

9. Berlin: A City of Indefinite Dreams?

Hashem Al-Ghaili

The move to Berlin

When I lived in Bremen between 2013 and 2016, I knew that although it was beautiful and quiet, it was too small for me. I was in the midst of switching careers from academic life to science communication. By then, I had switched from academic science research to science communication, where I produced science communication videos on social media where science is explained in the most straightforward and attractive way possible.¹ My work as a science communicator, filmmaker, and author has attracted a global audience, regardless of geography and education. As long as they understand English, the ubiquitous language, I can interact with them. My audience is mainly US and European, with a large base in India and the Philippines. It has a 50% equal gender balance.

But I knew I needed a push in my career, which required me to move to a bigger city. My first choice was Berlin. The incentives were great! I had always heard about how receptive Berlin was and learned it's rich in diversity and like-minded people. Indeed, I found it a living, breathing city that loves art and awards creative minds. It's a central hub for science, technology, and innovation. And I have come to feel that no matter the country you come from or your educational background, Berlin will always have a place for you.

My success on social media provided me with more exposure, so people around the world started inviting me to speak about science, technology, innovation, and social media. and I have traveled extensively to deliver talks about topics that interest me and the public. I enjoy giving public talks and my natural audience are people all over the globe who speak English. I have delivered TEDx talks, in Rome (Italy), Cluj (Romania) and Zagreb (Croatia). I also participated in a session at the European Parliament in Belgium, which was a chance to engage with policymakers.

¹ You can view my work by joining me across social media: <https://app.muse.io/hashemalghaili>.

Berlin has always facilitated easy travel for me, with direct flights my priority. From the German capital, you have direct flights to many destinations.

I made the decision to move to Berlin end of 2016, and officially moved here on December 31st of that year, just in time for New Year's Eve. That night, I was invited to join some friends at a party, which was fun to attend. There were people from different countries and backgrounds. Everyone was in a festive mood and having a good time. When the clock struck 12 AM, we were all outside watching fireworks declaring the beginning of the new year, 2017. The celebrations were much bigger than what I was used to in Bremen. After all, I was in the capital of Germany with a population of over 3.5 million. While I enjoy fireworks and my opinion became more nuanced: they are fun and enjoyable, but the accidents associated with it made me realize they also need more responsibility.

My dreams for the new year were as big as the city – or even bigger. I *really* wanted to advance in my career and make a difference in this world, and I felt that this city might *just* be my ticket to a better tomorrow.

Encounters with authorities

The first step in Berlin was registering as a resident, which didn't take as long as I thought it would. Every district in Berlin has its own registration offices, and this makes it easier to register large groups of people to avoid waiting for a long time to get an appointment. You just show up in the morning, grab a number from the machine, and wait for your turn.

The next step was applying for a freelance residence permit in Berlin. I had a blue card issued in Bremen but had decided to become self-employed after quitting my previous job, which required me to apply for a freelance visa. After collecting a huge number of documents, I showed up for the appointment, and initially, I received feedback that – as a freelancer – I am not eligible to get a Blue Card after all. But from there on, it took a year without a response, and yet I was already working, earning money, and paying taxes which led to frustration. Finally, when I received a response about my application, it wasn't positive: they just asked for more documents. In the end, I had to involve an immigration lawyer. Once I had a lawyer, I got the permit within 4 days. It's something I wish I had done sooner. This encounter revealed the inequality in administrative processes: people with access to and knowledge of legal services would enjoy a different, faster treatment if they can afford it. It also reveals the human factor: the outcome of some processes depends on the tolerance level of the person who handles your file.

While waiting for the work permit, I wanted to meet like-minded people in the creative industry in Berlin, so I signed up for a co-working space called Factory. I would go there and work in video production and script writing. It was a wonderful

experience working with like-minded people, discussing different ideas, and sharing thoughts on different subjects. I made many friends there whom I'm still in contact with, which made me love Berlin even more. The city is rich, not only in diversity but also in talented people. At the time, I hoped to collaborate with some of them on future projects, but most were already busy working on their own projects, coming up with innovative ideas and on the verge of making the world a better place. In the meantime, some of them have built their own startups.

