradition of thinking, knowledge, politics, and art were the conditions of possibility for totalitarianism. In his words: “The non-analysis of fascism is one of the important political facts of the past thirty years.”<sup>1</sup> The famous saying of Theodor Adorno, that no poetry can be written after Auschwitz, has to be seen in the same context.<sup>2</sup> It is impossible to write poetry as before. For a moment, an aspect of Western rationality had become brutally visible in the concentration camps. What had previously been in practice in the colonies (and would continue in animal factories) – rational, effective, and scientific killing – had taken place in the middle of Europe, making it obvious where the heart of darkness was located. And the conclusion these thinkers drew was that Western thought, knowledge, and art had to be investigated anew.

For the generation that Foucault belonged to, it was in the aesthetical experiments of contemporary art that one could find ways of problematising the given forms of rational thinking and open the possibility for something new to take place. However, the question was, and still is, how far one may go. When is the border to madness or to the simply incomprehensible crossed? Symptomatic is perhaps that Boulez’s *Structures I* for two pianos (1952) – the most persistent effort to develop the serialism of Webern, to apply the principal of the series to almost all aspects of music, including pitch, rhythm, attack, duration, and so forth, and thereby to achieve a radical break with conventions and intentionality – was for a long time expelled from his worklist by the composer himself because he considered it unlistenable.

In his theoretical work, Boulez stated the problem in terms of a need for context, for something that the listener might recognise in order to find some orientation. The a-human series had to be enclosed and balanced by some kind of traditional, human order.<sup>3</sup> In the context of today’s urgent need to further problematise a reason that has produced climate change and mass extinction, the question of balance might be formulated as how we should relate to a rationality that we recognise and adhere to, when we, at the same time, acknowledge it as part of the problem. To what degree must established forms of reason (and composing) be accepted in order to communicate, influence, and matter?

Since the 1950s, radical serialism within music has been seen as a dead end, an experiment that was important but had to be abandoned in order to return to graspable music, to communication and recognition belonging to human communities of understanding.<sup>4</sup> Even the thinking of Foucault and his generation has often been

interpreted within such a frame of cultural relativism, when it actually tried to trace how this very frame was part of making fascism possible. Perhaps this *right to understand* has become something that stands in the way of the very possibility to think that anything could be different. Maybe our rational search for control leads to a loss of our ability to find even a trace of something other than ourselves, a trace of the non-human, of “nature,” enclosed as we are in the necessities of second nature, the one created by us. Are the answers to the questions that mass extinction and climate change pose really *more* control, *more* hardcore sustainability, and *more* old-fashioned rationality? Foucault thought that critique could, at least, open a possibility for us – and others, I want to add – not to be governed so much.<sup>5</sup>

The film *Force Majeure* (2014) by Ruben Östlund was mostly received as a depiction of the crisis of masculinity and the traditional family.<sup>6</sup> And it is, but that particular theme is placed within a larger context concerning questions of value, understanding, order, and control, questions asked not only on a thematic level but also through cutting, framing, camera views, editing, and so forth, much in the same way as Boulez and Foucault used experimental techniques and methods in order to avoid established reason, and thereby open music and research onto the possibility of something new taking place, being heard, seen, felt. When categorisations, determinations, norms, and conventions become sensuously palpable in the films of Östlund, almost materialised through the framing of the camera lens, their contingency becomes just as obvious as when serialism exposes tonality, or archaeology and genealogy expose historicism. Artists always use cultural conventions as working material, but Östlund displays them as *objets trouvés*, in order for us to think.

#### “PHOTOGRAPHE TOURISTIQUE”

*Force Majeure* begins with *the family* being portrayed by a photographer, dressed in ski garments and with the Alps in the background. A family, typical middle class of our times (two children, conventional gender roles, the man always online through his iPhone) is on a ski holiday, staying in a huge, breathtaking hotel within a just as breathtaking winter landscape. The gaze of the film’s audience coincides with the camera’s gaze, and it is thus made clear, as always in a film by Östlund, that the viewer of the film shares the way the camera watches the characters. Thus, the opening scene marks the distanced, reflective way of narrating that will imprint itself on the movie in its entirety. In accordance

with the aesthetics of, for instance, Chantal Akerman, Michael Haneke, Roy Andersson – or Brechtian *Verfremdung* (with its roots in romantic irony) – the viewer is prevented from identifying with the characters, of feeling for them, and is instead forced to reflect on her own gaze and her own preconceptions and abilities to read what is taking place on the screen. Everyday values, convictions, and conventions that are used for understanding movies and the world in terms of predictability and control and the motives and agency of characters are all made obvious through this framing and thereby turned into something that demands reflection.

