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NARRATIVES OF CRISIS AND INDEPENDENT CINEMA: PRODUCTION, AESTHETICS,
AND IDEOLOGY IN THE FILMS OF RAMIN BAHRANI

by

Kyle Miner

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ABSTRACT

NARRATIVES OF CRISIS AND INDEPENDENT CINEMA: PRODUCTION, AESTHETICS, AND IDEOLOGY IN THE FILMS OF RAMIN BAHRANI

by

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The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2021
Under the Supervision of Professor Tami Williams

This dissertation examines the first six U.S. feature films of Iranian-American director Ramin Bahrani in order to explore key connections between various industrially independent production modes and the aesthetic and ideological qualities of the films. Bahrani's films are divided into three distinct periods based on the production mode in which he was working at the time, here characterized as microbudget, guerilla-style independent, Indiewood, and digital streaming productions. Each chapter explores the production mode in question, including production histories of the relevant films, and then discusses key connections arising between production strategies, aesthetics, and the films' ideological and historical import. Ultimately this dissertation raises questions about how what "independence" means in a contemporary and increasingly digital filmmaking landscape, as well as how audiences are asked to receive and understand socio-politically engaged films via aesthetics, production narratives, and exhibition context.

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I. Introduction

When Ramin Bahrani was nominated for a Best Adapted Screenplay Oscar for *The White Tiger* in March 2021, it marked a new stage of mainstream recognition for the independent director that in some ways paralleled the narrative arc of his new film itself. The film had been a relative hit since its release on Netflix in January, reaching the streamer's top 10 list in 64 countries and being viewed by 27 million households in its first month. It is by far the biggest film Bahrani has made, including an expansive cast and shooting for over 2 months on location in India. The story hits familiar beats for Bahrani, including observations about socioeconomic stratification and sharp capitalist critiques, albeit on a newly global scale. It follows Balram, a young man born into poverty in a small Indian village who rises through the ranks of a cut-throat caste-driven economic system. For a filmmaker who started out making microbudget dramas with 4-5 person crews on the streets of New York, an Oscar nomination for a critically hailed film produced by a major streamer might seem to mirror Balram's own ascension through a ruthless economic system. (Not that Bahrani is a stranger to critical attention—just a month earlier his first two films were added to the Criterion Collection.)

While Bahrani has always resisted a clear application of the "crossover" filmmaker label, *The White Tiger* does mark a distinct and meaningful break with the earlier, more industrially independent part of his career. In addition to the more visible stage offered by Netflix, the film was Bahrani's first working on a global scale, shooting outside the country¹ and dealing with a non-U.S.-focused story. This is a significant shift for a filmmaker whose career thus far has been so strongly tied to both American cultural myths and various relatively independent production

modes. Bahrani's first six U.S. features address major cultural crises and narratives during distinct periods of social, economic, and political change in recent U.S. history. The films make interventions into contentious contemporary discourses around immigration, capitalism, class, and digital privacy and securitization, all primarily through claims to different modes of realism. As is often true within the realm of independent cinema, these articulations of realist form and aesthetics are directly tied to the industrial modes in which Bahrani was working.

This makes his early career an interesting case study of shifting production modes inextricably linked with different economic and political situations. I divide the discussion of Bahrani's six early films into three chapters below, each of which is organized around the encompassed films' common production mode. These production modes—microbudget independent (chapter 1), Indiewood crossovers (chapter 2), and high-profile streaming productions (chapter 3)—act as jumping off points to explore the corresponding changes in aesthetics, narrative mode, and ideological import of the films themselves. Ultimately an exploration of the six films that constitute this initial period of Bahrani's career offers insights about the ways in which independent productions attempt to engage audiences in relation to cultural and political issues. The stages of his career show how even within independent film—a sector that so often prides itself on telling stories excluded from the mainstream—narratives of marginalization and even access to representation itself is shaped and restricted by factors of industry and capital. This has implications for how we understand not just contemporary media representations, but also the complicated relationships between those who wish to challenge dominant ideologies and the industrial structures through which they articulate these critiques.

Why Bahrani (and Independent Film)?

In just over a decade, Bahrani fairly prolifically progressed through three distinct production modes, which are used to structure the three chapters that follow: he made three microbudget, hyperrealist films with primarily non-professional actors; two low-budget studio-connected films in what Geoff King calls the Indiewood mode; and an adaptation of a popular sci-fi novel for HBO's streaming service. Each of these groups of films also corresponded to distinct periods of cultural, economic, or socio-political crisis and disjuncture in recent U.S. history. Bahrani's first three films—*Man Push Cart* (2005), *Chop Shop* (2007), and *Goodbye Solo* (2008)—are post-9/11 narratives of economic struggle featuring non-white immigrant protagonists. His fourth and fifth films—*At Any Price* (2012) and *99 Homes* (2014)—are post-financial crisis stories of economically disenfranchised white American families. *Fahrenheit 451* (2018) reimagines Ray Bradbury's novel in a Trumpian era of heightened concerns over digital privacy, surveillance, and hyper-mediated political discourse.

This first part of Bahrani's career offers a unique opportunity to examine how these different industrial and production modes entail not just their own freedoms and restrictions but also exercise a shaping influence on a film's form and aesthetics, narrative preoccupations, and ideological positioning. This also presents a convenient way to trace some of the contours of contemporary independent production and how various so-called indie film aesthetics and discourses address audiences—particularly with claims of realism and verisimilitude. The independent sector is notable here for the ways its historically oppositional production modes and limited economic resources have so often aligned with counter-hegemonic and overtly political content.² I am referring here to the more contemporary notion of independent cinema as John Berra has defined it: as a "cultural concept" that includes the "self-aware" industry and

promotional discourse through which certain films are made to carry sociopolitical and critical value. While this is the way many in the field now define various articulations of independent and "indie" cinema, it's important to distinguish the term here from a purely industrial usage (ie – simply anything made outside of the studio system). "Independence" thereby gains a significance that goes beyond denoting rote details of funding and production and signifies various qualities of the discourse around and audience experience of such films.

As Ariel Rogers notes, “cinematic experience is not limited to what the film spectacle itself conveys but entails individual and cultural dimensions including memory and imagination... both embodied and historically contingent” (11). The changes in production strategies, formal and aesthetic characteristics, and technologies of production and exhibition that occur as one moves through the independent cinema spectrum are tied not just to industry practices but also a complex set of cultural and historical relations. For independent cinema in particular, these configurations of production and aesthetics have always been explicitly linked to appeals to audiences' belief in the "realism" of the image—that what they're seeing authentically represents the real-world referents of the fictional film.

Sherry Ortner argues this is in fact a key defining element connecting studies of independent cinema from New Hollywood up through the digitally defined Indie 2.0 period. Specifically, independent cinema has come to function as a "critical cultural movement" characterized by its consistently oppositional formal and aesthetic qualities and its anti-hegemonic political stances. This applies not just to filmmakers and those producing films or to audiences and film press, but rather to the entire discursive field in which "independent films" are constructed as a cultural category. To revisit the evolving definition of "independence" started above, it is here taken to mean not isolation but rather belonging to a community

characterized by "the value of being independent from the mainstream represented by Hollywood" (33).

Chapter Structure and Organization

The organization of each of the three following chapters borrows from Geoff King's notion that U.S. independent cinema is distinguished from and in relation to Hollywood in three sometimes overlapping areas: industrial and production mode, socio-political ideological stances, and formal and aesthetic strategies.

Different Modes of Independent Production

Each chapter outlines the specific production mode in which Bahrani was working at that time. This includes an overview of the films' budgets and industrial/economic circumstances of production as well as testimony from Bahrani and some of the main cast and crew. I identify production techniques that, at least for Bahrani, are consistently tied to the creation of textual authenticity or realism while also being responsive to the economic limitations and affordances of each mode. Tracing what changes were necessitated by each mode—often things like crew size, length of the shooting schedule, and shooting location(s)—allows a closer exploration of how industrial positioning influences not just the films' aesthetics but also the ways in which they make claims to realism.

The connections between each stage's production factors and social-political stances helps illustrate a fundamental codeterminacy between capital (both funding and industrial mode), aesthetics, ideology, and audience address. Specifically, the films' ideological stances and critiques are actively and inextricably linked with their production styles because the latter helps determine and shape what narratives can be represented and how. For instance, Bahrani's early

work in an independent microbudget mode required the use of a quasi-improvisational shooting style, non-professional actors, and other considerations that gave the films a minimalist, social realist aesthetic. His move into production modes with higher funding, more traditional shooting styles, and well-known professional actors correspond to distinct shifts in the characters and experiences represented in the narratives, the films' formal and aesthetic qualities, and the audiences being addressed by each film.

Historical Context and Crisis

The films all deal closely with periods of historical disjuncture and crisis that were unfolding as they were made and released. I've referred to the films of chapters 1 and 2 above as “post”-9/11 and “post”-financial crisis because the films are less concerned with these events themselves than with their fallout and the political and cultural atmosphere that developed in their wake. Much of the press and critical narratives around the films refer to 9/11, the housing crisis, and Trump's election (chapters 1, 2, and 3 respectively), but these events are treated as fissure points that brought to the fore various sociocultural anxieties, neoliberal values, and political discord that the films seek to reflect and critique. When Bahrani moved into digital streaming and the highly referential mode of sci-fi allegory, the contemporary ties became even more immediate: *Fahrenheit 451* concerns itself directly with "post-truth" discourses around journalism and information exchange and manipulation. As the persistent invocations of MAGA rhetoric show, however, it is decidedly not post-Trump.

