

The 76th Berlin International Film Festival—Part 9

The consequences of extreme exploitation – *Enjoy Your Stay* and *I Understand Your Displeasure*

Bernd Reinhardt, Stefan Steinberg
12 April 2026

Among the highlights of this year's Berlinale were the two feature films *Enjoy Your Stay*, by Dominik Locher, and *I Understand Your Displeasure* (*Ich verstehe Ihren Unmut*), by Kilian Armando Friedrich.

Both films uncover a hidden world of misery. The first film focuses on migrant workers without rights who keep the Swiss luxury tourism industry going, while the second addresses precarious working conditions in the German cleaning industry.

There is no shortage of money in Swiss director Locher's *Enjoy Your Stay*. Young children at a plush hotel toss wads of large bills around as part of their play. Why play with Monopoly money when your parents can provide the real thing?

The film is set in the winter resort town of Verbier in the Swiss Alps. Luz (Mercedes Cabral), an undocumented Filipino migrant, works as a cleaner in a hotel. She has to perform every kind of menial task to avoid being fired. Like millions of other casual workers in Europe, she has no residence papers.

Her boss, Thibault (Alexis Manenti), instructs her to use the back entrance designated for cleaning staff, which perfectly reflects her low status. Luz's sole goal is to earn enough money to be reunited with her daughter Sofia in the Philippines. Luz has separated from her husband, who has turned their custody battle into a public spectacle via a video broadcast.

Enjoy Your Stay casts a ruthless, unsentimental gaze on the human cost of Europe's exclusive tourism industry. While guests ski down pristine slopes and enjoy their comfortable lives, Luz and her colleagues live in a parallel world marked by precariousness, surveillance and exploitation. No matter how hard she works, Luz can never earn enough to solve her problems. Her only way to make more money is to recruit other women into the same exploitative conditions she herself endures.

Enjoy Your Stay heads toward a quiet but devastating denouement: after a series of abuses, including an assault on a colleague, the women leave the resort. There is no liberating

catharsis, no justice, no material improvement in their situation. Luz leaves just as she arrived—economically trapped, socially invisible and still unable to secure her future or that of her child.

Global capitalism depends on a transnational underclass whose labor is deliberately kept out of sight. The deluxe resort serves as a microcosm of this system: a place where wealth and leisure are made possible only through the extreme exploitation of migrant workers, whose legal and economic vulnerability ensures their subjugation.

The title *Enjoy Your Stay* is marked by biting irony. It is both a polite gesture toward the guests and a cruel reminder of the asymmetry at the heart of the narrative. For those who can afford leisure, the system runs smoothly. For those who sustain it, the experience is one of personal self-sacrifice and erasure.

It is impossible to watch the film without recalling that just a few months ago, the global capitalist elite gathered in the sumptuous hotels of another Swiss resort town, Davos—four hours away—with the aim of further widening the already vast gap between the super-rich and the broad masses of the population. And 90 minutes away lies the resort town of Crans-Montana, where earlier this year a fire in a disco—triggered by cost-cutting measures in the pursuit of profit—claimed the lives of over 40 young people and left more than 100 with severe burns.

Kilian Armando Friedrich and co-director Tizian Stropm Zargari previously presented the documentary *Nuclear Nomads* (*Nomades du nucléaire*) at the 2023 Berlinale. It depicted French migrant workers who maintain and clean nuclear facilities at the risk of their lives.

I Understand Your Displeasure, the title of Friedrich's debut feature film, is what Heike (Sabine Thalau), 59, manager of a small German cleaning company, often says on the phone as she rushes from site to site in her car, attempting to placate dissatisfied customers who expect top quality at discount prices. The clients are supermarkets, construction sites, schools,

kindergartens, retirement homes and so on. Turnover among the cleaning company's international workforce is high, leaving little time for training. Mistakes are not uncommon.

Although the company pays union-rate wages, cost pressures force it to collaborate with a subcontractor, Vadim, who pays below-minimum wages. An industry-wide strike means "stress" for the boss. Heike and her Bosnian colleague Taja (Nada Kosturin) hand out vouchers to discourage the workers from joining the walkout. Despite her supervisory position, Heike's job is just as precarious as everyone else's.

When she tries to help an African asylum seeker employed by the subcontractor who needs a legal job, her boss tells her that if Vadim pulls out of their dealings because of her attempt to poach the African, he will no longer need her as site manager. To appease Vadim, who persistently demands new contracts, Heike fires a Bosnian colleague, accusing him of a theft she herself fabricated.

A highlight of the film is the confrontation between Heike and a daycare center director who terminates the company's cleaning contract. Heike had asked her roommate Detlef to clean at the daycare center out of necessity (a worker had suddenly fallen ill). Detlef did everything wrong. Heike and the daycare director—two managers in different industries, who both want to do a good job but suffer from the same lousy working conditions, especially staff shortages—yell at each other in frustration.

The job is also destroying Heike's personal life. Unable to switch off after work, she snaps at Detlef, as soon as she comes home, telling him to clean up. It annoys her when he lies relaxed on the couch reading after she has been working hard all day. Detlef has his own problems.

When social services representatives come to check whether the two might still be a couple, he suddenly falls to the floor, gasping for air. The daycare incident has also taken a toll on his nerves, and when Heike one day unexpectedly and disappointedly asks him why he took money from her without asking, he silently moves out.

When the boss learns that Heike is diluting cleaning supplies (she and Taja use the profit to supplement their meager wages), this is the last straw. Heike quits. The boss wants to overlook her offence—he needs her. But Heike is deeply hurt because, of all people, Taja betrayed her. Just recently, Heike had helped her with money for her sick mother in Bosnia.

The film captivates with its detailed portrayal. The non-professional actress playing Heike, Sabine Thalau, is a cleaner herself, and director Friedrich also worked in the cleaning industry for a time. Heike breaks down under the pressure of work and an unsolvable inner conflict: in a system where only efficiency and profit count, it is impossible for her to act in the interests of her colleagues and the company at the same time. She drives her colleagues relentlessly.

I Understand Your Displeasure presents no easy solution to Heike's dilemma. At a farewell party, she gives an emotional

speech about the need to stick together and do something on their own. When, to everyone's surprise, she announces plans to start her own cleaning company where there are no bosses and workers decide their own working hours, the reaction is muted. The state employment office brings Heike back down to earth. The case worker strongly advises against starting any experiments at her age. In a few years, she'll be able to enjoy her benefits—i.e., a minimum pension.

Throughout *I Understand Your Displeasure*, there's a touching, unspoken solidarity among the co-workers from all over the world, who are prepared to forgive and forget. All of them show up at the farewell party hosted by the rather unpopular Heike—including the Bosnian worker who had lost his job because of her, and the asylum seeker disappointed by Heike, but who now hopes to be hired by a construction company after his probationary period.

Previously, Taja had sharp words for Heike. As a German, she argued, Heike couldn't understand what it meant for someone coming from a war zone (the former Yugoslavia) to build a life here. In the end, they stand on a balcony, and Taja pulls out a small birthday cake, sticks a candle in it: "Make a wish!" Heike, too, is on the verge of forgiving the betrayal. Taja wasn't herself when the boss put her under immense pressure.

Both films resist portraying the respective behavior of Luz or Heike—born of desperate situations—as a matter of individual failure or moral weakness. Instead, they underscore a central truth: under capitalism, personal decisions can be so severely restricted that they become almost irrelevant. The problem is not that Luz or Heike make "wrong" decisions, but that the social structure itself offers no viable path to dignity or security.

Concluded



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