Ever since Östlund's earlier film *Play* (2011) was accused of being racist, readings of his films have tended to either accentuate their avant-garde way of provoking the audience into reflection or maintain that they reproduce the norms they make visible.<sup>7</sup> As I have argued above however, these kinds of ambiguities could also be seen as immanent to the kind of modernist and avant-garde aesthetics Östlund adhere to. This has also already been pointed out by, for example, Anna Westerståhl Stenport and Garrett Traylor in their article about *Play* with the telling title "Playing with Art Cinema?"<sup>8</sup>

Helena Karlsson has also read *Play* in close affinity with my own view regarding *Force Majeure*:

Östlund's filming strategy is long static takes, more or less in real time. The camera is placed at a distance from the scene, sometimes as if hidden; there are few close-ups, many slight pans, as if to avoid emotional identification.<sup>9</sup>

Karlsson emphasises how Östlund "makes segregation visible onscreen,"<sup>10</sup> and how this creates ambiguity: "Östlund's strength is his ability to create this uncomfortable ambiguity: to not give easy answers to complex questions."<sup>11</sup>

Although he does not treat it in any extensive way in his book *The Feel-bad Film*, Nikolaj Lübecker places *Play* firmly within an avant-garde tradition, distinguished by its "direct disturbance of the spectator".<sup>12</sup> Such a film "produces a spectatorial desire, but then blocks its satisfaction, [...] creates, and then deadlocks, our desire for catharsis,"<sup>13</sup> according to Lübecker, who calls this disturbance via indeterminacy, and means that "the destabilisation of the spectatorial contract is precisely the point, for this is how the films raise political and ethical questions."<sup>14</sup> Alluding to Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*, Lübecker underlines this critical aspect of *Play*:

Östlund's ambition is to create the images that can trigger the mythical reading, and, at the same time, invite the spectator to step back and engage with the images in a self-reflexive and critical way.<sup>15</sup>

As I have argued above, the first scene in *Force Majeure* establishes – or at least suggests – a similarly dialectic frame of reading for the viewers, preparing them for the next scene, in which we see the hotel embedded in the Alps (0:02:02). A light twinkles. Culture and nature, architecture and landscape, stand out as distinctly separate from each other. In images that remind of artificial models, the hotel is placed without any real relation to the mountains surrounding it. It is like a tourist, part of the reshaping of nature into organised ski slopes.

After the hotel's welcome sign has filled the screen for a moment, one of the films lead motives is presented: images of the mountains together with explosions fired off to trigger avalanches before they become dangerous, and all this accompanied by *The Four Seasons* of Vivaldi. Piste machines will also be integrated within this motive later, but this already shows how important the relation between nature and culture is in the film. The hotel's relation to the mountains and to the snow is one of control, of reshaping nature, disarming its threat. The mimetic aspect of *The Four Seasons*, the shaping of nature into music, into art, is also underlined, not least because the work is so often heard, and so often used in hundreds of films, that it is in itself an example of something utterly conventional, utterly cultural. Östlund thus uses repetition of motives to mark the conventional, the ritual, the same, which keeps things together and gives (the impression of) control and risk-management. Vivaldi, the explosions, the piste machines, are all such repeated motives, and to those others will be added, such as peeing, underwear, conveyers, lifts, electric toothbrushes, mirrors, all of them participating in repetitive, ritual, and technical ways of trying to handle what is usually called nature.