This historic periodization is also helpful in considering Anna Backman Rogers' notion of independent cinema as a cinema perpetually both "in" and "of" crisis. Rogers argues that the independent sector's preoccupation with crisis narratives reflects its state of constant flux and tension with the dominant Hollywood mode—as can be seen in the various shifting production

modes across the course of the three chapters here. For Rogers, independent cinema is characterized less by formal and aesthetic claims to verisimilitude and realism than by "the aesthetics and poetics of crisis that figure or visualise notions of ambiguity and the in-between" (1). This notion of interstitiality or transition from one state to another is often important to the films' consistent critique of neoliberal models in which an individual's pursuit of economic success is positioned as the highest, most-laudable goal. Sometimes Bahrani does this more subtly, as with the constant failure and stasis experienced by Ahmad and Ale in *Man Push Cart* and *Chop Shop*, respectively. At other times he draws more explicit parallels, such as when *99 Homes'* Rick Carver lectures Dennis Nash on his personal ethics of enforcing evictions with a Trumpian speech about how "America was built by bailing out winners" and "turning its back on losers."

Realism and Verisimilitude

Because of the films' strong focus on contemporary U.S. political and social crises, Bahrani's career is also an especially productive one through which to explore the long-standing relationship between independent cinema and claims to realism or verisimilitude. Per Ortner, the specific ways independent films purport to "tell the truth" about "the condition of American society today" are tied every bit to the formal and aesthetic choices that certain production practices enable as they are to the social and political narratives being engaged (27). Throughout the three chapters I discuss several different ways impressions of realism are articulated in relation to the films' distinct production strategies and aesthetics. What I'm concerned with here is how particular textual qualities have been historically linked with realism—either as evidence of cinema's indexicality or as a cultural assumption of authenticity—and how these qualities have been reified as realist within contemporary independent film discourses. For example,

certain minimalist qualities in the films of chapter 1 are construed as evidence of cinema's indexicality and are made to signal a more immediate connection with profilmic action. While not directly, this evokes early ontological assumptions about cinema found in Bazinian formal realism or Kracaeur's dual recording and revealing functions. In other cases the films rely on what Geoff King calls "subjective realism" as a mode of engendering audience trust that what they're seeing authentically represents a character's subjective experience.

Audience expectations are often a key determining factor in what is considered realist as well. While I'm more concerned with the links between certain production strategies and the resulting aesthetics here, I also look at how formal and narrative verisimilitude shapes perceptions that the films are engaging with current issues in more authentic ways. This demonstrates how textual elements like aesthetics or narrative structure never operate in a vacuum. There is no such thing as realism or authenticity as an innate quality of a film—it is always discursively constructed. Steve Neale notes that contexts of production, exhibition, and marketing discourse also convey verisimilar conventions and expectations. For example, discourses around each film's production, Bahrani's use of “non actors,” and critical festival reception positions the American Dream films very differently than premiere events with Hollywood actors or the advance press cycle for a release on a major streaming network. How these expectations are fulfilled and/or subverted relative to a particular genre or mode of filmmaking—in this case, one with a self-promoted claim to realism—can influence audiences' perception about the believability of what they've seen and its proximity to the real experiences purportedly represented.

Chapter 1: Realism and Authenticity in the American Dream Trilogy

The opening chapter discusses Bahrani's first three U.S. features, *Man Push Cart*, *Chop Shop*, and *Goodbye Solo*. These films are sometimes referred to as the "American Dream" trilogy for their engagement with narratives of economic struggle and mobility via a realist aesthetic meant to suggest socio-political "authenticity." The films feature immigrant characters working and saving to attain a degree of financial stability and autonomy, directly invoking the traditional "bootstrap" narrative. While only *Man Push Cart* explicitly mentions anti-immigrant sentiments—in a story about an Islamophobic attack one of Bahrani's actors actually suffered in real life—the films are all situated within larger post-9/11 discourses of xenophobia, cultural identity, and belonging. This is evident in the protagonists' narrative arcs, each of which is motivated by an illusory goal not of financial wealth but of simply attaining economic autonomy and security. For example, Ahmad (*Man Push Cart*) wants to afford a bigger apartment so his son can come live with him, and Ale (*Chop Shop*) wants to afford a safe, permanent living and working space for him and his sister. The culmination of the bootstrap myth in these cases involves reaching a state of basic economic security necessary to participate in a capitalist system in the first place—or at least to participate as insiders included in that system.

The three films embody a more traditional economically independent mode of production, with all three funded for less than \$1 million with no support from major studios. They exhibit many of the characteristics Geoff King identifies as markers of an "independent aesthetic," including an "artisanal," director-focused production mode (*Indie 2.0*) and a privileging of formal "verisimilitude" and "subjective realism" (*American Independent Cinema*). This emphasis on verisimilitude and realism as qualities rooted primarily in aesthetics helps trace important connections between textual and industrial factors. Independent cinema is often

discussed as having a politically and socially engaged mode of address, the function of which is "to orient attention... to issues of social experience and identity" (Newman 90, see also King, Rogers). Certain production elements serve this distinct rhetorical function in the guerilla microbudget mode Bahrani is working in here: shooting on live sets, seemingly improvised dialogue, the use of non-professional actors, and what often appears to be handheld or improvisational camerawork. These elements shape the aesthetic of the films and in turn implicitly signal to audiences a kind of authenticity in line with other historical modes of cinematic "realisms," as well as the perceived and cultivated truth-telling function Ortnier attributes to the independent sector.

The films of the American Dream trilogy have been aligned with Italian neorealism by critics, and Bahrani's formally and aesthetically minimal approach does echo that period's sense of "taking the camera to the streets" (Canet 155). Improvisation, filming in uncontrolled environments, and apparently extraneous sounds and objects cutting into the frame at times give the impression of events being captured as they happen, even though this is in truth a result of Bahrani and cinematographer Michael Simmonds working carefully to create an aesthetic described as "complicated although seemingly accidental" (Porton 47). The relationship between this aesthetic, certain formal and narrative elements, and the sociopolitical orientations of the films says something significant about how certain independent aesthetics work to elicit a particular kind of trust from the audience. Here we get a textual basis for Ortnier's notion of truth-telling in independent film: the sense that what we're seeing is an accurate and authentic representation of actual lived experience.

Chapter 2: Crossover to Mainstream in At Any Price and 99 Homes

This chapter explores how Bahrani's move toward mainstream narrative styles and aesthetics shifts and complicates his mode of audience address, particularly as it orients viewers toward contemporary socio-political issues. In the second phase of his career Bahrani shifts his focus to intergenerational white American farmers in *At Any Price* and a white Florida family who lost their home in the housing crisis in *99 Homes*. For a director whose three prior features are so inextricably linked with issues of immigration, cultural interstitiality, and socio-economic marginalization, these fourth and fifth features may seem to turn their attention away from those rendered less-or-invisible in the larger system of "American Dream" capitalism. Yet the stories being told and characters being represented align with Bahrani's move into what King defines as the Indiewood mode: "a part of the American film spectrum in which distinctions between Hollywood and the independent sector appeared to have become blurred" (*Indiewood 3*). In this chapter I'll discuss how King's notion of Indiewood has been complicated by the decline of the major studios' specialty labels and the recent rise of specialty independent studios like A24, Annapurna, Blumhouse, Hyde Park, and others, which have come to serve similar functions to what were referred to during the 80s and 90s indie period as "mini-majors."

Several factors indicate this shift toward more mainstreamed independent production: both films were financed in the millions, significantly higher than the budgets for Bahrani's first three features; each film was produced and/or distributed with involvement from either a studio specialty division (Sony Pictures Classics distributing *At Any Price*) or a prominent independent studio (Broad Green Pictures and Hyde Park Entertainment for *99 Homes*); and each film had a more public, high-profile release strategy involving advanced buzz and strategic use of the festival circuit. These shifts in production style noticeably and significantly affect the aesthetic

and narrative sensibilities of the films as well. Gone are the long tracking shots and the seemingly improvised visual strategy of the American Dream trilogy, replaced here with the usual staging, invisible editing, and rehearsed dialogue delivery of classical studio films. These films are also Bahrani's first to be headlined by recognizable Hollywood actors: Dennis Quaid and Zac Efron lead *At Any Price* and Laura Dern, Andrew Garfield, and Michael Shannon play the main characters in *99 Homes*.

The shifts in style and audience address are inextricably linked with the films' higher budgets and restrictions imposed by studio-modeled filmmaking, but they also open up new avenues for Bahrani's critique of American socio-economic myths. While the films are drastically different from the American Dream trilogy in terms of production practices and aesthetics, they share similar ideological approaches. Both *At Any Price* and *99 Homes* are at their core about the large-scale failures of U.S. capitalism and those who find themselves misled by American narratives of prosperity and economic security. However, whereas the American Dream trilogy illustrates the illusory and ultimately unattainable nature of the bootstrap myth by foregrounding immigrant people of color, the latter two films focus on issues of class and economic insecurity for middle-class white U.S. families. The cultural and economic myths these two films engage with are still distinctly "American," but they are more directly tied to a historical moment in which, post-financial crisis, economic success and security seemed to be snatched away from those who had already achieved it. In *At Any Price* this manifests in the mythology of the small-town, generational, white American farmer and economic disenfranchisement in the face of "Big Agriculture" capitalism. *99 Homes'* focus on homeownership and material markers of superficial financial success (and excess) similarly

engage with myths of economic security and property ownership in the midst of the housing crisis.

