11. FROM *LOCUS AMOENUS* TO *LOCUS ABSURDUM*: SKIING AT THE END OF NATURE IN RUBEN ÖSTLUND'S *FORCE MAJEURE* (2014)

Caroline Schaumann

In *The End of Ice* (2019), Dahr Jamail cautions: "A child born today will see an Everest largely free of glaciers within her lifetime" (6), urging us to come to terms with guilt and grief in order to acknowledge the loss of our planet as we know it. Melting mountain ice caps and retreating glaciers, as documented from *An Inconvenient Truth* (Davis Guggenheim, 2006) and *Chasing Ice* (Jeff Orlowski, 2012) to *Before the Flood* (Fisher Stevens, 2016) and *Ice on Fire* (Leila Connors, 2019), have become icons of global warming that highlight both the destructive power of humans and our vulnerability and incapacity to live with the damages we have produced. The fact that Al Gore's 2006 claim "Within the decade, there will be no more snows of Kilimanjaro" (*An Inconvenient Truth*) has been—fortunately—proven wrong but more often ridiculed, illustrates the need for adequate and effective representation across genres:

> It is now 15 years since Al Gore's startling pronouncement, and, for now, Africa's tallest mountain still has its iconic white icecap. In the intervening years, Mount Kilimanjaro has become a poster-child for the grim effects of climate change. Yet buried beneath the avalanche of panicked headlines and shock-inducing before-and-after pictures, the voices of scientists have largely been lost. Glaciologists who have studied the ancient volcano for decades argued that the link between climate change and Kilimanjaro's disappearing glaciers is tenuous at best. Which, bizarrely,

> has turned out to be a far less convenient (and less emotive) truth. (*Africa Geographic*, 2021)

While Kilimanjaro's glaciers continue to shrink rapidly (with over 90 per cent of the ice coverage lost over the last century, scientists now estimate most of the ice will disappear by 2040), the mountain media spectacle invited emotionally charged and cynical responses by scientists, laymen, and climate change deniers alike, but led to little action. In "The History of Ice: How Glaciers Became an Endangered Species," Mark Carey (2007) points out that glaciers have become a ready symbol of climate change precisely because of their affective charge, metaphorical malleability, and remove from ordinary life. In a more recent contribution, Zackary Provant and Carey describe glacier memorials in Iceland, Switzerland, and the United States, and provocatively conclude:

> The news [of glacier funerals] romanticizes high-mountain elegies and paints funeral organizers as heroic saviors, making it too easy to consume and then forget the spectacles. This very process of consumption is often followed by amnesia amid the global climate crisis. What we ultimately need are stories that ignite change and force authorities to respond with justice-oriented policies. (Provant & Carey, 2022)

Photos of shrunken icebergs, Arctic environments flooded in water, and emaciated polar bears have indeed become all too common images shared in the news and on social media, while greenhouse gas emissions and global warming have accelerated at an unprecedented pace. As Provant and Carey allege, climate accountability as an acknowledgment of causation by the Carbon Majors, the top ten global emitters of carbon dioxide and methane from 1965 to 2017 (Saudi Aramco, Chevron, Gazprom, ExxonMobil, National Iranian Oil, BP, Shell, Coal India, PEMEX, and Petroleos de Venezuela), most often remains missing from these at once beautiful and terrifying visuals. And as Alexa Weik von Mossner's illuminating contribution in Chapter 10 of this volume details, it also remains to be seen whether climate films as a whole elicit engagement or action beyond a temporary sense of shock. The climate grief that Jamail references certainly carries great emotional force and becomes beautifully articulated in novels like Ilija Trojanow's *EisTau* (*The Lamentations of Zeno*, 2016) and films like *Chasing Ice*, but, with its erasure of causation, it can also serve to diffuse climate justice.

