

Berlin Film Festival 2026

Maayane Bouhnik looks back on the technical challenges faced to shoot "Where To?", by Assaf Machnes

"In the Berlin night", by François Reumont for the AFC

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After several short films on the counter, including *7 minutes*, already selected in 2017, Israeli director Assaf Machnes lives and works in Berlin. He is also the co-author of a web series called "Gimel" (broadcast on Arte) that deals with these young men and women who want to escape military service in the Hebrew state. This year he presents his first feature film *Where To?* in the Berlinale

Perspectives selection.

An entirely night film, which immerses the viewer in the daily life of a taxi driver of Palestinian origin crisscrossing the streets of the German capital. It is also a vibrant multicultural humanist advocacy in these dark times of tension between the peoples on the planet. Director of photography Maayane Bouhnik signs the images of this story delicately designed and very precisely staged. She comes to give us the secrets of making this very successful film. (FR)

In the endless nights of Berlin, Hassan, a 55-year-old Palestinian Uber driver, transports night owls from one party to another. Away from her eldest daughter, who is determined to marry her German boyfriend, Hassan often finds herself driving in the streets without a specific goal. One night, Amir, a 25-year-old Israeli tourist far from home, accidentally gets into Hassan's taxi. A few months later, Amir resurfaces. He now lives in Berlin and suffers from a heartache after the tormented end of a romantic relationship. Over the course of their journeys together for two years, Hassan begins to recognize in Amir's difficulties echoes of his own buried pain. Finally, their night trips help Hassan face his own past, including the events that led him to leave his native country 30 years ago.

What does this project mean to you?

Maayane Bouhnik: First of all, I felt personally very connected to the characters in the film. I felt like I had crossed these people myself... But without ever having had the opportunity to get in touch with them, to get to know them. And then there is this rather universal message that the film carries, which tends to show that even if everyone is looking for someone elsewhere in this city, or something different, basically everyone seeks to love or be loved.

For me, this is the strongest thing in this project, especially in these dark times that the planet is going through. I think basically that all the different narrative strata of *Where To?* lead to this universal advocacy for love, and the tense bridges between cultures and people. Aren't five different languages used in the film's dialogues? Almost as many languages used on the set, like this deeply cosmopolitan city.



Maayane Bouhnik

How did you approach the project? It's a big technical challenge to film an entire feature film in a taxi, at night...

MB: It was a real marathon. Having joined the team only a month and a half before the shooting, analyzing all the visual issues of the script was a real challenge for me. When you find yourself chaining car night interior with car night interior, the need to visually define each scene compared to the previous one catches your eye. Whether in terms of camera position, light or movement...

But not in a necessarily flashy or obvious way... Rather in a subtle, delicate logic. Our goal is really to suggest to the image this slow opening of Hassan's character, very progressive, towards the other. Like this opening filmed mainly through the rearview mirror, to slowly bring the characters closer, and film them after a while with each other in the same setting. And then in the picture, there is this central mission - as director of the photo - to translate the night on the screen. For me, it's really very different from the day. The night at the cinema is necessarily a mental representation. Not just the objective observation of a certain solar naturalism.



Photogram

This imagination of the night is all the more true as in a car, at night, the driver and passengers are usually in total twilight. A simple light on in the passenger compartment disturbing, as we know, driving and cannot be justified. As for the lights generated only by urban lighting (when we have some in a scene), their effects in the image are so random, multiple and disorderly that we are necessarily forced to fix a kind of representation, to fix certain variables to allow us to progress in the narration.

Have you spotted in situation?

MB: Yes, we spent a lot of time driving in Berlin, at night, with Assaf... It was essential to observe this urban light and also determine the possible routes "in real life" that could correspond to each scene of the film. The German capital is full of extremely different atmospheres in terms of night lighting... Whether it is very hot or very cold, very dark or even very bright, very retro or on the contrary very futuristic... We also reviewed *Night on Earth*, by Jim Jarmusch (1991) - image Fred Elmes, ASC -, one of the few films that also takes place in full in taxis. But with five segments, five drivers and five different cars... And a much more stylized narrative context, basically very different from ours. Another discussion, that of the 1.33 report, linked to the car, to this feeling of confinement in a box that we wanted to translate into the image for each character. Even if many other options, such as the anamorphic, were even mentioned for a while. Finally, the central idea of filming most of the scenes in the studio, with discoveries on LED wall. And the rest in real life, especially for some scenes where we wanted to place the camera more outside the vehicle...



The Berlin Night: filming in real settings

How many days of shooting?

MB: The film was made in 19 days. The opportunity of studio shooting allowing us to sometimes bring back more than 11 minutes of script in one day, while some scenes really shot in the streets were of course much slower to film... But when you engage in such a work plan, you know, as director of the photo, that you absolutely must ensure serious! Not much time to hesitate or grope... Everything must already be very well thought out and prepared upstream. For this, I was evoking those nights of car scouting in the city that really turned into a staging workshop for Assaf and me. Each real route is selected in advance, even giving the dramatic tone of each scene. It was all these night trips through the city that were indeed one of the keys for Assaf to concretely build his film.