It comes down to risk-management, trust, confidence, control, and ultimately to what it means to find safety. The films made by Östlund always pose questions concerning the limits of human control. *The Guitar Mongoloid* (2004) asks how we relate to the deviate, the provocative, the criminal, and the threatening. *Involuntary* (2008) frames the importance of being in control, to never lose one's face, to always endure, accept, in order to be part of a community, while *Play* investigates how stereotypical and racist conceptions of belonging plays a part in decisions about what is

right and what is wrong. *The Square* (2017) demolishes all illusions of institutional autonomy (aesthetical, personal, or political) and associated abilities of control. *The Guitar Mongoloid* is a title that designates the lead character of the movie as someone who breaks with the normal, but all the other titles of Östlund's films underline the extent to which we are imprisoned by the order in which we trust, and therefore how we are actually never in control no matter how hard we might try, that we are involuntary, just playing our parts, being tourists in a tightly squared order that we think is protecting us.

*Force Majeure* explicitly inserts these themes – or, rather, poses those questions that the registrations of the lens awakens – within an ecological context. What happens when that which we imagine as being under our control (usually called nature) emerges as uncontrollable, when even rational risk management itself proves to be a threat? It is hard to avoid reading *Force Majeure* as anything other than an ironic allegory of the situation that mankind has put itself in and that has begun to be referred to as the Anthropocene.

#### CUTTING

As seen in the opening scene of the film, and in accordance with modernist aesthetics, the viewer's own position, the viewer's values and interpretations, are drawn into the workings of the film. As a viewer, one cannot avoid relating to what is being shown. We – the film, the producers, the viewers – share a context, but the film in itself does not provide much *interpretive* framing concerning what takes place on screen. It just marks the gaze of the camera lens, which is usually unnoticed when fitted into recognisable fiction and narrative order but when marked produces an estrangement that forces the viewer to relate what is shown to his or her own contexts and values.

Musical serialism was an attempt to liberate music from the hierarchical system of tonality, to decontextualise it, so that new possibilities of sound could emerge. The method was to apply rules for setting up rows of tones that made it impossible to rely on conventional modes of either composing or listening. Techniques of making, *poiesis*, forced thinking and affect into the aleatory, into uncontrol. A consequence of this was also that naturalised conventions were marked, were framed *as* conventions. When similar techniques were used in films – and in relation to Östlund what most obviously comes to mind is Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) – the most important aspect was to break up the conventional ways of creating

continuity between images. Akerman does this through what might seem like extreme realism, using a static camera framing everyday activities like preparing dinner. But while realism usually tells a story wherein some elements, some motives or actions, are more important than others, Akerman places the images in a row that has no centre. The viewer is not provided with any traditional clues to what is happening, much as the listener to serial music meets tones that are all equal and therefore cannot depend on the naturalised conventions of tonality to *understand* the music.

My aim is, however, not to celebrate Östlund as an heir to serialism, but merely to point to the fact that forms of *poiesis* might matter in artworks even if they are not so obvious. Ideas cling to techniques; copying also brings ideas. One might see the aesthetics of Östlund as using modernist techniques of marking, framing, and questioning conventions of both filmmaking and life, even though he, at the same time (and more and more), also uses such conventions – story, character, causality – to envelope, to use Boulez’s term.

So, *Force Majeure* does not strictly follow conventional ways of telling a story within movies, where the centre is taken to be a character that acts – that practices agency – out of psychologically believable motives and whose actions produce the changes that constitute the plot of the movie. In that kind of film, time is created out of actions and the way those produce a continuous chain. Continuity and context, movement that produces a sense of time, distinguishes what Gilles Deleuze has called the *movement-image*, which he takes to be the most important image in conventional movies. And it is against that kind of image that Deleuze puts the *time-image*, in which the continuity of movement and action are broken. Used in “modernist” films it places images next to each other without supplying them with any “sensory-motor link” (action) that connects them, as in movement-images, instead it lets the cut become an interstice, which “*is irrational and does not form part of either set* [the images before and after the cut], *one of which has no more an end than the other has a beginning*: false continuity is such an irrational cut.”<sup>16</sup>

I will not go deeper into Deleuze’s thinking of film than necessary. The tools of analysis that his concepts provide are, however, very useful for recognising important aspects of Östlund’s kind of filmmaking. Time-images present difference, while movement-images connect through a “corrected, normalised, ‘elevated’” understanding of how the world is held together by means of movements and actions.<sup>17</sup> The result of time-images

is, according to Deleuze, a cinematic thinking that puts forth the *difference between* and *within* images, breaks them apart instead of uniting them, and thereby forces thinking to open itself towards other connections, other contexts, not actually there, but invading the image and leaving the viewer without conventional rails to understanding. One could describe this as serialism in film. Östlund practices this way of putting images and scenes next to each other without connecting them, without turning them into continuous and meaningful stories, held together psychologically and causally. Even if *Force Majeure* is more conventional than earlier films by Östlund, even if the images *are* enclosed in a recognisable narrative, they are also kept apart from each other, reminding of serialist techniques.