Rather than focusing on the emotional plea of mountain elegies, my contribution turns to comedy, an unlikely choice for instigating climate action. But by not rehearsing the emotionally-laden imagery of tragedy and documentary that has become both oversaturated and ridiculed, comedy is arguably freer to

concede to complexities, point to factors of causality and responsibility, and anticipate responses that engender denialism or inability to cope. As Nicole Seymour (2018) has suggested, irreverence, irony, and playfulness are not only able to run counter to a moralizing and self-righteous environmentalism, but also avoid its often undergirding racism and heteronormativity. With its critical and often ironic distance, comedy does not rely on a claim to truth or the providing of wide-ranging explanations, and it cannot be proven untrue—perhaps a more effective strategy to deliver climate change's unpredictability and vast impact reaching into all areas of life. In this vein, the sci-fi satire *Downsizing* (Alexander Payne, 2017) connected the threat of overpopulation and Arctic methane emissions leading to planetary disaster with a social critique of consumption and global inequality in a story about a middle-class white American male's midlife crisis and path toward political activism. The film flopped with the critics and public alike—though some suggest it was simply ahead of its time (See Kleinman, 2022). As a vehicle to communicate the climate crisis, comedy film received a big boost with Adam McKay's star-studded 2021 feature *Don't Look Up!*, which became the second most-watched film within a month of its release on Netflix. Rather than establishing the facts of climate change in grief-inducing imagery, the film pointed to the often comical and bizarre mechanisms of denial, deflection, and defensiveness of politicians, journalists, scientists, and the public. While the conservative media predictably trashed the film, finding its portrayal of climate deniers, Trumpism, and anti-vaxxers unfunny and derivative, others saw an astute and terrifyingly realistic depiction of not only the political status quo but also the media response. Slavoj Žižek (2023) commented:

> [C]ritics were displeased by the light tone of *Don't Look Up!*, claiming it trivializes the ultimate apocalypse. What really bothered these critics is the exact opposite: The film highlights trivialization that permeates not only the establishment, but even the protesters.

Indeed the film inspired a broad debate on how to communicate the urgency of climate change most effectively (see Braun, 2022). In recent years, climate change humor has gained increasing attention, from online memes to stand-up comedy, to Rollie Williams's entertaining YouTube show *Climate Town*, to the Climate Comedy Cohort, a fellowship and contest supported by the nonprofit group Generation 180, which views comedy as "a vastly untapped resource."[1]

While the classical *Bergfilm* drama has avoided comical interventions—as Christian Quendler (2022, 136) explicates, Siegfried Kracauer's film scenario *Tartarin sur les Alpes*, which was intended to subvert the pathos of the German mountain films, unfortunately remains unrealized—my chapter continues what

Eva-Maria Müller outlines in Chapter 2 of this volume as the destabilizing potential of the ski comedy. In particular, I investigate how Ruben Östlund's *Turist* (*Force Majeure*, 2014) models—by way of tracing a family's skiing vacation in the Alps with humorous absurdity—our disorientation and vulnerability in the Anthropocene. In both *Don't Look Up!* and *Force Majeure*, climate change is not mentioned at all, though both films—*Don't Look Up!* rather obviously and *Force Majeure* more broadly and in veiled form—confront both global warming and our simultaneous strategies of denial. While this denialism in *Don't Look Up!* leads to planetary destruction, in *Force Majeure* the catastrophic event ends up being physically harmless but carrying long-term mental repercussions, accentuating the absurd quality of the film. Both films thus engender a downward trajectory, visibly reinforced in *Force Majeure*'s iconic frames of expansive mountain vistas that pan down to cables lying in the snowy ground as if to symbolize the protagonists' dashed hopes for recreation in the mountains. Mountains in this way invite and fulfill but also resist and disappoint viewer expectations. If Tom Gunning in the Introduction to this volume claims that "mountains in cinema can provide not simply a backdrop or setting, nor an abstract symbol, but something that absorbs and exceeds all of these," this holds true for *Force Majeure*, too, when the skiing protagonists, along with the narrative plot and the avalanche, speed down the mountain toward disintegration and destruction.

By now, it has been over two decades since Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer (2020, 18) put forth the term Anthropocene as a new geological epoch characterized by "the central role of mankind in geology and ecology." If the term lends power to humankind, who in the "Age of Man" define an entire geological epoch, it also characterizes the destructive power that humans—and more precisely, distinctly historical-, racial-, religious-, gender-, and wealth-based humans—wield over the land, the oceans, and the atmosphere of the earth. At the same time, the Anthropocene highlights our vulnerabilities of living on a hothouse planet, with damage that hits disadvantaged populations first and hardest, though it becomes noticed and endured by all. These parameters offer urgent and rich lines of inquiry in the sciences and humanities alike, underscoring the need for new genres of delineating nature and our participation in it.