Ultimately *At Any Price* and *99 Homes* feature characters who are more socioeconomically empowered than those of the American Dream films, but the terms of their empowerment become moral and ethical traps. Both Henry Whipple and Dennis Nash are caught within economic systems that create pairings of inherently unethical choices motivated by desperation. Bahrani calls this the "deal-with-the-devil structure" of the films (Murphy, NY Times). If the characters of the American Dream trilogy are Sisyphean in their perpetual struggles against an exclusionary economic system, then those featured in *At Any Price* and *99 Homes* fit a Faustian archetype, having compromised the very "American" values that ostensibly motivated their actions in the first place. In *At Any Price*, we see this in the "expand or die" mantra that Whipple and others embrace in the name of maintaining a legacy to pass from one generation to the next. In *99 Homes*, Nash consistently falls back on the idea that "if I don't do this, someone else will." These narratives of inevitability and of just being a cog in a vast machine subtly prioritize individual agency and empowerment over communal wellbeing. This allows the characters to remove themselves from the moral and ethical consequences of their actions—the system is responsible, not them—while prioritizing their families and their own economic security over that of others.

Bahrani's focus on white working-class U.S. families seems in this context to be more than simply a requirement of a new production mode geared toward white, upper-middle-class audiences. Bahrani also uses the process of mirroring and recognition for these audiences to critique certain American myths' connection to capitalism. *At Any Price* and *99 Homes* both take as a central theme the various costs of economic success, especially those human costs often

strategically elided in prominent cultural narratives of hard work and financial security via forms of ownership. Henry Whipple tells his son at the start of *At Any Price*, "when a man stops wanting, a man stops living," one of the many canned capitalist maxims he repeats throughout a film that's ultimately about living with the consequences of such unbounded desire for accumulation. With these two films Bahrani reflects back some of the often generational consequences of these very American desires for things like legacy (handing down the family business) and property ownership (having "something to call one's own").

Chapter 3: Digital Cinema and Mediation in Fahrenheit 451

The third chapter focuses on two firsts for Bahrani: an adaptation—of Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*—and the first time making a film for a straight-to-streaming release platform. This is notable as many independent filmmakers have begun looking to streaming services—either VOD like Amazon, iTunes, Vudu, etc., or subscription platforms like Netflix or Amazon Prime—to provide financial support or post-production viability for smaller projects. Bahrani's move to HBO to make *Fahrenheit 451* echoes this move to streaming and digital distribution for much of the independent sector. Yet for Bahrani this move also meant a larger budget, working with a fully professional cast, adapting an existing property, and adopting a more stylized digital aesthetic. In working with HBO Bahrani stepped into a digital streaming production and exhibition system that's become crucially important for many independent creators while simultaneously making the least independent film of his career. Fittingly, it addresses the broadest and most immediately timely political issues of all six so far, and engages audiences through far more simplified, straightforward narrative allegory than his previous films.

Working in a purely digital mode—both in the film's production and exhibition—Bahrani weaves contemporary issues of digital surveillance, privacy, identity-as-commodified-data, and a

polarized media environment into the reimagined political allegory of Bradbury's original novel. Bahrani's most aesthetically and formally mainstream film is, not surprisingly, his most didactic and ideologically clear-cut. The film's narrative suggests a tumultuous alternate history in which “too many opinions” led to a second civil war, resulting in a dystopian, highly mediated surveillance state in which the oppressive police force is at war with information and those who seek to share it. Michael Shannon's Captain Beatty repeatedly invokes the need to eliminate “two sides” to every issue, enforcing a governmental mantra that consensus is happiness. These narrative elements clearly mirror current discussions over political polarization as well as fake news and the ethical reliability of various digital platforms through which news is disseminated, updating some of the original novel's concerns for current times.

However, Bahrani adds more specific contemporary resonance through a new narrative device: the temporary or indefinite deletion of one's identity as punishment for possessing or disseminating unapproved information (text or digital). Deleted individuals are even labeled with a derogatory term: "Eels." This process not only literalizes an extreme version of governmental control over and/or corporate ownership of one's personal data, but also introduces the film's ideological orientation regarding issues of class and race. Identity deletion entails one's fingerprints being both literally burned off and erased from governmental databases, in effect severing Eels' access to a variety of government services and basic rights. In introducing these elements, Bahrani and co-writer Amir Naderi update Bradbury's broadly applicable allegory about censorship to a more pointed and specific critique of contentious rhetoric regarding class and race, and ultimately the political weaponization of immigration status in a Trumpian "post-truth" era.

Bahrani's aesthetic approach for *Fahrenheit 451* differs radically from his previous films. It features neither the arguably neorealist aesthetic of the American Dream films nor the more classical, invisible Indiewood style of *At Any Price* and *99 Homes*. Rather, Bahrani employs a visual strategy aligned with what Steven Shaviro describes as "post-cinematic affect": the film-world's proliferation of screens and watchful surveillance devices is evoked and enacted in the look and editing of the film itself. Continuity of action and unified space are broken constantly by simulated live video feeds, ominous obliquely angled surveillance footage, and simulated participatory social media interfaces through which faceless viewers respond to Montag and crew's livestreamed propagandistic exploits. For example, as Montag and the rest of the firemen are broadcast live during a raid, Bahrani often shifts to a simulated streaming interface featuring viewers' comments and emoji-style responses hovering over the video feed. These moments do more than just serve to visualize, via recognizable interface elements, the diegetic audience's interaction and engagement with the firemen's politicized rhetoric. They also mimic the multi-screen "hallucinatory mediascape" through which so many audiences consume films and other media today—especially those made exclusively for streaming platforms.

Furthermore, Bahrani's constant remediation of social media interfaces and other media forms helps illustrate Shaviro's point about constant fragmentary surveillance, that "[i]n this environment, where all phenomena pass through a stage of being processed in the form of digital code, we cannot meaningfully distinguish between 'reality' and its multiple simulations" (7). The raids in which Montag and the firemen take part involve performances of political and social narratives that are made more and more "real" through continued collective experience—everything subsumed into a Baudrillardian simulacrum. In a way, the discourse of realism and believability being engaged with here comes full circle from the types of realism discussed in

chapter 1. The trust in the authenticity of the image derived from its indexical origins—which is what gives rise to the discourses of realism and independent authenticity discussed in chapter 1—is revealed to have always been a tool of cultural production. Here the producers of cultural narratives are just foregrounded in the plot and sci-fi genre trappings of the film itself.

Markos Hadjioannou argues that cinema's new digital mode is characterized by a "relationship between celluloid modes and digital practices in the creation and perception of cinema's images... [digital] reconfigures rather than replaces celluloid modes of creation and interaction" (2). In this way "the digital"—not just production technology but also exhibition platforms and modes of reception—creates a range of new "functions" that may be applied to the cultural practices of cinema. Notions of realism in cinema have always been rooted in the affective potential images derive from their original ontological roots in the index. What Hadjioannou argues is that the heightened potential of digital cinema practices to convincingly manipulate such affective images, and the increased frequency with which images are encountered, introduces ethical concerns over how digital technologies may function to shape and manipulate thought. Bahrani's broader interest in realism finds expression here in the interplay between these mimetic post-cinematic aesthetics and the contemporary political issues with which the film is concerned. Bahrani frames this not as a theoretical issue of index versus code, but rather as an urgent problem of how to combat social marginalization and injustice without the tools to accurately reflect and represent the world in which such injustices occur (tools he employs via the aesthetic and formal approaches of his earlier films).

An analysis of these three distinct periods not only explicates Bahrani's narratives of crisis but also demonstrates the various ongoing crises of independent cinema. In perpetually negotiating points of difference and overlap with the dominant modes of filmmaking—and this

no longer always means Hollywood—independent productions offer their own configurations of aesthetic, narrative, and ideological possibilities and limitations. These industrial affordances and restrictions can translate to textual qualities, often opening up space for different types of narrative contracts with the viewer through which films signal their differentiation with Hollywood. In addition to various aesthetics of realism, Bahrani also embraces narrative ambiguity, evoking and subverting elements of genre, and adaptation as unique means through which to situate audience expectations—particularly regarding what the viewer is asked to consider as “true” in the real-world conditions and experiences the films reflect. In a digital age of increasingly hybrid production and exhibition contexts, it also becomes more complicated to clearly delineate the different modes being bridged by each of the independent positionings Bahrani occupies across the six films discussed here. Bahrani’s career-so-far therefore raises questions about what “independent” positioning means at this point in cinema’s history.

II. Realism and Authenticity in the American Dream Trilogy

In the years since their release, Ramin Bahrani's first three U.S. features have been unofficially dubbed his "American Dream trilogy" for their engagement with narratives of socio-economic struggle in the face of upward mobility and cultural otherness.³ *Man Push Cart* (2005), *Chop Shop* (2007), and *Goodbye Solo* (2008) are small-scale, economically independent productions made in quick succession, which tell distinct but narratively and aesthetically similar stories about immigrant characters striving for perpetually elusive economic success and security. At their core, the films offer criticisms of American "bootstrap" narratives of hard work and upward mobility, specifically questioning how these narratives—so often inextricably tied to national identity—function for immigrant people of color in a post-9/11 U.S. The films' minimalist, realist aesthetics and guerilla shooting strategies, which often incorporated unplanned action on live sets, contribute to an impression that the films are documenting real life as it unfolds. This naturalistic, often seemingly improvised quality is actually heavily cultivated, both in Bahrani's shooting practices and in post production, in order to create the impression of a more authentic engagement with life at the capitalist margins.