In studio with LED wall

How did you proceed?

MB: We first shot all the planned scenes in the studio. The LED wall measured 7 m x 2.5 m, and our vehicle was placed on a rotating device allowing us to quickly change from one supposed camera angle to another. The service being supported by the team providing the LED wall, they were also responsible for bringing back the peels, filmed from a vehicle equipped with a Rig with 9 Panasonic GH5 cameras. I had to adapt to this data, and find on my side the best light configuration to give this illusion of the night in the car that I mentioned above. For this, a moving keylight base was our main source to illuminate the faces, the simple reflections from the LED wall not enough to illuminate the actors satisfactorily. Thanks to a Kino Mimik, a sufficiently powerful LED atmosphere capable of reproducing a light from the video stream from the peels, I was able to recreate the light movements in total synchronism with the background. All associated with a small effect to get a simple shine in the eyes even in case of dim light.



The Arri Alexa in "compact" mode

The other challenge was the camera itself. As I wanted to shoot in Alexa 35, especially for its excellent color rendering in low lights, we were confronted with its relative bulking (compared to other more compact camera bodies) in the vehicle. It was therefore completely stripped of everything that was not necessary to transform it into a kind of very compact block, simply equipped with optics. And I must say that it worked pretty well...

LED wall studios are often cited as a real advantage in light for realism...

MB: It's not that obvious. First of all, the dynamics of LED panels is of the order of 7 diaphs, which is much lower than what we can find in reality. The brightest parts of the background, for example, may seem a little dull. Or the blacks a little gray... And then the peels were turned in ProRes, and you had to make choices according to the routes, which would be clear or on the contrary dense... White balances too, crucial when we know that we need to bring back almost directly usable background images. All this in this context of a film that absolutely had to look like a simple thing shot in a very small team in a real taxi. When you look a little at what the illusion is based on, you notice that it is both the light, the movement(s) of the camera and/or vehicle, the actor's game imitating driving... With a random side, especially in the small jolts observed almost every time you film for real in a car crossing the city. As I explained, each peel had been prepared quite meticulously upstream in terms of rhythm, by timing the covered dialogue. And by setting the journey of the Rig car on a route determined according to the atmospheres necessary for each scene, with this or that stop at a red light, for example. These elements being precisely known, the game then consisted in the studio to organize this kind of ballet between the machinists acting with a bastaing to give vibrations to the car and the camera, plus any side effects of directive light (red light, public lighting etc., etc.). It's a really destabilizing job, because you spend all your time watching the return wondering if it looks true.... So much so that at the end of this first session in the studio, when we found ourselves outdoors for the few scenes shot in real night, I was surprised to suddenly find the image a little artificial! My brain had been as if washed by this fortnight on LED wall, and had now taken it as a reference.

At the end of filming, when we shot the few scenes outside the taxi, I can't tell you how happy I was suddenly to find myself in an apartment, with windows, doors... To see the whole bodies suddenly...



Photogram

Did you then have to compensate with calibration to make the discoveries more real?

MB: Calibration was another exciting key moment for me. With the help of modern tools, such as depth maps, for example, we were able to work on the backgrounds and translate the separation with the foreground in a very realistic way. This step, which took place over several sessions spread over three months, allowed us to take our time and analyze exactly what was needed to further strengthen the realism and reach the final result. Fortunately, as we were able to shoot in Alexa 35, the rendering of the complexions, even in these low light conditions and these unflattering light tones, was quite easy.

What do you remember from this experience?

MB: For me this question of twilight which is fundamental when filming a story that takes place almost entirely at night in a car. What is the twilight, and what is the image that everyone has of it? It is almost a philosophical question, where the line between naturalism and effect lies. Asking ourselves this question at each scene was exciting for me, especially since we could completely customize the car, add here or there small sources with magnetic support, to increase this or that reflection, or play on the contrast. All like in a sensitive trip, at least not a "classic" story by car... Like for example a road movie that usually goes from point A to point B, with a destination.

(Interview by François Reumont for the AFC)

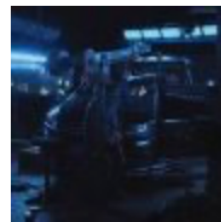
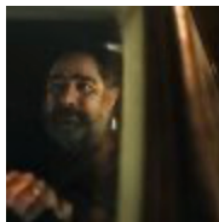
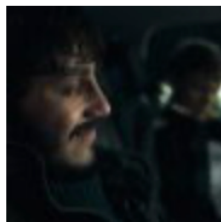
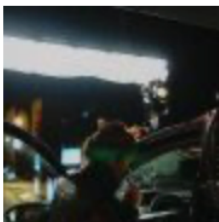
Where To?

Directed by: Assaf Machnes

Production: Iconoclast, 2team, Rogovin Brothers, Lev Cinemas

Direction of photography: Maayane Bouhnik

PORTFOLIO



First assistant operator: Timo Blessing

Gaffer: Peter Assman

Chief engineer: Philip Hobucher

LED wall turning supervision: Production Concept

Calibration: Gal Issar

Camera equipment: Arri Rental Berlin (Arri Alexa 35 and Arri DNA series)