By his own admission, Ruben Östlund used "the absurdity of a ski resort" to show what happens when the lives of rich people seemingly in control "become messed up"—a theme of Anthropocene urgency when human dominance and helplessness go hand in hand. Indeed, climate change in and of itself carries a distinctly absurd quality—as with Albert Camus's laboring Sisyphus, the task of halting the looming disaster may well be unsurmountable. Since the effects of global warming are so far-reaching and long-term, they become difficult to pinpoint and easy to question with seemingly disparate singular weather events. The often-used analogy of comparing climate change to the social

strata on an ocean liner that is speeding toward an iceberg but unable to stop also pushes the absurd forward. On the 100-year anniversary of the sinking of the Titanic, director James Cameron himself drew the connection between these two catastrophes:

> You've got the starving millions who are going to be the ones most affected by the next iceberg that we hit, which is going to be climate change. We can see that iceberg ahead of us right now, but we can't turn. We can't turn because of the momentum of the system, the political momentum, the business momentum. There are too many people making money out of the system, the way the system works right now, and those people frankly have their hands on the levers of power and aren't ready to let 'em go. Until they do, we will not be able to turn to miss that iceberg, and we're going to hit it, and when we hit it, the rich are still going to be able to get their access to food, to arable land, to water, and so on. It's going to be the poor, it's going to be the steerage that are going to be impacted. It's the same with the Titanic. (Romm 2012)

If absurdism more generally can be understood as the disconnect between intention and outcome, then, in the collision between our awareness of global environmental damage and our simultaneous incapacity in finding a joint effective response, we have arrived at an utterly absurd moment. By depicting the protagonists' futile and flawed visions of grandiosity in the face of crisis, *Force Majeure* points to a similarly absurd moment. Rather than confronting us with the environmental damage we have caused, the film thus hits at the mechanisms of denial—from consumer capitalism to hypermasculinity to narcissism—that are continuing to enable the climate crisis. If in 1989 Bill McKibben famously declared the "End of Nature" and Dahr Jamail twenty years later lamented the "End of Ice," Östlund presents us with the end of skiing, not only in environmental terms, but at its very moral, economic, and ethical foundation.

Östlund sarcastically admitted to three ambitions with *Force Majeure*: "To reduce alpine tourism, increase divorce rates, and make the most spectacular avalanche scene in history."[2] The film's memorable first scenes explore these themes. As the initial credits begin to roll and the musical score swells, we first hear then see a persistent tourist photographer dragging a reluctant Swedish family into the frame and moving himself out of the frame. Assuming the perspective of the photographer behind the viewfinder, we become participants in the ensuing involuntary photography session (Figure 11.1), invited to stage, view, and analyze both the tired and grumpy family in the front and the gloomy mountainscape in the background. In this way, viewers are forced to partake in the awkward framing of the family, who—egged on by the relentless

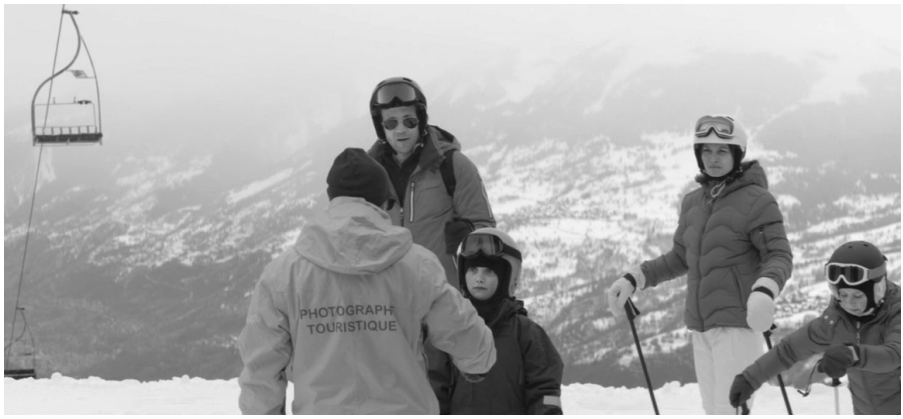

Figure 11.1 Family photography session in *Force Majeure* (2014)

Figure 11.2 Family photographs in *Force Majeure* (2014)

photographer's commands, fake compliments, and the countdown of camera clicks—assume victorious postures, embrace, and smile affectionately. This double framing by the photo and the film camera creates an uneasy distance to the events unfolding on screen—Roger Edholm rightly termed it a Brechtian alienation effect, as we witness through supposedly two lenses an odd kind of double-acting in the creation of a nuclear happy family on vacation. At the same time, the scene adds to the absurdist character of the film, as it not only flaunts the constructedness of a supposedly loving family and a supposed

winter wonderland, but also makes us unwilling participants in the framing and staging of two equally unattainable environments. When later in the film, Ebba happily purchases the finished photographs as a keepsake, we have come full circle in the process of selective framing, staging, consumption, and denial.