In his earlier films (short films, *The Guitar Mongoloid*, *Play*, and *Involuntary*) it is obvious how Östlund avoids the kind of movement-images that Deleuze mostly connects with traditional movies, that is, *action-images* (mostly half-shots) and *affection-images* (often close-ups), to instead engage in the kind of movement-image Deleuze names *perception-image*, which is concerned with what is seen by the camera lens.<sup>18</sup> While action-images and affection-images in traditional movies serve to create a pattern of action-affect-action that can also contain and absorb perception-images, the camera of Östlund merely registers what is taking place, and, as said before, gives the viewer very little guidance as to how they should interpret what is shown. Instead of a relation to the world outside by the analogy that it *too* is constituted by continuous movements and actions, which helps the viewer to understand the film (and the other way around), Östlund's movies open themselves to the world outside by breaking images loose from their conventional settings, and thereby *marking* and *framing* those settings and how they permeate every attempt of understanding. In this way, the film will force us to reflect upon how we categorise and give meaning. The viewer is forced to think when placed before the lens of non-human objective vision.

In *Force Majeure*, the long shot's still and objective registrations, so characteristic of Östlund's earlier films, are not that frequent, but the type of distanced observing that Östlund has used the perception-image to obtain, in line with directors such as Akerman and Haneke, is still there in his cinematic thinking. For even if the perception-images are to a greater degree integrated within the action-affect-action pattern of the movement-image in *Force Majeure* than in his earlier films (and thus more contained by understanding), they nevertheless continue to ask the viewer what

they mean, dissolving conventional frames by becoming time-images, balancing between rupture and understanding.

Östlund thus breaks the images apart from each other and from themselves and turns them toward the viewer and the conventions through which such images are normally read. But these are also conventions that the characters in the movie use when trying to understand themselves. Through the breaking up of naturalised connections between images, the categorisations and stereotypes working within conventional settings – *and* within each and every viewer's interpretation of these settings – are exposed and made perceptible. As the debates concerning *Force Majeure* (and even more so those concerning the earlier film *Play*) showed, the interpretations of the films will to a great degree be about how the interpreter relates to what the film shows. These films activate an analytic viewing merely by underlining that they are films, and Östlund, carrying a modernist heritage, forces us to reflect even on this. Our naturalised ways of linking become disjointed, and other possible links might appear.

#### “ISN'T THERE ANY PARMESAN?”

If the “First ski day” (the film is divided into episodes this way) showed the well-organised family in an ordered context, the “Second ski day” begins with the daughter's question, at lunch, of why the expected Parmesan cheese is not there (0:11:46). And as if the question was a premonition, the family, sitting on the restaurant's terrace, soon notices how an avalanche that was triggered in the background is quickly approaching. After initially having talked calmly about how everything is under control, that it has been set off by safety personnel, that “they know what they're doing,” the father is all of a sudden gripped by panic when it seems like the avalanche is about to throw itself over the terrace. He runs for his own safety and leaves the screaming family behind. Afterwards, when the white-out has died down and the father comes back, the only thing he can say facing shame and silence is: “Wow, that was...,” “Damn!,” “Are you okay?,” “They know what they're doing, but that was...,” and “Here comes the sun.” In the next scene (0:14:30), with the family standing on the conveyor, silence reigns. The mother, Ebba, walks ahead. The father, Tomas, is alone with the children. The children are obviously angry and embarrassed, and Tomas is ashamed. When they reach the hotel and the children have gone to their room, the parents talk in the corridor:

Tomas: You seem irritated.

(Silence)

Tomas: Well, are you?

Ebba: No.

Tomas: Good.

Ebba: Should I be?

Tomas: No, I don't think so.

Ebba: No...