Introduction: Minimalism and Historical Context

All three films have similar, minimalist narrative structures: the protagonists repeatedly perform the same respective routines of menial, service-oriented labor with the promise that it will propel them to a stage of economic stability and security that is instead perpetually delayed through various social and economic obstacles. This narrative minimalism is in part a result of

Bahrani's communal and improvisational approach to production, itself partially determined by the economically independent nature of the films. Freedom from studio oversight or strict production timelines enabled Bahrani to embrace at times more contingent, observational scripting and filming practices, embedding himself within a place or community and allowing each film's story to emerge organically from his and others' experiences. While the films are in the end scripted, structured fictional narratives, this communal and contingent approach results in an aesthetic that seems at times improvised and by implication more sociopolitically authentic than other cinematic representations of life at the margins of capitalist systems. The subject matter and anti-capitalist ideological bent combined with Bahrani's contingent and quasi-improvisational aesthetic have drawn comparisons with Italian neorealism. While the films explored here are very much of their own distinct historical moments, these comparisons help illuminate a strong connection between certain low-budget production practices—filming in live locations, improvisational dialogue, the use of non-professional actors—and a perceived socio-political function rooted in notions of cinematic realism.

Often grouped in terms of their implicit critique(s) of a capitalist American Dream mythology, it's important to note how each film also occupies a very specific social and historical context within a post-9/11, pre-financial crisis United States. This context is articulated by a number of factors in the films, the most obvious of which is Bahrani's focus on non-white immigrant protagonists whose narratives are driven primarily by economic struggles and immobility. *Man Push Cart* follows Ahmad, a Pakistani immigrant who operates a small food cart in Manhattan with hopes of paying off the loan on his cart and saving up for a larger apartment that will enable his young son to come live with him. Ale, the young protagonist of *Chop Shop*, lives in a small office above the titular Willet's Point auto shop where he works off

the books, saving his cash earnings in order to buy a food truck to operate with his sister Isamar. *Goodbye Solo's* lead is a Senegalese immigrant (named Solo) who drives a taxi in Winston-Salem, saving up for his own cab while he prepares to take the exam to become a flight attendant.

While the characters are drawn forward in their respective narratives by overarching capitalist systems that promise a degree of autonomy and economic success, they each engage with these systems in subtly subversive and telling ways. Ahmad, Ale, and Solo all perform service-oriented jobs in some kind of officially licensed capacity (operating a food/coffee cart, auto repair, and driving a cab, respectively), but they also supplement these incomes with unlicensed, often illegal work that subverts these same systems—illicit work in which networks of secondary characters are also often involved. Ahmad, as well as Ale and his friend Carlos, all sell bootleg DVDs, often using these unofficial consumer products to barter for other goods and services, such as cigarettes and repair work. Solo uses his company-owned cab to offer off-the-meter private driving services for his friends William and Roc, the latter of whom Solo drives to and from various locations to buy and sell drugs. While these hybrid modes of engagement with the very structures of capitalism are in their own ways subversive, they are ultimately absorbed into the cyclical routines of work that keep the protagonists stuck firmly in their same socioeconomic stations.

The characters' traversals of various urban landscapes underscore the role and importance of place as both mythology and connection to authentic lived experience in Bahrani's communal, locally and socially engaged mode of filmmaking. The on-screen representations and narratives of each film are, in very real ways, bound to the specific places in which the stories unfold. This begins at the pre-production level, as Bahrani often wrote and rewrote screenplays based on his

experiences with certain neighborhoods and locales, as well as the real people living there.

Incorporating the real geographical and spatial relations of these various prominent settings also becomes a means of reflecting certain overarching themes in the organization of space itself. For example, Bahrani often situates his characters in relation to specific markers of socioeconomic neglect and decay as well as iconic symbols of U.S. prosperity, the visual juxtapositions of which are rendered cruelly ironic. For example, we see frequent shots of Citi Field looming in the background of Willets Point's "Iron Triangle" district in *Chop Shop*. While *Goodbye Solo* takes place in the far less metropolitan setting of Winston-Salem, North Carolina—it's name itself evoking a more specific kind of U.S. capitalist symbol—the act of navigating the city in all its social stratification is an important element of Solo's character and story.

On a broader symbolic level, the major cities in which the films occur frame the characters and narratives in distinct ways, with urban centers acting as visual and cultural symbols of capitalist success and opportunity. The characters' constant cycles of work are situated always against a backdrop of busy commercial flows and transit, implying constant movement in the face of their own stagnation. City skylines reaching vertically up out of the frame or iconic structures (like *Chop Shop*'s Citi Field) towering frequently in the background act as physical monuments to ever-elusive upward mobility. Perhaps even more important, these visual and architectural symbols of U.S. prosperity and global prominence take on additional meanings in early 21st century, post-9/11 U.S. geopolitics. This is particularly significant for the films set in New York, where such iconography is also a constant reminder of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the increasingly xenophobic rhetoric and racist hostility that pervaded U.S. political culture in their wake.

Bahrani incorporated some of the real-world effects of such xenophobic nationalism into the narrative of *Man Push Cart*, which features a scene in which one of the characters describes being called a terrorist and attacked with a knife. This actually happened to the actor playing the character, who isn't delivering a scripted, fictionalized version of the event but rather telling the story as it happened. He ends the story by lifting his shirt to reveal his actual scars from the attack. Even the production of the films was affected: Bahrani and his AD recall a number of times they were stopped by passers-by or security on the street or in locations for which they didn't have a permit and asked if they were "shooting a Bin Laden training film" or whether the film they were making was "political" ("Director's commentary," *Man Push Cart*). For this reason, the films' are not simply engaged critically with U.S. bootstrap narratives of hard work and economic success, but also contextualize such narratives in a historically and culturally hyper-specific way. What do these traditional American narratives of opportunity and upward mobility mean for those who are branded as cultural Others and radically excluded from belonging in a post-9/11 United States?

The films share a particular kind of indie realist aesthetic, stemming in part from their microbudget guerilla production style in which Bahrani employs non-actors and often co-opts the daily goings on and inhabitants of real-world settings. While this aesthetic approach is inextricably linked to material conditions of production, including access to spaces for filming and budgetary concerns, it also aligns with a specific mode of audience address. The films' aesthetic rawness and imperfections signal a seemingly less mediated connection with profilmic reality, appealing to what Sherry Ortner argues is the independent sector's perceived imperative for "telling the truth." Specifically, the interrelation between Bahrani's communal production style and (arguably) neorealist aesthetics contributes to a perceived authenticity in the POV of

the films themselves. This approach works to situate characters within their historical and political moment(s) without falling prey to mainstream Hollywood conventions that would normally tokenize them or reduce their stories to rags-to-riches success narratives.

Microbudget Production

It's useful to characterize Bahrani's American Dream trilogy as microbudget guerilla productions in part to distinguish their production mode (and resulting aesthetic) from the broader field of contemporary independent production. The constantly shifting industrial landscape of independent film makes it difficult to reliably characterize what a given "independent production" may look like at any point in time, much less one defined in part by its production style and budget. This is to some extent due to the growth of major studios' specialty labels and so-called "mini-majors" in the 90s and early 2000s—a period of increasing overlap and interaction between the studio system's production and distribution apparatus and otherwise traditionally independent filmmaking practices. Geoff King, Yannis Tzioumakis, and others have dubbed this mode of cooperative production and/or distribution "Indiewood," a current evolution of which can be seen in the industrial prominence of independent producer-distributors like A24, Annapurna, and Blumhouse. Because "independent" productions at this level may involve Hollywood actors, see releases of 1,000+ theaters, and have budgets in the tens-of-millions of dollars,⁴ it is appropriate to distinguish smaller-scale, more industrially and financially independent productions from this larger "Indiewood" model.

In tracing the rise and evolution of what he calls "ultra-low-budget" films, Peter Broderick situates 1992 as a watershed moment that saw the emergence of commercially viable microbudget features made without third-party funding and using whatever resources filmmakers had at their disposal. He situates these productions—which include Robert Rodriguez's *El*

Mariachi, Greg Araki's *The Living End*, and Nick Gomez's *Laws of Gravity*, all with production budgets of less than \$50,000—against the predominant budgetary model for low-budget independent features of the 80s (Broderick "Ultra-Low-Budget"). This traditional model, Broderick argues, put financing for independent films in the \$500,000-\$1 million range, a budgetary level dramatically undercut by the films he labels ultra-low-budget. However, as Geoff King notes, the full release costs for these ultra-low-budget films of the mid-90s nearly always far exceeded their reported production budgets, with additional costs potentially including the need to convert lo-fi (often video) master recordings to 16mm or 35mm distribution prints, securing music rights, cleaning up audio tracks, and more (King *American* 14). Furthermore, for Broderick the value in exploring the ultra-low-budget production mode he first coined in the early 90s lies in illuminating the patterns of distinct production practices such budgetary constraints necessitate, practices he later updated and codified to include the "Digital Revolution" of the late 90s and early 2000s. It is this notion of the ultra-low-budget or microbudget production as a specific mode of filmmaking within the larger independent cinema landscape that I want to call on and develop here.

While *Man Push Cart*, *Chop Shop*, and *Goodbye Solo* were each budgeted at just under \$1 million, Bahrani's production practices fall well within what Broderick and others have characterized as ultra-low-budget filmmaking in the digital era (Macaulay 57). Writing for *Filmmaker* in 2008, Anthony Kaufman situates the "\$1-million-and-under movie" as a specific type of independent production he argues is, as of that writing, still occupying a distinct space in the cinematic landscape (Kaufman 22). In doing so, he discusses several recent or upcoming independent films, including *Goodbye Solo*, drawing connections between their production budgets and additional factors like release strategies and crew size. Similarly, while he doesn't

use the term "microbudget" Geoff King does situate Bahrani's first three films within a larger group of low-budget independent social realist dramas of the early 2000s—including those of A.O. Scott's proposed "neo-neorealist" moment discussed below—arguing they exemplify "a particular strand of indie production in the budget range between hundreds of thousands of dollars and the \$1 million mark" (*Indie 2.0* 170).