Force Majeure takes place at an upper-class ski resort in the French Alps, an ostensibly perfected nature, created thanks to artificial snow, ski lifts, snowplows, transporter belts, restaurants, and posh lodging all integrated into nature recreation. Östlund's clever cinematography reveals that the picturesque mountainscape that tourists and viewers admire and consume during the day is the result of a violent warscape at night, when panzer-like snowplows roar to the cannon fire of controlled avalanche bombings. In the first few minutes of the film after the photography session, we are presented with a montage of shots: an illuminated ski resort amidst the mountains before dawn, medium shots and close-ups of snow cannons, bright avalanche barriers, and flashing welcome signs, all to a thundering condensed version of Antonio Vivaldi's violin passage from *The Four Seasons*. Though the easily-recognizable "L'estate" (Summer) Concerto No. 2 in G minor, Op. 8, RV 315 may only ironically resonate with the subject matter of winter sports, the "Summer Storm" movement, along with the lyrical lines that Vivaldi (presumably) wrote and dedicated to this part, reference greater forces of nature quite fitting with the avalanche in the film: In the summer concerto, a "little shepherd sobs in fear of the violent storm […] frightened by the lightning bolts and roaring thunder." The final *Presto* concludes with the storm's destructive impact: "Alas, his [the shepherd's] worst fears are realized, as huge hailstones fall from the roaring heaviness, cutting the heads from the proudly standing grain" (Vivaldi, 18th Century).[3] The tension between technological control and natural forces is reinforced with a final slow camera pan from the sky, which looks over imposing mountains all the way to the cableways reaching down into the valley, and which, accompanied by the explosive sounds of the snow cannons, completes the film's opening. There are no humans visible, so the machines eerily assume a life of their own.

Though we are about to watch a ski film, this beginning unmistakably engages with Walter Ruttmann's Weimar city film *Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt* (*Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*, 1927), when a quiet and peaceful Berlin opens to chaotic hustle and bustle in the early morning hours. By mapping the genre of the city symphony onto a mountain film, Östlund at once draws attention to the modern infrastructure networks of mountainscapes and creatively pushes the boundaries of mountain and city film altogether. *Force Majeure*'s contemporary viewers can hardly feel quite as celebratory about the coal-fueled, carbon-emitting (tourist) economy of production, transportation, and consumption, fully knowing its devastating environmental consequences. With his close-ups of machines and shots of the illuminated resort preparing for its

opening, Östlund, in another allusion to the absurd disconnect between intention and outcome, reminds us of the connection between fossil-fueled industrialization and outdoor recreation of a privileged leisure class. Conversely, the prominent mountain panorama in *Force Majeure*'s establishing shot recalls the classical German *Bergfilm* such as Arnold Fanck's *Der heilige Berg* (*The Holy Mountain*, 1926), which also opens with a majestic panorama of snow-capped and lonesome mountains. Östlund grants us a similar panoramic view, but only in yet another absurdist and playful way; that is after a disorienting pan from a completely blue sky that viewers first take to be a background, and by concluding the pan with an image of cables amidst the snow, mapping the resort's infrastructure (Figure 11.3). Combining traditions of the Weimar city and mountain film genres with twenty-first-century technology not only underscores how nature (and in this case, the fragile and disappearing environment of snowy mountaintops) is molded and changed, but also points to the problematic legacy and unsustainable future of this form of outdoor recreation.