Working as a freelancer and signing up for a co-working space was a good way to drive away the isolation of working from home. My goal was to expand my network, meet more and more like-minded people, and collaborate with them on future projects. At first, I collaborated with a few people on smaller projects that would not justify moving to Berlin. But then, two years later, my career really took off. I was producing more video content and hiring freelancers occasionally to do some of my work. My Facebook page was gaining millions of followers and billions of video views. In 2018, the BBC featured my work and called me "The Man with 16 million fans" (Shehabib 2018). While Berlin contributed to this success, where I used its location to network and collaborate with the creative industry, I wanted to move on to something bigger. Instead of just simplifying scientific content and publishing it on social media in video format, I wanted to expand my activity to science fiction and filmmaking. I love movies, and making my own movie would be a great learning experience and enable me to push people to ask thought-provoking questions. Berlin was the perfect place for that – a hub for cinematographers, screenplay writers, film editors, visual effects companies, cinemas, and filmmaking equipment – in short, for all things connected to the craft.

Filmmaking in Berlin – a new station

In 2018, I wrote and directed a Sci-Fi movie called *Simulation*, the product of my imagination and enthusiasm for science. Its builds on my first novel with the same title. The plot revolves around an advanced alien civilization which builds a simulated reality where infinite creatures, including humans, are imprisoned. *Simulation* was filmed in just three days, all of them in Berlin. The first day of filming was in my apartment using a green screen. I had hired a professional Berlin-based crew to take care of this under my direction. The cast and crew arrived in a massive van with amazing, high-end equipment. As a hub for filmmakers, Berlin makes renting such tools accessible. We then placed massive lamps outside the windows of my apartment to light the scene in the best way possible.

But the large van and the lighting equipment drew my neighbors' attention – and not in a good way. As we began filming the scene, they knocked on my door and asked us to stop filming. One of them argued that I was using a lot of electricity, to

which I responded, "Don't worry. I'll pay for any energy costs". They then insisted that we couldn't film on the property, although I had informed my landlord months in advance. The neighbors had even threatened to call the police. My crew convinced them that we would only be filming for half a day and that everything would be removed from the property by evening. At that, they left us alone – only to return later, this time in an even larger group. They yelled at us and even claimed that we were making a lot of noise, even though we were, in fact, filming silent scenes. When we told them we were almost finished, and filming would only take half an hour more, they finally changed their tune. Ultimately, they were impressed by the equipment and even decided to ask what the film was about.

So, in the end, we could shoot the needed scenes for that day. But the pressure of being under threat to shut down production was immense. I kept telling myself, "This doesn't make any sense. I've worked so hard to get everyone on board and to come here on the same day. Shutting down production would lead to a loss of resources, time, and effort, and I'm not going to let that happen" One of the most challenging steps in the filmmaking process is making sure that everyone shows up on time on the same day, given their different schedules and plans, so I found what my neighbors did very distressing and annoying.

As the production was not as smooth as expected, it made me realize the inter-cultural and inter-generational frictions in Berlin. Dealing with neighbors in Berlin has its ups and downs, especially when you live in an area with a considerable age gap. Most people who live in Alt-Moabit are elderly, so they like it to be quiet. By contrast, in Kreuzberg, you will find more young people. When friends in Kreuzberg invited me to parties, I would be amazed at how loud these parties could get without hearing complaints from the neighbors, as they are more or less the same age. Living in a quiet and elderly neighborhood, I could not bring many people to organize a social gathering. Some areas in Berlin are livelier than others, which I hadn't considered when I moved here.

Finding a suitable place to rent in Berlin is a major challenge for newcomers. Flat hunting can linger for months or even years, which forces one to settle on an apartment just as a transition.

The good thing is, over time, I built good relations with some of my neighbors who were open to building connections with foreigners. We now exchange food, talk about personal things, and always greet each other with smiles. In fact, if I decided to film new scenes in my apartment, some of those who objected the previous time would defend me this time. So I have learned that the sooner you establish connections with them, the sooner you win their hearts.

The second day of filming was mainly outdoors. One of the things that I love the most about Berlin is how rich it is in locations suitable for filming literally any scene. The third day of filming was at the Berliner Union Film, a famous studio known for major productions. I had selected it for its huge green screen, something not avail-

able in other studios, let alone smaller towns. The nature of the scenes in my movie required such a big, well-equipped studio, and I felt that moving to Berlin had been the right choice, providing me direct access to such a high-end location, along with a professional cast and crew.