For the purpose of situating Bahrani's first three films more specifically within a particular range of the contemporary independent sector, I argue that productions falling under \$1 million qualify as "microbudget" if, as Broderick, Kaufman, and King point out, certain other contingent or non-studio-standard production practices also apply and are necessitated by this budget. This still leaves significant room for variation in the budgets and production practices of so-called microbudget films, but places an emphasis on budget as one of many relative and contextual factors that may influence textual qualities. For example, budget constraints may limit shooting resources, exercising control over shooting style and locations, or prompt different approaches to the creative process, as discussed below.

Guerrilla-Style Shooting: Contingency and Collaboration

Broderick argues that the so-called "Digital Revolution"—in part ushered in by the dual Dogma 95 successes of *The Celebration* and *The Idiots* at Cannes in 1998—changed ultra-low-budget filmmaking in 5 fundamental ways. Two of those changes, frequently referenced in discussions of early digital cinema, include the availability of professional-grade digital cameras and digital editing suites, both of which could suddenly be purchased for a fraction of the costs filmmakers would otherwise incur renting a camera, equipment, and time in an editing booth. I'll explore the particular aesthetic style of the films below, but it's worth mentioning here that all three were shot not on 16mm but rather the hi-def Sony F900, and then "blown up on 35mm" by

cinematographer Michael Simmonds (Macaulay 57). The first of Sony's CineAlta line of digital cameras, the F900 was designed to allow shooting at 24fps and simulate the look of 35mm. Far from a low-end "prosumer" piece of equipment, the F900 was used for a number of Hollywood releases through the 2000s, including by George Lucas on *Star Wars: Episode II – Attack of the Clones*.

Bahrani emphasizes the importance of the films each looking like 35mm rather than digital, praising cinematographer Michael Simmonds' work and noting that "most people never understand that [they're not shot on film]" (Macaulay 57). The close collaboration between Bahrani and Simmonds enabled them to make the most of the relatively inexpensive and much more agile and flexible shooting style (and schedule) of digital without sacrificing a particular aesthetic—a mix of industriousness and frugality also emblematic of many microbudget productions. He credits this kind of deeply collaborative process with both cinematographer Michael Simmonds (on all three films) and co-writer Bahareh Azimi (on *Chop Shop* and *Goodbye Solo*)—both of whom were involved from the idea stage through production on their respective films—for being able to make his first three films within a period of 4 years.

In addition to the importance of a cinematographer well versed in the specific challenges of filming on digital, microbudget productions often utilize shooting spaces, actors (frequently non-professional), and equipment that is already easily available, as well as embracing shooting styles that can make the most of a small, dedicated crew (King, *American* 13). Bahrani notes that all three films were shot in 30 days (including reshoots) with an average crew of 14 people (Macaulay 57). For comparison, Jason Orans, a producer on *Goodbye Solo*, estimated that a film of that size would normally have utilized a crew of 45, and yet the most intensive days—involving a process trailer to shoot driving scenes in Solo's cab at night—required a high point of

20 crew members (Kaufman 22). While making *Man Push Cart*, Bahrani recalls that "about 20% of the scenes in the movie were shot after the rest of the crew had gone home," with just him, Simmonds, assistant director Nick Elliot, and lead actor Ahmad Razvi (*Man Push Cart*, "Director's Commentary"). The solitary nature of many of the scenes in *Man Push Cart* undoubtedly help to make this kind of shooting style possible, with Ahmad spending much of the film traversing nighttime Manhattan alone, interacting with other street vendors (who often didn't know they were being filmed) and hauling his cart and supplies to and from the garage where they're stored. Broderick points to this "guerilla production" mode as another common characteristic of microbudget filmmaking in the digital age, arguing that "[u]sing small digital cameras and a small crew enables inconspicuous production in real world locations, making it possible to capture reality rather than faking it" ("Ultra-Low-Budget"). I want to return to this notion of "capturing reality" in the discussion on aesthetics below, but it's worth noting here that Bahrani seems to find value in these moments of close-knit, almost communal filmmaking that extends beyond pure economic necessity.

Despite each film's fairly short shooting schedule—albeit typical of a low-budget independent drama—Bahrani and his actors had gone through what he describes as months of extensive rehearsals before cameras rolled. He describes his rehearsal process as often informal but always deeply collaborative, creating time for the actors to meet and become comfortable with each other, sometimes over meals or by exploring shooting locations (Macaulay 90). In some cases, the pre-production process included the principal actors living with Bahrani and/or working alongside him and Simmonds on location. Ahmad Razvi slept on Bahrani's couch for several weeks while making *Man Push Cart* in order to be closer to production, which included frequent pre-dawn and late-night shoots. Souleymane Sy Savane stayed with Bahrani and his

brother in Winston-Salem, North Carolina for three months before shooting began on *Goodbye Solo*, actually driving a cab for work during this time. Even rehearsals during this pre-production period don't always include running through actual scenes, but can involve the actors meeting each other in order to develop a natural rapport. Bahrani describes the first time Souleymane met the actress playing his daughter Alex:

The first rehearsal with him and Alex was just hanging out. We had hot dogs and French fries at the hot dog stand. That's a rehearsal for me. Another rehearsal was driving to Blowing Rock together. They sat in the car with her dad and drove, and they played video games in the back of the car together. They were becoming father and daughter. (Macaulay 90)

This familiarity between cast members, as well as between cast and crew, is important for Bahrani beyond just developing a closeness that will eventually transfer to performances in front of the camera. *Man Push Cart* and *Chop Shop* in particular involved shooting a significant amount of scenes on "live locations," meaning his cast and crew's presence couldn't be disruptive in a way that would register on camera. For example, the garage where Ahmad stores and retrieves his cart at the start and end of each day was a real, operating garage in Manhattan. Many of the other vendors we see moving in and out of the space as Ahmad prepares to start his day are really working ("Director's Commentary"). For *Chop Shop* Bahrani went so far as to have Alejandro Polanco spend 6 months working in and around Rob Suwolski's shop⁵ so that his ostensible knowledge of mechanics, parts, pricing, and lingo would appear genuine on screen. Bahrani and Simmonds also shot the entirety of the film via rehearsals on a Handycam in the 5 weeks before principal photography began, so the real-life auto workers who star alongside Polanco were used to the constant possibility of being on camera (Macaulay 90). By the time

they started formal production, many Willets Point occupants were so familiar with Ale they thought Bahrani and his crew were filming a documentary (Canet 159).

Beyond this personal familiarity, the extensive pre-production in this case arguably has the effect of reducing the film crew's obtrusiveness in a live location, with the intent of minimizing the degree to which their presence alters normal everyday behaviors and interaction.⁶ This enabled Bahrani and Simmonds to capture a number of unplanned scenes, such as when a mechanic from a competing auto shop across the street comes out and accuses Ale of "leaning," telling him he has to stay on his own side when flagging down customers. This interaction helps establish how the adults in Willet's point view Ale as a peer rather than a child while also interjecting some site-specific lingo. During another unplanned sequence, Sowulski saw that Ale was being filmed learning to use a buffer on the hood of a car and walked casually over to supervise—a small moment that develops their relationship while also reinforcing the trust Sowulski and others have in Ale as an apprentice worker. Bahrani notes that these scenes, which were not planned and are not in the script, made their way into the film because the cast and crew were so familiar to those living and working in the area that they would respond to and interact with Ale as a fellow laborer even when on camera. These moments are included throughout the film and are indistinguishable from otherwise scripted, heavily rehearsed scenes—some of the latter of which Bahrani says often required upward of 30 to 40 takes to get right.

Pre-Production: Location as Character

Filming locations are themselves incredibly important to Bahrani, often exercising a shaping influence on the story during the ideation and scripting stage. Some of this is wrapped up in financial concerns: advanced location scouting during pre-production was essential to get each film's budget to come in under the \$1 million mark. However, the shaping role that specific

locations play in Bahrani's writing process could signal a key difference from the digital-era "ultra-low-budget" filmmakers Broderick points to—a reversal of the latter group's tendency to tailor scripts and stories to locations and sets to which they already had access for free. Rather, Bahrani's model takes as its starting point collaboration and relationship-building with a particular community in the hope this will build trust to allow him to film there. The real-world people and settings his screenplays are built on are usually incorporated into the films as well, a factor he credits with helping him reach contractual agreements with location owners (Macaulay 57). As *Wendy and Lucy* producer Neil Kopp points out, this kind of extended pre-production research on location not only helps microbudget filmmakers incorporate the daily rhythms and textures of real locations into a fictional narrative, but it can also help secure shooting permits at necessarily low costs, since location owners "understand the type of film [being made] and that we're not trying to rip them off" (Kaufman 22). For example, this was the case for Bahrani being able to shoot in and around Rob Sowulski's auto repair shop in *Chop Shop*.