It is in this setting that marital tensions in *Force Majeure* come to the fore and eventually lead to an existential family crisis. What started out as a dream vacation takes on distinctly nightmarish dimensions when Thomas and Ebba, an attractive, young, and wealthy couple, and their two kids, Vera and Harry, watch an avalanche cut loose from the mountain's upper slope while enjoying an elaborate lunch on the deck of the resort's slopeside restaurant. Thomas first calmly reassures his family that the snow they see thundering down is a perfectly controlled slide, filming the incident on his phone. But when faced with the approaching flurry, he grabs his phone and gloves and flees the scene

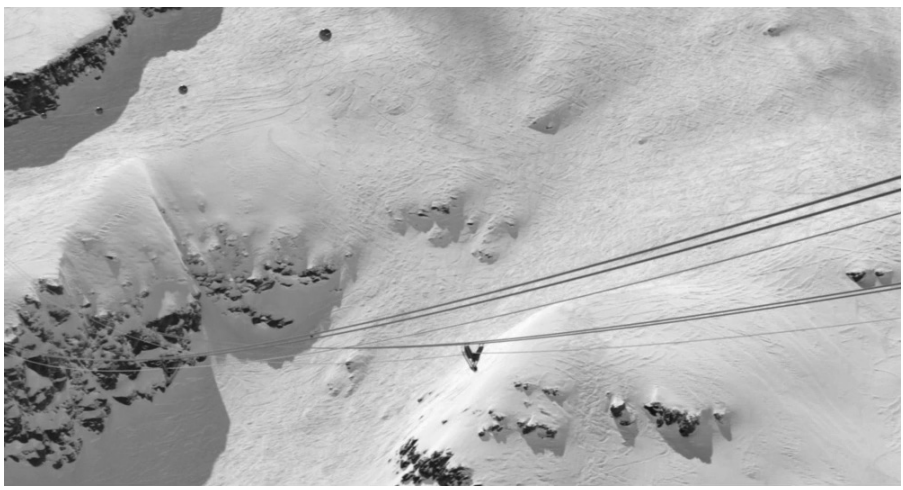

Figure 11.3 Cables in the snow in *Force Majeure* (2014)

in panic, pushing others aside and leaving his wife to fend for their two children as a billowing snow cloud roars into the dining area. This cowardly act of omission determines the entire course of the remaining vacation. Silenced at first, it leads to denial, shame, obsession, awkward social interactions, passive and open aggression, breakdowns, amends, and attempts at reconciliation.

While the actual cause of the (eventually harmless) avalanche is never revealed, this either intentional or unintentional force of nature sets into motion a crisis of masculinity and the nuclear family as a whole. As ambivalent as the avalanche itself—is it manmade or natural, does it qualify as a disaster or not?—are the responses to this event, inviting viewers to reflect on male heroism and failure while also questioning the validity of any one representation amidst a multitude of differing perspectives and framing devices. On the one hand, the film adopts a conventional dramatic plot, building up linearly and chronologically to a catastrophe that becomes the source of conflict and resolution. On the other hand, the film's parodic elements and ironic subtext continually undercut the melodramatic plot, and the intended disorientation questions not only the conflict and its resolution, but the reality of the film as a whole. As Thomas and Ebba desperately and futilely attempt several (ineffective) coping strategies, it is up to the viewer to recognize the incongruity of the situation, draw conclusions from the film's disasters big and small, and find meaning in an uncontrollably heating world.

Engaging traditions of the German mountain film and the disaster movie, Östlund exposes how violent disturbances disrupt a seemingly controlled and perfected environment. Like the geologist and avid skier Arnold Fanck almost a century before, Östlund also began his career with documentary ski films, and the setting of Fanck's *Der heilige Berg* and *Force Majeure* is similar—a secluded holiday resort in the Alps. But if the German mountain film pioneered on-location camerawork and men's daring climbing and skiing feats amidst an awe-inspiring but unforgiving nature, *Force Majeure* at first sight is a parody of a mountain film in that it does not display skilled skiing or mountaineering, but out-of-town tourists in convenient if clunky equipment who ski tentatively, awkwardly, and frightened on groomed and signed pistes, transported via gondolas, chair lifts, and conveyor belts. While Leni Riefenstahl in *Der heilige Berg* recalled being buried by several small avalanches during filming for dramatic effect (something still visible in the film), the protagonists in *Force Majeure* become paralyzed by an avalanche that does not touch anyone and was presumably safely controlled from the get-go. And while *Der heilige Berg* concluded with the tragic deaths of both male protagonists, leaving their love interest Diotima in despair and empty-handed, *Force Majeure* ends simply with the family travelling home, albeit in yet another absurdist sequence, as I will elaborate. Thus *Force Majeure* somewhat gleefully depicts the destruction of every single one of the values