Producing Science Fiction Content in Berlin

Berlin is an interconnected city that feels like a small world. When I did the casting for my movie *Simulation*, finding experienced actors and actresses wasn't difficult. So many casting agencies can help you connect with their members, but most importantly, you can easily find people on Facebook. There are several groups for filmmakers in Berlin, which makes accessing literally any talent in the business possible. In those Facebook groups, you can easily find Berlin-based editors, cinematographers, videographers, sound designers, visual effects artists, color grading artists, concept artists, and actors. As soon as you post a casting announcement or a call to join your film, you receive dozens of messages from talented people expressing interest in joining your project. If you strike a deal, you can meet face-to-face and discuss everything. I don't have to travel elsewhere to meet talented people in Berlin because they're just right around the corner. Networking here is excellent. Just one contact will connect you to their circle of talented friends, so you know you will never be short-staffed. The cinematographer will know actors, who know sound designers, who know visual effects artists, and everyone will recommend their friends or people they have worked with. This simplifies the process of assembling a crew for any project.

Science fiction movies require a lot of visual effects, otherwise known as VFX. My movie was no different. Seeking VFX professionals for my movie, I looked for a Berlin-based company in this field. And sure enough, I found lots, some of which had worked on Hollywood blockbuster movies. I ended up making a deal with MovieBrats Studios. We worked together to create VFX shots for the movie and integrate computer-generated images into existing scenes. I would visit them frequently to monitor their progress and provide art direction. As a perfectionist, I have always believed that the best art direction can be given in person. Had I lived in another city, traveling to Berlin to meet the VFX team regularly would have been a challenge.

In 2019, the movie was finally ready. I wanted to share my excitement about it with the rest of the world, but first, I wanted to share it in Berlin, the city that had made it possible. So, I organized a film screening at CineStar at Sony Center, one of the most popular cinemas in Berlin. The team there was very welcoming and happy to organize my screening. On the screening date, over 300 people showed up to enjoy watching the film together. Seeing people watch my movie was the highlight of my

stay in Berlin. This great feeling made me appreciate the city even more. And it really motivated me to repeat the experience again.

Simulation went on to win several awards at international film festivals across the globe, including the Award of Excellence and Best Visual Effects from the Los Angeles-based international awards competition Global Shorts. Other awards included best director, short film, sound design, and original music score. Most of these aspects of the film were possible because the film was made in Berlin, so I feel that Berlin also won these awards. The film was also selected for screening in two Berlin-based film festivals, namely Berlin Independent Film Festival and Berlin Sci-fi Filmfest. So throughout, I have been aware of how Berlin has contributed significantly to my success. In the end, moving to Berlin promoted my growth. But still, I ask myself, was it just the city, or would I have been able to replicate this success elsewhere?

During my stay in Berlin and while working on the film, I worked on smaller projects that took just a few weeks, like the Sky Cruise, a futuristic Flying Hotel, and EctoLife, the World's First Artificial Womb. My most recent project, the sci-fi movie Last Stand, employed AI to explore its possibilities in filmmaking. Using so-called deep fake technology, it used AI-generated audio-visual materials featuring world leaders like Biden and Putin. The synopsis revolved around the world's reactions to contact with aliens in 2023, with strong parallels to the current global political situation.

Challenges as an Arab expat

Focusing mainly on my work, as a highly skilled expat, I remember encountering a few instances that made me feel the invisible barriers for Arab newcomers. Once when I was walking with a friend, a middle-aged woman heard us speaking English and shouted at us, "Go back to your home. This is Germany! Speak German." Another incident involved a passerby mocking a friend and me speaking Arabic by imitating us and making ape-like sounds. Again, the language you speak is a marker of who you are. Those incidents made me realize that racists reveal themselves when they have the opportunity.

These situations make me feel how Arabs are boxed into the frame of incompetent foreigners while my reality is far from that: I am a highly skilled tax-paying expat.

One's migration background does not expire, and one keeps being treated as an Arab, even when one gets German citizenship. A prominent example is the systematic and frequent racial profiling at airports, being vetted more frequently than others and being checked and delayed for one's last name or appearance while boarding a plane. However, I hope the old mentality might fade out as new generations come in and are more open-minded.

