

Nick Davis  
Film Discussion Group  
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## *99 Homes* (dir. Ramin Bahrani, 2014)

### On Camera

Dennis Nash      Andrew Garfield: *Never Let Me Go* (10), *The Social Network* (10), *Spidey*  
Rick Carver      Michael Shannon: *Revolutionary Road* (08), *Take Shelter* (11), *Freeheld* (15)  
Lynn Nash      Laura Dern: *Mask* (85), *Rambling Rose* (91), “Enlightened” (11-13), *Wild* (14)  
Frank Green      Tim Guinee: *Sweet Land* (05), *Promised Land* (12), “The Good Wife” (11-15)  
Connor Nash      Noah Lomax: the young kid in the Nicholas Sparks film *Safe Haven* (13)  
Freeman (tycoon)      Clancy Brown: *The Shawshank Redemption* (94), “Carnivàle” (03-05)

### Off Camera

Director/Writer      Ramin Bahrani: *Man Push Cart* (05), *Chop Shop* (07), *Goodbye Solo* (08)  
Co-Screenwriter      Amir Naderi: Iranian filmmaker, working with Bahrani for the first time  
Cinematography      Bobby Bukowski: Many indies since 80s, *The Messenger* (09), *Rosewater* (14)  
Art Direction:      Alex DiGerlando: *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (12), “True Detective” (14-15)  
Original Score:      Antony Partos: Australian thriller *Animal Kingdom* (10), recent doc *Sherpa* (15)  
Co-Composer:      Matteo Zingales: mostly for TV, including recent “Secrets & Lies” (14)  
Film Editing:      Bahrani works as his own editor, which is very rare for a feature film director

### Previous features from writer-director Ramin Bahrani

*Man Push Cart* (2005) – Pakistani-born streetside food vendor in New York struggles to get by  
*Chop Shop* (2007) – Homeless, 12-year-old Latino boy takes a job at a Queens auto-repair shop  
*Goodbye Solo* (2008) – Older white man hires Senegalese cab driver to take him on one last trip  
*At Any Price* (2012) – Young race-car driver refuses to take over his family’s agricultural empire

### If you liked *99 Homes*...

*Training Day* (2001) – Denzel Washington won an Oscar in this police thriller in which a rookie cop (Ethan Hawke) finds himself apprenticing from a deeply crooked veteran (Washington)  
*House of Sand and Fog* (2003) – Adaptation of a novel in which a bankrupt divorcée (Jennifer Connelly) and an Iranian émigré (Ben Kingsley) tussle over a house they both feel they own  
*Michael Clayton* (2007) – Another legal thriller about a man forced into ethically dubious duties to stay afloat, but who eventually hits the breaking point of his own conscience  
*The Messenger* (2009) – Oscar-nominated film in which Ben Foster and Woody Harrelson have to inform families who have lost a servicemember in the Iraq War; beyond the hook of a young man on an unbearable errand, the montages of informing families are very similar

## Contexts about *99 Homes* you may appreciate...

Ramin Bahrani, like *Selma*'s Ava DuVernay, became something of a cause célèbre for late film critic Roger Ebert, who saw *Man Push Cart* at the filmmaker's invitation at the Sundance Film Festival and wrote such a positive review that this small-scale immigrant story received a very visible commercial release and several other festival bookings. A career was born. Bahrani speaks about Ebert's support and friendship in the documentary *Life Itself* (2014).

Bahrani was born to Iranian immigrants in Winston Salem, NC, the setting of one of his best-loved films, *Goodbye Solo*. He received a prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship in 2009, has had major retrospectives of his work at Harvard University and the Museum of Modern Art, and currently teaches on the filmmaking faculty at Columbia University.

*99 Homes* debuted a year ago at the Venice Film Festival, to rave reviews. As with *Phoenix*, which debuted internationally around the same time, the distributor wound up holding it almost a year to release it as an early-fall "prestige" release. This represented a major return to form for Bahrani, whose previous film *At Any Price* flopped at Venice and with audiences.

Andrew Garfield, who plays Dennis, has been primed for mega-studio stardom ever since his breakthrough role as Mark Zuckerberg's sidelined friend and fellow Facebook inventor in *The Social Network* (2010). Shortly after, he signed to appear in the lead of the rebooted *Spider-Man* franchise but reports have swirled of his unhappiness with celebrity and studio filmmaking. Until *99 Homes*, he made no other films since 2010 except his two contracted *Spider-Man* movies, opting instead for artistically challenging and off-Hollywood enterprises like the Broadway revival of *Death of a Salesman* with Philip Seymour Hoffman. We might read his character's refusal of big-business corruption but also his reliance on big business as his meal ticket as, in a way, a metaphor for Garfield's own ambivalent stardom.