that *Der heilige Berg* proclaimed in its dramatic conclusion, when a mountaineer simply called "the Friend" unswervingly holds onto to his fallen and long-dead climbing comrade dangling below on a rope, until he himself perishes. *Der heilige Berg*'s final intertitle pronounced the mountain as "a symbol of the greatest values that humanity can embrace—fidelity—truth—loyalty—faith"—contemporary as well as recent critics easily identified these values, in their celebration of sacrifice and masculine hegemony, as harboring proto-Nazi ideals. In *Force Majeure*, conversely, we are presented with Charlotte, a promiscuous wife in a seemingly happy open relationship, with Thomas's outright lies when trying to hide his cell phone use, with Ebba's passive-aggressive prodding to expose her husband's failures, and with their children's eroding trust in their parents' marriage. Leading a formerly firm value system ad absurdum, the film does not proclaim anything in its stead but merely plays out attempted coping scenarios: Thomas experiences some male bonding with his friend Mats while off-piste skiing in the high mountains, but his efforts to scream away his pain atop the mountain on command by Mats seem clichéd and hollow. Later he enjoys a hypermasculine drinking ritual, but most likely this entire sequence is merely a dream and doesn't lead to any solution. His eventual breakdown resulting in an excessive crying fit seems overdramatic even to Ebba, and a final scene of redemption when Thomas resumes his patriarchal role by heroically rescuing an injured Ebba from the ski slope becomes a performance staged for their kids when she proceeds to jump from his arms and easily walks away. It remains unclear if any of these tactics actually work, leaving viewers to reassess expectations, outcomes, and representational strategies.

If on-location shooting was a particular early trademark of Fanck's films, Östlund also employs the by now customary on-location shooting (in the French resort Les Arcs and British Columbia), but his frequent use of film within the film critically reflects the function of recording and observing—from the professional photographer at the beginning to the pictures constantly being taken on phones, from the Go-Pro camera along the extreme ski descent to the recording that reveals Thomas's escape on his phone. Corresponding to the protagonists' different perceptions of what happened and how to interpret it, different versions of the unfolding events exist on different screens. When a drone interrupts the revelatory conversation between Thomas, Ebba, Mats, and Fanni, another device that has nowadays become prevalent in shooting mountain films is notably used for comic relief, with Östlund both anticipating and poking fun at the burgeoning drone fad. As a comedy, the film denies viewers emotional identification with a main character in the framework of a conventional story—Anders Johansson (2018, 149) sees it in the "avant-garde and modernist tradition." In "Broken Contracts," Michelle Orange elucidates on Östlund's unique camerawork:

> The *Guitar Mongoloid* and *Involuntary* established Östlund's distinctive style of long takes, stationary camera, and deceptively indifferent positioning of actors. […] It's rare to get a good look into the eyes of any of his characters; their natures are revealed through their negotiation of other people along a modest spectrum of incident rather than through psychology or backstory. The picture-window quality of Östlund's direction reframes individuals as products of their surroundings, offering a study in both reaction and transience. The view is strictly limited and in constant flux. (2015, 34–37)

As we observe protagonists from a distance in mirrors, windows, and photographs, we come to wonder about hidden desires and conflicts. And as much time as the protagonists spend outdoors skiing, they spend as much and more time indoors, in restaurants, lobbies, and most of all in their hotel room. Here, the bathroom in particular occupies a prominent space and lengthy time for brushing teeth and peeing. Like the outdoor ski slopes, these indoor spaces are carefully attended and groomed by working-class personnel who are supposed to remain unseen but become visible in Östlund's film. Here, the encounter with a migrant worker adds another comical and absurdist perspective to the events unfolding on screen: Continually present in the hotel's hallways, the nameless janitor becomes an unwanted witness to the marital conflicts. In marked contrast to their reliance on camera and phone recordings, Ebba and Thomas become visibly uncomfortable with this human witnessing and confront the janitor, aggressively prodding "What do you want?" but in another scene inadvertently lock their kids into the hotel room with him. As with the nightly preparation of the ski slopes, the scenes with the janitor bring into focus the depth of the protagonists' oblivion, condescension, and prejudice. Annegret Heitmann has convincingly illustrated how *Force Majeure*'s visual language reinforces the emotional turmoil, gender imbalance, and social inequity in the pursuit of "happiness tourism":