Tomas: No. (0:18:00)

During their talk, it is clear for the viewer that Ebba has accidentally locked the male cleaner in with the children. For a second time, and in an off-hand way, something alien has entered the family and its community of the same; first there was nature and now comes the cleaner, who by ethnicity and class is alien to the family (he even smokes). When the father meets the cleaner in the doorway, entering with his wife, they exchange phrases of courtesy. Although, as the viewer knows, nothing is normal anymore.

In an interview by Jörg Heiser in *Frieze* Östlund states that “I never consider the characters other than in terms of the social position they find themselves in.”<sup>19</sup> This is made obvious in this particular scene, but the emphasis on position also reflects the structural (or even serialist?) approach of Östlund to filmmaking on all levels. Just as for a composer it is positions that Östlund deals with, and it does not matter if these positions are on a social, bodily, or aesthetical level; it is constellations and relations that are important. Even language, dialogue, is treated as found objects, phrases that are framed so as to display their conventional position. The phrase “You seem irritated” gets marked.

How deep the fragmentation of the family is, and how difficult this is to handle, becomes apparent when the children, sitting in and by the bed (in which all of them have previously taken a nap together), tersely reject the parents. And then, when the mother awkwardly tries – “I know you're angry, but can't we talk about what happened?” – only answers: “Go away!” The awkwardness, and the inability to handle what has taken place, is made explicit by the parents' embarrassed laugh when saying “We're going” (0:21:00).

The horror of someone else seeing your shame is portrayed in the film as a continuum from embarrassment to devastation. In the following scene, when the parents are having dinner with another couple, they tell them about the experience of the avalanche. Everything turns around the question of how to deal with embarrassment. Tomas tries to be rational and in control,

stating that they have had “some kind of experience, actually...,” an experience of an avalanche, but that it “was controlled” (0:25:39). But when Ebba notes that Tomas “was so scared that he ran away from the table” it, at first, leads to laughter around the dinner table and to Tomas’s reply: “No, no, no....” The other woman’s look is, however, telling when Ebba continues, despite Tomas’s denial: “You grabbed your phone and your gloves and ran like hell away from me and the kids.” His awkward defence – “That’s not how I remember it. ... Is it even possible to run in ski boots?” – prompts Ebba to ask: “OK, how do you remember it?” and the other woman to try to save his face: “But isn’t this a situation that comes really quick? I mean, how do you know how to react?” Ebba laughs (0:28:20).

Ebba’s reactions are interesting. Here we have someone who has been pulled out of her usual context, who can no longer accept interpretations according to conventional frames for consensus, such as those that the other woman invokes. In the next scene we see Ebba carrying her son to the hotel room. We see her from the back, her neck, watching her husband and their daughter in front of her. We share her perspective. Everything has tumbled down. Everything is incomprehensible.

When they have reached the room and stepped out into the corridor to be able to talk without the children listening (0:29:54), there is an obvious likeness to the scene in Kubrick’s *2001* (1968) in which the two remaining astronauts try to avoid HAL (the spaceship’s super computer that they are beginning to suspect has other goals than their own safety) being able to listen by locking themselves into a soundproof space capsule. However, HAL *sees* what they are talking about, just as the cleaner *sees*, from the balcony above, *and* the children *see* what is happening. But what is most important, both in *Force Majeure* and *2001*, is what the objective gaze of the camera lens *sees*, representing the big Other of the symbolic – that which *always sees us*.

And what is being seen is the shame, and how the mother and the father no longer share a common world, do not recognise each other, themselves, or that which they have experienced:

Ebba: What’s going on? This isn’t us. I don’t recognise us at all.  
[...]  
Try to hug me. I need one.  
[...]  
It’s just that... It’s so weird that you won’t admit what happened.  
Tomas: What’s so weird about having different versions? I can’t

“admit” to your perception, that’s not how I see it. I really can’t relate to your description. And the way you tried to convince everybody at dinner that your version was...

[...]

Ebba: The important thing is that I don’t want us to be like we were tonight.

Tomas: Right, it was embarrassing. It was terrible.

[...]

Ebba: I want us to share the same view...

Tomas: Are we back to that? Are we back to “a shared view”?

Ebba: I think it’s good for the kids. And for us.

Tomas: What exactly is your view?

Ebba: Listen to me... If we could agree that there was an avalanche and that we were frightened, but that everything went fine.