Michael Shannon, who plays Rick Carver, is a hugely respected Chicago theater actor who has steadily built a sterling reputation as a film actor—though he is often typecast as an oddball, a madman, a villain, or all three. For a young actor to go head-to-head with Shannon these days is akin to working with De Niro or Pacino in the 70s or 80s. The pressure on Garfield to go toe-to-toe with this heavyweight is also a convenient metaphor for the plot dynamics. (For an atypically sympathetic Shannon performance, go see the current release *Freeheld*.)

*99 Homes* builds off of Florida's notorious reputation as a tempting but unstable real-estate market, full of seductive deals but also of hucksters and swindlers. (Read Susan Orlean's *The Orchid Thief* for a distilled, sad, but entertaining gloss on this history.) *99 Homes* was filmed entirely in New Orleans, so why go to such lengths to emphasize Florida in the script? Incidentally, *Magic Mike*, aside from its other attractions, would be another great companion piece about thwarted working-class male ambitions and Faustian bosses in Florida.

Bahrani has spoken about how the film only took shape as a suspense thriller—he had previously imagined it as a more stoic, timely drama, closer to his other movies—after visiting Florida for research and noticing how speedy and dramatic the bank meetings and court hearings often were, and how almost everyone at foreclosures and evictions had a gun.

## Broad conversation topics...

**Morality:** *99 Homes* is scripted such that we see why Dennis has few if any options but to seize the job that Carver offers him. He feels intensely critical of the whole operation but still casts his lot with it. Other characters, including his own mother, will later insist he had the option to refuse, though some of them would have been adversely, even catastrophically affected had he done so. On his side, Carver refuses to accept that he is a villain and believes he is simply responding pragmatically to the same financial sinkhole that has gobbled up so many of the people he evicts, without which he could soon go under. Bahrani has said that Carver “is not an Iago,” i.e., naturally evil. “He is absolutely a product of a current system.” Where did you fall on these lines? Did the end of the film resolve its moral puzzles, or no?

**Photography:** Many themes in *99 Homes* as well as its thriller aspects (in plot, in music, in the buildup toward a gun-toting standoff) bear traces of 40s- or 50s-era *film noir*. However, instead of the usual route of using nighttime scenes and heavy shadows to suggest ethical compromise and corruption, *99 Homes* is filmed largely on bright Florida daylight, and the movie often fades to white rather than black between shots or scenes. What does it mean for a movie to depict corrupt structures that exist in plain sight, rather than “exposing” them?

**Against Subtlety:** “Subtlety,” like being “realistic” or having “three-dimensional characters” or bringing a plot to “resolution” is something we often say as implicit terms of praise for good movies, but there are lots of reasons a good movie might want to avoid these qualities. I didn’t find *99 Homes* particularly subtle. The huge red boldface font of the title and the pounding percussive score that kick in right away were early cues that the movie didn’t even want that reputation. But that’s not the same thing as saying the movie was obvious in its themes. Would you call the film “subtle”? Why or why not? If we assume that Dennis’s Faustian bargain with Carver and a basic indictment of cynical, structural corruption leading to mass foreclosures are the clearest themes in the film, what are some less obvious ones?

**Frames of Comparison:** Bahrani has invoked *Up in the Air* (2009), which I bet many of you have seen, as a point of comparison for *99 Homes*. That movie uses the rash of post-2008 layoffs the way *99 Homes* uses the post-2008 epidemic of foreclosures as a topical premise. They both make use of famous movie stars and anonymous faces actors to approach a modern problem, and the montages of multiple people being evicted in *99 Homes* mirror in some ways the montages of multiple people losing their jobs in *Up in the Air*. I balked at how *Up in the Air* set up all that context only to swerve halfway through into a project of trying to “humanize” George Clooney’s character, deflecting from questions of social malaise and re-centering around issues of romance, loneliness, and marriage. *99 Homes* refuses to budge from its earliest set of concerns and makes no move to give Dennis a love interest. But does *99 Homes* compromise in other ways in its thematic goals?

**In Current Context:** I found it interesting to see *99 Homes* during the same month when I saw *The Martian*, which absolutely endorses the very anti-Bahrani idea that if you really set your mind to it, you can think and strategize your way out of even the direst problems; and also *Steve Jobs*, who might be interesting to compare to Carver as someone making merciless, inhuman choices in the interest of pragmatism, but arguably with a larger vision of collective benefit. How do these movies stack up for you? What else did *99 Homes* remind you of?