> The film's visuals, […], deal heavily in impressions of the void—with long shots of the hotel's deserted and labyrinthine passages and the gloomy, empty pistes. […] The cinematography thereby produces a feeling of unnatural unease that seems to haunt tourism and its promise of happiness in this anonymous, empty world propped up with metal struts and electric power. (2017, 513)

In its original version, the film was called *Turist*, but Östlund thought that *Force Majeure*, the title for the foreign language edition referring to a standard contract clause suspending obligations in case of natural or manmade disasters, was particularly fitting. Indeed it is fruitful here to turn to disaster

studies in order to illuminate the parallels between the triggering effects of the film's disasters and the even larger force majeure of climate change, which goes unmentioned in the film but remains the elephant in the room. Much like the avalanche in the film, climate change as a similar but much larger-scale combination of manmade and natural forces leads to helplessness, guilt, shame, and disillusion, a crisis deflected rather than confronted. The film's unexpected ending, concluding the five parts announced in intertitles proclaiming the first, second, third, fourth, and final day of skiing, substantiates the parallels to disasters and the disaster film. After their departure from what increasingly turned into a suffocating hell, the family endures yet another misadventure along the narrow switchbacks on the harrowing bus ride back to the train station. In scenes reportedly inspired by a YouTube video, Ebba begins to panic, then demands to leave the bus, with all other passengers except Charlotte following her lead. In reversal to the previous situation, Thomas does not abandon the family but on the contrary helps his children off the bus. The final scene shows the group marching down the lonely mountain road in growing darkness, becoming a united community that shares cigarettes, holds hands, and carries their children until the film fades out (Figure 11.4).

As critics have pointed out, the cinematography here recalls many disaster films, such as *Twister* (Jan de Bont, 1996), *The Road* (John Hillcoat, 2010), and *Interstellar* (Christopher Nolan, 2014), when a group of survivors becomes bonded in the wake of an extraordinary event pushing characters to extraordinary deeds. While the above-mentioned calamities on screen seem to fall into the category of natural disasters, Kate Rigby in *Dancing with Disaster* (2015)

Figure 11.4 Abandoning the bus in *Force Majeure* (2014)

points out: "there is a sense in which the term natural disaster has always been a misnomer." Earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, landslides, avalanches and floods, fires, and droughts have been a constant part of the planet's geological history but are usually only declared a disaster once they affect the lives of peoples and communities. Rigby continues: "The entanglement of human and nonhuman actors and factors in the genesis, unfolding, and aftermath of a 'natural disaster' is now well recognized in the research field of disaster studies" (14). In the wake of manmade climate change, as we have exited the stable conditions of the Holocene and the "end of normal," extreme weather events cannot be simply termed natural disasters anymore. In a disaster film, protagonists may learn that they are not always in control, and the catastrophe can free them from their predetermined roles, liberate gender expectations, and bond a community in the face of a threat. These developments arguably hold true for *Force Majeure*, when Thomas could learn from his previous acts of negligence, Ebba becomes the leader of the pack, and an unlikely group of tourists is bonded through decisive action and able to defeat danger.

In her examination of the disaster tradition, Kate Rigby traces the meaning of representations of catastrophes:

> A true catastrophe, then, is not only a terminus but a turning point. In the *Poetics*, the katastrophe is intimately associated with anagnorisis: the moment of realization, when the tragic hero or heroine is faced with the collapse of their underlying assumptions about themselves and/or others and is brought, painfully and sometimes fatally, to the recognition of the damage that has been wrought by their ignorance. To the extent that it seeks to disclose the potentially catastrophic consequences of the track that society has taken, in the hope that a different path might yet be chosen and the worst averted. (2014, 18–19)

Such transformative potential corresponds to the unexpected turning points in *Force Majeure*, though Östlund characteristically imbues them with an ironic and absurd twist. In this way, the harrowing bus ride fails to relate to any of the previous themes in the film, and more importantly, the bus drive in and of itself cannot qualify as a disaster or catastrophe, making the film's ending strange and unbefitting. At the conclusion of the film, therefore, all questions that have been posed remain unanswered: Will the group reach the train station unscathed? Was the bus ride, or, as a matter of fact, the avalanche, ever putting the family in danger or did they only reflect people's fears? Have Thomas and Ebba overcome their marital troubles? Was their trip a turning point, or will they continue life as before? In interviews, Östlund revealed that only Charlotte, the philandering wife who in traditional cinema would be punished, remains on the bus and successfully makes her train back home. Hence the ending of the film questions

the value of community bonding in the wake of a disaster and, denying audience expectations once again, adds to the absurdist character of *Force Majeure*.