Tomas: I’m totally okay with that. Is that what you meant, sorry...

Ebba: A unified front.

Tomas: Sure, I’m okay with that.

Ebba: All right, then.

[...]

Tomas: Let’s put all this behind us. (0:32:28)

They shake hands and relax. But agreeing on having had a shared experience because one *needs* to? When they, in the next scene, stand in the bathroom, look in the mirror, pee, brush their teeth – that is, control nature – they do not talk to each other. Instead, the film equates control of personal nature with control of non-human nature by cutting to the motif of piste machines and risk management by triggering avalanches. By placing these scenes next to each other, without linking them through any progression in the story, Östlund forces the viewer to interpret the connections between them.

The couple have said that they need a unified front, a shared view, through a common story about what has happened, and that story is the most common of all – from good to bad, and then a happy ending. Could this film turn out to be a romantic comedy? In the face of loss of control, of the failure of conventional patterns of understanding what is happening, understanding Tomas’ reactions, understanding nature, Ebba longs for the most simply comforting kind of story, a story that might unify a community in which we understand ourselves, each other, and our environment. Just as researchers of climate change or environmental activists often

claim that we need a story that might make figures and scientific facts graspable and understandable, Ebba needs a story that make sense of her experiences. Does *Force Majeure* give such a unifying story? Is it possible that the community of human understanding, including Ebba and the viewer of the film, can re-establish rational control over nature? Can we continue as before? And would that be a happy ending?

#### NO OPENINGS?

When the mother, on the last day of skiing, at the end of the film, pretends that she needs help by the father out in the slope, order can be restored and the father can be released from his shame (1:46:29). Is this a happy ending? Throughout the film, the characters are locked within the conventional roles that they play, not finding any other way to handle the fact that these very roles are dissolved other than by cynically restoring them. In the film's last scene, Ebba cannot control her own fear, and then her husband, with a cigarette in his mouth, can become a man again, regaining control over the role he plays.

Peter Sloterdijk writes that today's enlightened reason has become cynical, that it acknowledges wrongs and injustices, but cannot see any other possibility of relating to them than by accepting them, albeit from a distance and ironically.<sup>20</sup> The film exposes such a retaining of something that has already been seen through. What else is there to do when seeing the stupidity of it all does not help? Is there any other way of handling the shame of one that loses control, as well as the contempt of those who see this, other than to continue as if nothing has happened?

But the exposure of these contradictions in contemporary reason is also, as stated before, placed within a larger context than the family, namely that of the relation between culture and nature. The inability to control what is usually called nature is exposed both in the sudden, outer threat of the avalanche and in Tomas's reaction, his inner fear. In this way, the film relates to ecocritical and post-humanist discussions of the border separating culture and nature. What is natural? The father escaping or the mother taking care of the children? What is socially constructed, and what is not? And the film's answer is, of course, more questions: Who knows? Who can tell? Who can understand? The avalanche event underlines the fragility of our usual ways of protecting ourselves through borders and categorisations. The avalanche is triggered by humans. Is it then nature or culture? And the affects, where do they belong? If Östlund describes a cynical acceptance of the socially

conventional and ordered as being the only possibility imaginable for the characters, does he not at the same time frame this so that the viewer *sees* the cynicism, can relate to it, and thereby get a sense that it could be different?

What the characters in the movie do is to follow the script and to play the parts that the socially accepted, the normal, allows them to. And this corresponds with the viewer's attachment to the same script. Good intentions do not help. I cannot decide on my own whether I am good or not. The film exposes how our beliefs in predictions and control bind us to structures that make it impossible to think differently. This is the aporetic underside of the rational ethics of trying to be good. And by not allowing either the characters or the audience a continuity based on intentions and actions, by serialistically breaking apart the images as well as the dialogue, Östlund forces thinking to recognise this underside.

Such aporias are the reasons why thinkers of the same generation as Foucault, Stockhausen, and Boulez (despite their differences) maintain that we have to see the possibility of a thinking that opens to the unpredictable, the new, instead of intentional goodness repeating the same. The unwillingness of Östlund to take responsibility in the restricted meaning of traditional morals, which he has been explicitly criticised for, might, from this perspective, be a way of really taking responsibility for the unpredictably new and different that might occur if images are cut out of their usual normalised connections and thereby demand thinking. Serialism is a method of uncontrol.