Bahrani notes that for the American Dream films he avoided the more common process of "scouting" locations for scenes and settings he already had in mind. Rather, he would visit certain areas or communities he found interesting, and during these early research periods the characters and main story elements for each film emerged via interviews with real people (King, *Indie 2.0* 173, see also Macaulay). Of this process Bahrani says:

I usually have the locations before I start writing or while I've started writing. I write while I'm coming back and forth between locations. So the locations become truly integral to how the story is told and how it's being envisioned from the script stage. (Porton 44)

Locations are so important to Bahrani's creative process that beyond simply sparking an initial idea, they often provide a fully formed symbolic framework for the characters' narrative journeys. *Chop Shop* continues to be especially useful here for the way it functions as a distinct, fixed intersection of various cultural and commercial flows. While Winston-Salem (and later Blowing Rock) serves as a character in itself in *Goodbye Solo*, the majority of the action takes place inside Solo's roaming cab; and while Ahmad navigates through a web of Manhattan streets in *Man Push Cart*, his exact location of operation varies based on the other odd jobs he's performing. However, while Ale's ventures take him to several different parts of the city, he always winds up back at Rob's shop, where an office doubles as his sleeping quarters. Bahrani says he was instantly fascinated with Willets Point when his long-time cinematographer Michael Simmonds brought him there in 2004, remarking, "[m]y God, this place is the world, the world in 20 blocks" (Canet 158).⁷

Indeed Willets Point acts as a microcosm of American late capitalism in its constant juxtaposition with Citi Field. The bustling streets of the Iron Triangle district, packed with rusty garages, auto parts, and other refuse, are almost literally in the shadow of the stadium, which looms monolithically in the background during the day and shines brightly at night, when the lights and sounds of baseball games are distant but inescapable. Additionally, Bahrani notes that we "see Manhattan once and only once" throughout the entire film, its skyline visible in the background of one of the first shots, as Ale rides in the back of a pickup truck full of migrant workers traveling to a job site. The skyline here serves a symbolic purpose similar to Citi Field in demarcating the setting—the run-down, industrial Queens—from the affluence and glamour of Manhattan. We're reminded that just as there are many "Americas," there are also many different

New Yorks, not all of them the iconic and glamorous symbol of capitalist success that is the Manhattan-as-New York of most films set in the city.

Independent Social Realism

A kind of ragged aesthetic minimalism characterizes Bahrani's American Dream trilogy, no doubt in part stemming from microbudget production practices but also reflective of a particular mode of audience address. Much of the existing writing on these films applies the broad label of social realism to their formal and aesthetic qualities.⁸ In this discourse social realism refers not to the historical and cultural specificities of British social realism, but rather to a broader range of qualities like the use of non-professional actors, low-fi video and audio recording, seemingly improvised dialogue and interactions, and unresolved narratives focused on economically disenfranchised and marginalized characters. These elements, when paired with seemingly simple and naturalistic cinematography by Michael Simmonds, can be argued to create the appearance of a less mediated connection with profilmic events—the notion that what we're seeing is somehow a more authentic portrayal of actual lived experience, more accurately reflecting a particular social "reality." Here I want to discuss both the theoretical roots of this assumption (often tied to various sociopolitically engaged types of "-realist" films) as well as how the films deliberately orient themselves toward and manipulate our conceptions and mental images of otherwise un/under-represented experience(s).

To help illuminate some of these formal and aesthetic characteristics—and to further contextualize Bahrani's American Dream films within the cinematic and historical moment into which they were released—I want to turn to A.O. Scott's much-discussed (and rebutted) 2009 article "Neo-Neo Realism." In it, the *New York Times* critic postulated a contemporary resurgence of neorealist sensibilities in a handful of films from young independent directors

touring the recent festival circuits,⁹ which he argued embraced the "possib[ility] that *engagement with the world as it is* might reassert itself as an aesthetic strategy" (emphasis mine). Drawing connections between the poor and disenfranchised postwar characters of Italian neorealism and the contemporary United States' post-9/11 cultural and economic climate, Scott praises these films for "offer[ing] not only bracing, poetic views of real life but also tantalizing glimpses of a cinematic tradition that might have been," enthusiastically declaring that "American film is having its Neorealist moment, and not a moment too soon." He makes note of *Slumdog Millionaire's* Best Picture Oscar in the same year so many of his "neo-neorealist" films were hitting festival screens, and the juxtaposition is apt—while Danny Boyle's hyperactive film "concerns itself with poverty and disenfranchisement... it also celebrates, both in its story and in its exuberant, sentimental spirit, the magical power of popular culture to conquer misery, to make dreams come true" (Scott). Bahrani's arguably "neorealist" films are thus situated against a major Hollywood production concerned, as Hollywood so often is, with confirming rags-to-riches "dream" narratives. In response, Bahrani offers the "quotidian rhythms" of marginalized individuals' daily lives in the pursuit of dreams rendered "cruelly untenable" in a more grounded socio-economic reality. (Or so goes Scott's argument.)

Plenty have taken issue with Scott's eagerness to boldly declare a new filmic "moment" based on a set of fairly broad thematic and aesthetic affinities, from Richard Brody's near-immediate, strangely incensed response in *The New Yorker*¹⁰ to Bahrani's own reflections on associating his work with the "neorealist" label.¹¹ Part of the issue is that Scott is invoking a very specific and historically contextualized cinematic moment as a way to easily link particular aesthetic characteristics with a hazy and hopeful notion of realism-as-social-authenticity. Setting aside for a moment whether it's even possible for films to render socially "authentic" experiences

for remote audiences, the desire to make this connection between neorealist aesthetics and a politically motivated notion of realism/authenticity is understandable. As described above, the films are characterized by a mix of careful planning and staging alongside improvisation, filming in uncontrolled environments, and makeshift documentary-style production techniques, culminating in an aesthetic Bahrani describes as "complicated although seemingly accidental" (Porton 47). Combined with the drive to capture a degree of "real life" at street level, it is in fact easy enough to make the connection with the films of Rosellini and de Sica, in which "the dramas were found on the streets of a Europe destroyed after the war" (Canet 155).

While this "taking the camera to the streets" approach may aesthetically recall Italian neorealism, it is the degree of social engagement within a specific historical context that is the sticking point for most, including Bahrani himself. He questioned the connection in a 2008 interview, asking "[w]hat does neorealism even mean in America in 2008? After all, I don't live in wartime, or postwar, Italy... [W]hat is neorealist Iranian cinema? ... And how does one make an Italian neorealist film in Iran or America?" (Porton 47). He gestures to an answer later in the interview by paraphrasing a review of *Man Push Cart* from *The Village Voice* that claimed, "Bahrani gives us a guy with donuts in a pushcart whereas an Italian neorealist film would have given us the character's social context in a post-9/11 world" (48). I would argue the films *do* provide this context, if not always overtly. For instance, one of the key ways we are reminded of the various characters' social stations is through Bahrani's formal engagement with their daily rhythms and routines, and through the repetitive and circular role these routines play in the narratives. Ahmad, Ale, and Solo are always moving before our eyes, but they never come any closer to reaching their socio-economic destinations. While we don't need to repurpose a term as historically specific as neorealism, there is value in discussing the films' formal and aesthetic

qualities particularly as they pertain to the construction of each character's social reality and attempt to render their experience of this reality in a more ostensibly authentic manner.

Realism and Authenticity (in Relation to Audience and Film Text)

Before turning again to the films themselves, I want to propose a working definition of "realism" as I'm exploring it here—particularly in relation to the similar, and similarly amorphous, notion of "authenticity" that so often crops up around certain independent films in popular critical discourse. As a term, realism (or realistic) is often thrown around in such a way that its aesthetic, formal, and ideological dimensions are made to seem interchangeable. Do we mean something is realistic because it has a sensorily mimetic appearance of recognizable daily experience, or because the representations onscreen enact a believable version of social experience in real space? It's important to remember that the latter are always shaped by cultural dialogues and ideology as well as aesthetics and form, and thus in turn always have their own cultural, subjective, and/or political utility.

Here I'm defining Bahrani's particular kind of cinematic realism as a perceived and carefully cultivated quality as opposed to something "objectively" rooted in a film text. I'll return to this shortly, but ultimately I want to distinguish realism as perceptual and subjective—a way of understanding the presented image and its historical-cultural significance rather than some kind of ontological *fact* embalmed in the material of film. With this definition I also hope to avoid attaching Bahrani's American Dream trilogy films—which are very much of their own historical and culturally specific moment—to the historical-political contexts of other so-called "realist" movements simply by way of aesthetics. In fact I think the question of realism can be addressed as a duality: what we believe to be true in and via the image (ie: what it tells us, ideologically, about our world), and the specific aesthetic and formal qualities that render this

image believable (what I'll refer to as authenticity). Realism in this broad sense is then both a theoretical and textual quality, and one that only has any value when considered as the product of negotiations between the mind (filmmaker and audience) and the text.¹²

Considering the realism of Bahrani's films as a cinematic way of knowing rather than an ontological explanation of what cinema *is* allows not just for a more nuanced analysis of the films themselves, but also for us to think about how these particular constructions and evocations of life at the margins actively engage with cultural and political discourses via their purported claims to authenticity. By authenticity I am describing the degree to which the sound-image appears to be a direct and unmediated reproduction of profilmic reality at the time of filming. This involves both the presentation of visual information—from framing and mise en scene to color reproduction and image quality—as well as sound and other elements that might prompt a more fully mimetic viewer experience. (I'll return to this latter point shortly to explore how Bahrani's contingent production practices contribute to this sense that the viewer is "really there" on location during the action.) It might be helpful to think of authenticity as a textual quality or set of qualities audiences find in a film that in turn bolsters their confidence in its believability. Elements of a film could also seem to be authentic—to a particular character, time, space within the diegesis, etc.—without prompting the audience to situate these elements within a broader ideological conception of realism or lived experience.