The American remake of *Force Majeure*, *Downhill* (Jim Rash & Nat Faxon, 2020) keeps the satirical portrayal of a wealthy married couple, thanks to brilliant performances by Julia Louis-Dreyfus and Will Ferrell. In the film, Billie and Pete Stanton hope to escape from their hectic work life to find rest and relaxation in the Austrian Ski resort of Ischgl, even though the "Ibiza of the Alps," as the concierge terms it, is a little less family-friendly and suited for their two sons, Finn and Emerson, than they had hoped. Billie and Pete, too, meet a lustful Charlotte as the Austrian concierge (utterly overdrawn with a thick German accent and outlandish behavior), and one of the original actors of *Force Majeure*, Kristofer Hivju, even makes an appearance in *Downhill*. But by replacing the gloomy mountainscape, the impersonal hypermodern hotel, the high-tech lifts, cables, snow cannons, grooming tools, and thundering soundtrack with sunlit mountain slopes, cozy wooden inns, waitresses in dirndls, and yodeling, *Downhill* loses the environmental critique inherent in *Force Majeure*'s cynical depiction of outdoor recreation. Perhaps unsurprisingly, *Downhill* concludes on a happy note after Billie's staged rescue by Pete, with no continually festering conflict. The entire bus ride of *Force Majeure*'s bizarre ending is omitted, as are any references to the larger framework of skiing during global warming. If *Downhill* acquires an absurdist dimension, it is entirely involuntarily, since the "Ibiza on Ice" ski resort of Ischgl made international headlines after more than 6,000 people from forty-five countries contracted COVID-19, leading to the resort's closure in March 2020.[4] As news of the Ischgl breeding ground of the virus circulated around the globe, it certainly did not help with *Downhill*'s release in February 2020, illuminating a different and more material type of transnationalism that shows that the Alps are—like metropolitan centers—global hubs.

In describing the human condition in the Anthropocene, the Australian chemist Will Steffen (2016) from the international Anthropocene Working Group muses: "I would use paradoxical. That's the feeling I would have, this enormous paradox of this quite powerful, amazing creature but quite flawed creature at the same time."[5] Based on the assumption of predictability and human power that come with cheap energy resources and a remarkably stable climate, our cultural narratives have become insufficient to understand the human condition in a rapidly changing, volatile nature. While the Anthropocene has brought new genres, such as climate fiction, it has also led to the reassessment and reinvention of existing genres, as Stephanie LeMenager suggests:

> The study of genres exposes how affective expectations are put together, in the process of foregrounding opportunities for innovation within

> existing genres. Ideally, such innovation might shift the structures of feeling that undergird hegemonic understandings of nationhood and the good life. As we live into the everyday Anthropocene, literary scholars within the environmental humanities and a broader environmentalist public have seized upon genre as a means of innovating new socio-ecological relations. (2017, 476)

With its allusions to the absurd, *Force Majeure* works to unsettle understandings of "the good life" in the Anthropocene. As the film both exposes and disappoints clichéd and generic audience expectations, *Force Majeure* throws into question modern definitions of human control, exclusivity, masculine prowess, the meaning of family and friends, and the restorative power of nature. While climate change and other pressing ecological concerns go unmentioned, the film contributes to the environmental humanities by showing—with a lot of awkward moments—the thin veneer but destructive consequences of recreational ski tourism. In this way, *Force Majeure* invites us to reassess the very traditions and genres in which we narrate nature and creates space for new representational venues in the Anthropocene.

Notes

1. For more information, see https://generation180.org/climate-comedy-cohort/
2. https://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/apr/26/force-majeure-johannes-bah-kukhne (Accessed July 6, 2023).
3. In notable contrast, Thomas is not fearful of the approaching avalanche, remaining ignorant of the ubiquitous destruction it causes.
4. See https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/05/everyone-was-drenched-in-the-virus-was-this-austrian-ski-resort-a-covid-19-ground-zero See also https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/24/europe/austria-ski-resort-ischgl-coronavirus-intl/index.html (Accessed July 6, 2023).
5. Will Steffen interviewed in *Anthropocene*.

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