*Force Majeure* might state that social relations and conventions have become a second nature that precludes openings to anything other, but through its aesthetic form it exposes this and makes it possible to reflect and, perhaps, to think a little differently. But there are no guarantees. Perhaps it is just reproducing cynical reason by not taking a stand. There is, however, in the film certain aspects that problematise the relativism that cynicism depends on. Modern cynicism sees through traditions, dogmas, beliefs, and morals through the use of enlightened but also nihilistic reason, acknowledging that God is dead and hence all grounds are absent. Östlund presents relativist modern reason as it is formulated in everyday life in the form of clichés and internalised norms as well as in critique of norms. He investigates what a phrase really means.

When Tomas's inexcusable act has plunged the family into a state of shame and contempt, when it has dissolved normal order, its hierarchies, and its limits, and the family fumbles after something to hold onto, then the film actually acknowledges a more objective

gaze from the outside: the cleaner's. Subjective relativism is proven wrong by the gaze of the cleaner carrying the whole weight of socially mediated injustice. There might be no basic values. But there is thinking and analyses in detail and in context. There is objectivity in the cleaner's gaze.

Östlund stages incomprehensible "random acts of senseless violence," to use a phrase from David Sylvian.<sup>21</sup> In the film, the only way to deal with the inexcusable wrong that has taken place is through, on the one hand, discussions of subjective feeling, perspectives, and agreements on shared stories, and, on the other hand, facts produced by mobile cameras (as convincingly shown by the mother). There is nothing to hold on to except consensus and not losing one's face (even in front of photographic evidence), that is, nothing except the belief that belonging to a community in which we understand each other is the most important of all.

And in this there is a link back to where I began. In the manner of serialism, Östlund shows the contingency of what we take for granted, feel safe by, and think of as natural ways of being together, making music, making film, being a father, or taking responsibility. The alternative is to open up to uncontrol - to close, careful, and fragile forms of reading and thinking, in the case of Östlund, through the camera lens.

- 1 Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," *Power: Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1985*, ed. James Faubion (New York: The New Press, 2000), 328 and 139.
- 2 Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1981), 34.
- 3 Pierre Boulez, *Points de repère, Tome III, Leçons de musique: deux décennies d'enseignement au Collège de France (1976-1995)*, ed. Jean-Jacques Nattiez (Paris: Bourgois, 2005), 463-465.
- 4 György Ligeti's analysis of *Structures 1* is often seen as a turning point: "Pierre Boulez. Entscheidung und Automatik in der *Structure 1a*," *Die Reihe*, no. 4 (1958).
- 5 Michel Foucault, "What is Critique?" in *The Politics of Truth*, eds. Sylvère Lotringer and Lysa Hochroth (New York: Semiotext(e), 1997), 29.
- 6 *Force Majeure*, directed by Ruben Östlund, Plattform produktion, 2014.
- 7 Ingrid Stigsdotter, "'When to push stop or play': The Swedish reception of Ruben Östlund's Play (2011)," *Journal of Scandinavian Cinema* 3, no. 1 (2013): 41-48.
- 8 Anna Westerståhl Stenport and Garrett Traylor, "Playing with Art Cinema? Digitality constructs in Ruben Östlund's *Play*," *Journal of Scandinavian Cinema* 4, no. 1 (2014): 77-84.
- 9 Helena Karlsson, "Ruben Östlund's Play (2011): Race and segregation in 'good' liberal Sweden," *Journal of Scandinavian Cinema* 4, no. 1 (2014): 48-49.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 49.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 52.
- 12 Nikolaj Lübecker, *The Feel-bad Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 15.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 *Ibid.*, 17.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 132.
- 16 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2, The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London: Athlone, 1989), 175.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 38.
- 18 See Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1, The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London: Athlone, 1986).
- 19 Ruben Östlund, "The Square Becomes What We Make Out Of It," interview by Jörg Heiser, *Frieze*, March 2 2018, accessed September 3, 2018, <https://frieze.com/article/ruben-ostlund-square-becomes-what-we-make-out-it?language=de>.
- 20 Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).
- 21 David Sylvian, "Random Acts of Senseless Violence," *Manafon* (Samadhisound, 2009), CD.