Ariel Rogers' discussion of immediacy in digital cinema helps clarify how this particular notion of authenticity emerges as a textual quality from digital production practices, while also establishing a lineage with historical ideas about the ontology of cinema. In the 90s, independent filmmakers kicked off what eventually became a widespread popularization and ubiquitous adoption of digital technology at all stages of production and exhibition. Scholars and

filmmakers alike responded en masse to what came to be framed as a "digital revolution" in cinema, and Rogers notes that much of the rhetoric around the topic sprang from a more speculative place regarding cinema's potential future(s). From attention to the haptic dimensions of digital aesthetics to speculation that one day films would be streamed "directly into the audiences' brains," conversations about this early digital cinema's "bodily address" focused on the potential for digital technology to enhance and extend a Bazinian encounter with "the real:"

“The idea was that, in contrast to celluloid filmmaking, where larger crews and equipment were understood to interfere with the connection between filmmaker and subject, the digital apparatus intruded less and thus facilitated a sense of connection referenced through terms like *intimacy* and *immediacy*.” (116, emphasis in original)

In fact some of the contingent shooting practices described above illustrate this idea in practice. Take, for example, Bahrani and Simmond's ability to shoot Ale and Carlos interacting with "real" subway passengers or Ahmad's attempts to sell DVDs to actual construction workers on the street. These bystanders' lack of awareness that they're in a movie is made possible by what Geoff King refers to as "low profile shooting": Bahrani's ability to minimize or totally conceal the presence of a smaller and more portable digital camera in a public space (*Indie 2.0* 78). This less conspicuous shooting style lends an air of uncertainty and improvisation to these sequences, inflecting them with an impression of "life at street level."

Bahrani emphasizes that this was not solely a practical concern of production but also an aesthetic choice, albeit somewhat bound and determined by the production style. He notes that he and Simmonds made a conscious decision to prevent the limited instances of handheld camerawork from becoming too noticeable or obtrusive. He references the Dardennes brothers'

"chasing camera" style—often associated with their brand of objective realism—as specifically the kind of apparent aesthetic he wanted to avoid, saying "one of the goals was to erase ourselves" ("Director's Commentary, *Chop Shop*). We get what appears to be a fly-on-the-wall view of semi-unstaged events, and arguably a more "immediate" and "intimate" connection with the real-life rhythms and textures of the subway, a busy New York street, etc. The aesthetic and formal characteristics that result from a smaller, more adaptable digital production style create the impression of less filmmaker intervention despite the audience knowing such scenes must be at least partially planned and staged.

Rogers situates digital production's theoretically less mediated engagement with audiences into a longer cinematic tradition by noting that this "view of cinematic immediacy has implications for our understanding of cinema's continuing appeal to authenticity" (103). The immediacy that results from a more intimate, direct connection between camera/filmmaker and subject is, for Rogers, part of a cinematic continuum in which celluloid (and now digital) acts to objectively index physical reality. Taking this one step further, this smaller, more adaptable, and contingent production style in some ways acts as a technological equivalent to Bazin's privileged formal moves, the deep focus shot and the long take. Both the former (digital production) and the latter (formal elements) act in their respective ways to reduce the apparent evidence of human intervention in the registration of an image and profilmic events. A common reading of Bazin's notion of cinematic reality is that the photographic representation goes beyond acting as a mold of the photographed object itself. "True realism," he argues, "give[s] significant expression to the world both concretely and its essence," relying on the objective index rather than the use of tricks and illusion to create the impression of reality in the audience's mind (12). Formal manipulations like deep focus and long takes act to emphasize a unity of action with duration and

space that, for Bazin, mimics the nature of subjective human experience—"duration forces the spectator to witness time as it is lived" (Quiroga 241).

These techniques are seen as an active way to boost the audience's perceptual engagement with the image, a Bazinian version of the filmmaker stepping away to create a heightened degree of "intimacy and immediacy." However, Bazin's realism is not just a psychological encounter in which a human-created artifact generates a subjective experience mimicking real-world space and time—it must be the actual encounter with "the real" itself. Where cinema breaks with the "pseudorealism" of previous visual arts (such as forced perspective in painting) is that no creative human intervention is involved in the mechanical registration of the image, and thus for Bazin, "[t]he photographic image is the object itself." Because photography is a "transference of reality from the thing to its reproduction," cinema isn't simply representative or symbolic, but *is* material/physical reality itself—reality is "transferred" onto celluloid (14).

Bazin's privileging of indexicality might be somewhat undone by the shift to digital production, but digital cinema can still be characterized by the same fundamental quality of expressing an authentically subjective encounter with the physical world "in its essence." Bazin's praise of formal maneuvers like the long shot and deep focus reveals that his cinematic realism—even while privileging the physical index—is actually significantly subjective and perceptual.¹³ Kracauer helps illustrate this complex relationship between a view of cinema as ontologically inseparable from the index and one in which cinema is defined epistemologically as a way of knowing and seeing through film. Whereas Bazin says cinema is primarily an encounter with indexicality, albeit enhanced by (minimal) intervention and framing, Kracauer places a higher emphasis on the filmmaker's role in forming the image. Specifically, Kracauer defines cinema in

part as having a dual recording/revealing function in which physical reality is captured but must still be interpreted and shaped by the filmmaker. For Kracauer cinema isn't just a simple and unobstructed representation of reality, but is crafted from indexical representations (the "raw material" in front of the camera) via "the intervention of the film maker's formative energies" (39). He argues that while indexing physical reality is essential, it is the intervention of the filmmaker that makes an image cinematic—cinema's "claim to authenticity" (per Rogers) is that it is capable of materially evoking the phenomenological contours of reality for a viewer.

The definition of realism I offer above attempts to join Bazin and Kracauer's approaches to cinema and the "real" while updating them for a now predominantly digital medium. Bazin and Kracauer are of course talking about a much earlier mode of cinema when current levels of digital and post-production manipulation and control over the image weren't possible. This is one reason the distinction between authenticity and realism is so important here: how we understand the relationship between the film text and profilmic material and action has shifted because we understand implicitly that all A/V media is likely in some way altered for presentation. The importance of cinema's ontological connection to physical reality gives way to an epistemological concern of what cinema can tell us about its objects/subjects and how. This is what theoretically underpins many broader discussions about cinematic realisms and realist aesthetics, where aesthetic and formal elements are regarded as evidence of a deeper, more "authentic" connection to real lived experience.

Julia Hallam and Margaret Marshment argue that regardless of their historical and cultural specificities, cinematic realism(s) can all be defined in terms of formal and aesthetic departures from mainstream studio practices of the time, arguing that these differences draw attention to imperfections and idiosyncrasies typically elided by the classical "invisible" styles.

Such films “flag up [their] difference[s] from mainstream films, calling attention to [themselves] as a much more authentic representation, one that is *closer to the truth of everyday experience*” (Hallam/Marshment 17, emphasis mine). Here realist aesthetics function to “reveal” (per Kracauer again) that which is typically hidden or elided by more overt stylization or, at least in Western cinemas, the classical invisible mode. Distinct “realist moment[s]” occur in cinema when these aesthetic and formal differentiations from the mainstream historically align with a shift in production mode, such as independent cinema’s move to a more adaptable, ostensibly less mediated digital style. During these moments of differentiation, “the evidential claims of our visual and auditory recording instruments are increasingly called into question” (Hallam and Marshment 24).

Bahrani’s American Dream films are productive for thinking about how such a “realist moment” emerges from an intersection of technology, production—here tied to independence from the mainstream industrial model—and aesthetics. Bahrani’s contingent production style was both enabled and necessitated by the digital mode he and Simmonds were working in, but also resulted in many of the particular aesthetic traits that differentiate his style as realist. However, this is not to make some purely deterministic connection between production, aesthetics, and realism. It’s important again to note that many of the qualities that mark these films as realist were carefully cultivated during production or manipulated during post-production. They did not emerge from some objectively true “reality” that cinema is uniquely positioned to capture and embalm whole, but rather were shaped intentionally by Bahrani and Simmonds to produce a particular audience experience of profilmic spaces and events.

Bahrani himself specifically characterizes the aesthetic style of *Goodbye Solo* in lineage with his earlier two films as “realist or naturalistic,” acknowledging an effort to maintain this

sensibility even as he moved toward a more controlled and traditional production style (Macaulay 55). While *Goodbye Solo* does still exhibit realist traits in both its aesthetics and production, its editing and staging are certainly more traditional than either *Man Push Cart* or *Chop Shop*. More of the action takes place on enclosed and controlled sets, with significantly less of the chaotic urban energy and seemingly unplanned action that characterizes the first two films. Bahrani still referring to *Goodbye Solo* as a realist film despite its move toward a more classically invisible style calls attention to the nature of cinematic realism(s) as oppositional and relational—and therefore subjective—always set against mainstream expectations and industry standards.

"Documentary or Fiction?": Contingency and Immediacy

The seemingly more chaotic and uncontrolled aesthetic qualities that give *Man Push Cart* and *Chop Shop* a stronger sense of immediacy and authenticity are in part products of each film's contingent production style. However, Bahrani does not regard such shooting conditions as purely restrictive or a result of boundness to a particular economic mode. Instead he focuses on how such conditions enable various possibilities. He and Simmonds' guerilla shooting style often put actors into live sets in which bystanders didn't realize they were in a film—as in the scenes showing Ahmad's daily interactions with customers in *Man Push Cart*, or in *Chop Shop* when the boys try to sell DVDs and candy on the streets and in subway cars. Fernando Canet notes in his discussion of the latter film that Bahrani was so devoted to maintaining the uncertainty of such unstaged scenes that "[he] would avoid saying 'action' or 'cut,' in order to capture spontaneous footage of both the actors and the location. Sometimes even the crew could not distinguish between the script and the improvisations" (163).