Living through the pandemic in Berlin

After the COVID-19 pandemic hit the world hard in 2020, I decided to stay home. I isolated myself from the rest of the world. I would only leave my apartment once a week to buy groceries. The rest of the time I spent reading about COVID-19 and sharing this content with the public on social media. Staying at home and not doing what I love to do out there made Berlin feel different, like an ordinary city, not at all like the very special place I had experienced it to be. Once again, I felt isolated, working from home. I needed to reignite my excitement when I first came to Berlin. I needed to make Berlin feel more useful again, so I wrote a new science fiction movie. Unlike the first one, which was short, the new one was a feature film over 1 hour long. This time question was, could I pull it off on my own?

Like the first movie, I hired a Berlin-based cast and crew, and the film was shot in two days. Preproduction took a while, but filming went smoothly. There was only one issue. On the second day of filming, I was supposed to be at the studio at 9 AM on a Sunday. The cast and crew were waiting for me, but I was delayed due to the morning marathon. All roads were blocked, and there was no way for my taxi to get me to the studio on time. I definitely did not see that coming. As a newcomer to Berlin, I did not know the marathon was happening. Otherwise, I would have rescheduled the filming for another day. The good thing is that Berlin has one of the world's best public transport systems, which allowed me to reach the studio before it was too late. So, in the end, while we began filming a bit late, we managed to complete our mission.

During my COVID-19 quarantine and self-isolation in my apartment in Berlin, I took several online courses and learned basic VFX. Instead of hiring a VFX company, which had been expensive, I decided this time to do all the VFX myself. Things were looking good: I was finally able to handle this on my own. But I asked myself, so what do I need Berlin for now? I've finished filming the movie and it's all about post-production now, which I can do from anywhere in the world. Essentially, I can always live in another city, plan to film my movies in Berlin, come here to film my movie, get the footage, and return home for post-production. However, Berlin isn't just a place, it's a factory for inspiring ideas. If I hadn't visited MovieBrats Studio in Berlin and had a first-hand look into what they do, I wouldn't have had the curiosity to learn how to do VFX. So, again, Berlin has indirectly contributed to my learning a new skill.

During self-isolation, I wrote my first novel, an extension of my first movie, turning the 24-minute movie into a 466-page-long novel. It's called *Simulation: The Great Escape*. Although it's still being edited and has yet to be published, I will be proud to say that my first book was written in Berlin.

The COVID-19 pandemic showed me that some of the things that I chose Berlin for can be done online now. And still, my love for Berlin continues. Some of my plans

have yet to be fulfilled. For instance, I have always wanted to expand my online activities on social media into offline activities. Instead of just publishing educational video content, I also want to organize events and deliver public talks about science in front of hundreds, if not thousands, of attendees. For that, I'll need to live in a community that speaks English and is willing to attend such events. So far, I haven't managed to pull this off in Berlin. The logistics of organizing events here are very tedious, and more often, the response rate is not satisfactory. If you try to organize such events, don't expect many people to attend your educational public talks if you're planning to speak in English. Even though I consider my German language skills good, I'm not fluent enough to talk about scientific content in languages other than English and Arabic, a limiting factor when communicating science offline.

Epilogue

Berlin is a wonderful city that I love and enjoy living in. It has offered me great opportunities to push my career forward and allowed me to work freely in an environment filled with creative and ambitious minds. However, some things still remain unfinished. If Berlin can't provide them, perhaps another city will. It is not only a city of infinite dreams but also infinite problems. Berlin is now one station on my journey. It has helped me achieve some of my goals in life. But every station stop has a start and an end. My next stop is Dubai! My career plans are to engage in more filmmaking. Dubai is a young booming multicultural city where public speaking in English would not be a problem. It is entirely different from Berlin. So far, I have spent five productive years living in Berlin. There have been ups and downs, but my accomplishments will always be tied to this place. I leave behind beautiful memories that will make me remember Berlin for as long as I live. If I ever retire, I can always return to Berlin to enjoy the winters – my favorite season.

References

Shehabib, Ibrahim (2018) The man with 18 million fans. BBC Worklife, February 22 (<https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20180222-the-man-with-16-million-fans>).

Al-Ghaili, Hashem (2023) Last Stand. Sci-Fi Short Film Made with Artificial Intelligence. YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6dtSqhYhcrs>).