This intentional blurring of the boundary between controlled set and uncontrollable public space works to incorporate some of the "objective" qualities and uncertainty of the latter into the diegetic narrative. Bahrani asks, "is it documentary or fiction? It doesn't matter. What matters is the basic truthfulness of the premise" (Porton 46). Importantly, people's reactions to the characters are for this reason often genuine. Alejandro Polanco recalls shooting the scene where he steals a woman's bag on a boardwalk, with Simmond's camera and the rest of the crew set up 50-100 feet away out of view. Bystanders actually started chasing Polanco, not realizing the events were being staged ("Director's Commentary," *Chop Shop*). Such blending of staged and unstaged action lends a frenetic potentiality and spontaneity to the films, something that *seems* rooted in the relationship between camera and profilmic action rather than created artificially through overt stylization and editing. It may be more appropriate to say this is a cultivated or enabled quality, one encouraged by the way such scenes are planned out and staged but not strictly created or controlled by the filmmakers.

The aural and visual textures of the films are also made to seem unmediated, giving the impression that Bahrani and Simmonds started recording and the camera simply pulled in everything going on around them. In *Man Push Cart* we frequently see Ahmad from a block or two away, with the camera positioned across a busy city street so that the main action is constantly interrupted by pedestrians and blurred streaks of vehicles. The soundtrack picks up the whoosh of cars going past, honking in the distance, and general ambient noise of the city, all mixed in at nearly the same level as or even louder than Ahmad's dialogue. Similarly, the scenes following Ale and Carlos through subway cars or watching a baseball game from a crowded boardwalk in *Chop Shop* seem to incorporate audiovisual material that Bahrani and Simmonds couldn't have planned for or controlled on such live sets. These visual disruptions and audio

tracks brimming with extraneous sound impart what Geoff King argues is a key quality of indie "authenticity": seemingly lo-fi equipment registering flaws or other qualities that would typically be smoothed over or edited out in the classical invisible style (*Indie 2.0* 196-197). That the above qualities make their way into the final exhibited film text serves as a point of differentiation from mainstream conventions, which by comparison are positioned as obstructing audiences' encounter with some more "true" representation of profilmic space and action (*Indie 2.0* 14).

However, this appearance of a chaotic, potential-laden relationship between camera and object—in this case live sets coded as "real" spaces not subject to director and crew control—is itself carefully cultivated, an arrangement and assembly of profilmic and nondiegetic elements to get a particular effect. It is a testament to the persistent strength of this effect that audiences and reviewers frequently misremember the films as being shot mostly on handheld cameras, a production choice and aesthetic often associated with a particular improvisational micro-budget mode. Yet Bahrani and Simmonds note that in actuality there are very few handheld shots across all three films. Speaking about the making of *Man Push Cart*, Simmonds sounds almost amused as he recounts how often people bring up the "handheld" cinematography, clarifying that he almost always used standard tripod shots.¹⁴ In fact Simmonds was typically set up 2-3 blocks away and shooting with a zoom lens, so while the traffic and other general activity of the city streets are real, the range of possible action is fairly fixed and pre-determined ("Director's Commentary," *Man Push Cart*). The images have an unstable and uncertain quality, as if anything could happen at any time, despite the characters' movements and actions being likewise bound to a particular space. This isn't to discount the significantly more agile, contingent nature of the production, which allowed Bahrani and crew to pick up shots and quickly shoot new scenes as envisioned on the spot, with the textures of the city exercising a constant shaping

influence on the film. These are things that wouldn't be nearly as easy while shooting with a large crew on a bigger budget and controlled sets. However this deeper, more improvisational connection to live sets and unpredictable city spaces is still part of a production process designed to achieve a certain unmediated, "authentic" aesthetic.

The chaotic and often seemingly unfocused nature of the soundtrack is perhaps an even better example of how textual qualities that contribute to a sense of authenticity can in actuality be heavily mediated. In most of the scenes occurring in public spaces, the audio seems to have been gathered at the time of filming. When Ahmad is transporting his cart or trying to sell things to passersby on the sidewalk, the sounds of cars and trucks on the street are always present, often even briefly rising over the dialogue. We hear a constant cacophony of voices, honking, engines, and power tools as Ale works outside of his shop, and at night the distant cheers of Citi Field often rise up in the background. Even though *Goodbye Solo* takes place in a significantly less busy and chaotic urban setting, with much of the action taking place within Solo's cab, the sounds of Winston-Salem's streets are always creeping into the background of his conversations. What seems to be a Bazinian unity of action with duration and space—in particular the visual and aural textures of such "live" spaces—works toward the creation of "a perfect illusion of the outside world in sound, color, and relief" (Bazin 20). Returning to Geoff King's argument about indie authenticity above, this audio-visual unity is not in itself a marker of authenticity or a realist mode—audiences are used to heavily edited and mixed synchronous sound. However, the impression that the audio tracks have not been "cleaned up" and are relaying the actual sounds heard at the time of recording, often to the detriment of clear and audible dialogue, does signal a particular kind of authenticity. Perceived imperfections in the audio tracks, in the form of extraneous sounds from the filming locations, act as reminders to the audience that the events are

taking place in the “real world” as opposed to a controlled and closed set, and this heightened verisimilitude makes the films seem comparatively more “authentic” for their willingness to include such markers of everyday space and experience.

However, much like the lingering misperception that the films were shot in a handheld style, this impression that we're getting the actual sounds of each live set during recording is also incorrect much of the time. Bahrani stresses the intensity and importance of post-production work on sound alone, noting that the sounds we hear of busy city streets are rarely the actual sounds of what was happening on location. More often traffic and ambient noise would actually ruin the sounds they were trying to capture, requiring Bahrani and his sound crew to re-record things like street sweepers and garbage trucks ("Director's Commentary" *Man Push Cart*). Even though the re-recorded and overdubbed audio is intended to sound chaotic and unavoidable, and is mixed at levels that sound messy and full of imperfections, the final soundtrack is the product of many of the same standard post-production practices used by mainstream studios. In this case the textual quality giving the appearance of authenticity and immediacy—seemingly lo-fi and amateurish sound—is in fact heavily mediated, manipulated, intentional, and in practice fairly traditional.

The visual texture of the films is likewise at least in part a manufactured and aesthetically honed quality. The slightly grainy textures of the images and naturalistic camera movement give the impression not just of handheld cinematography but also of lo-fi visual recording equipment. Yet what seems to be a textual quality emerging from recording technology and production style is in fact a particular "look" carefully manipulated during post-production. As mentioned above, the films were not shot on consumer-grade camcorders or cheaper, poor quality film cameras, but rather on professional digital cameras also used in Hollywood productions. For this reason

Bahrani and Simmonds were careful to avoid a "digital video aesthetic," with efforts including restricting the color palette for each film's fairly limited wardrobe and shooting primarily on a 50mm lens. The look of each film was so important to Bahrani, in fact, that he devoted significant time to post-production work, noting that for each 30-day shoot "I spend eight days in color correction, sometimes longer, and my sound mix can go on between nine to 11 days" (Macaulay 89).

Again, it's easy enough to assume the various textual elements discussed above are simply the results of an industrial production mode materially bound by economic and other constraints. Messy audio and grainy visuals seem like a result of accessible, cheap equipment, and the frequent framing of action on uncontrolled sets seems to signal the need to film without permits and access to studio space. Yet these elements are also made to work in concert as part of a larger aesthetic strategy, with the material conditions of production also opening up opportunities for Bahrani and his crew. King offers a helpful distinction here:

A distinction can be made between the creation of an impression of authenticity in various aspects of the pro-filmic reality and in the use of particular formal devices through which the matter in front of the camera is conveyed to the viewer. In many cases the two overlap, sometimes necessarily. (*American Independent* 113)

Bahrani's contingent, low-profile shooting style, utilizing a minimal and agile crew, and staging narrative action on live sets are production practices determined and bound by budget and his industrially independent mode, but they are also choices that actively contribute to "the creation of an impression of authenticity in various aspects of the pro-filmic reality." The way in which such profilmic material is staged—including the allowance for unstaged action to enter the profilmic space—opens up the possibility for a kind of (seemingly) improvisational authenticity.

This material is then shaped for audiences through "particular formal devices" designed to highlight and further heighten the impression of an authentic, unmediated connection to profilmic events. For Bahrani and Simmonds these formal devices include the distanced and unobtrusive "fly on the wall" cinematography, minimal and naturalistic camera movement, relative lack of cutting and visual editing, and the manipulation of audio tracks to sound as if they were captured on-set at the time of filming.

Improvisation and Naturalistic Performances

This coevolving relationship between economic and industrial constraints and textual authenticity extends beyond just raw aesthetics. Bahrani's use of non-professional actors is both economically practical and uniquely tied to his investment in capturing and rendering individual experience in a realist mode. While the selection of actors and scripting style discussed below are not aesthetic qualities, they are part of a collaborative and organic approach to production that, like those discussed above, contribute to a broader style and aesthetic sensibility tied to the impression of authenticity. The particular acting style that emerges from this approach to casting and scripting imparts a distinct textual quality—one that works to strengthen the impression that what we're seeing onscreen, albeit staged and narrativized, may be a less mediated representation of real lived experience.

Much of the press around the American Dream films focuses on Bahrani's use of "non actors," and indeed few of his primary cast have significant, if any, film credits prior to the movies on which they worked. Bahrani himself has trouble with this vaguely defined, slightly contradictory term. Discussing Ahmad Razvi's performance in *Man Push Cart*, he says:

I can't understand people who keep talking to me about "non-actors." Because this is an actor—I mean, what's he doing here? He's acting. I think the main difference

between a non-actor and an actor is one has done [prior acting] and one hasn't.

What's important is the energy the person in front of you gives, not just to me but to the people around him, and if it matches the film, and if it does, and you work with them, they're actors. ("Director's Commentary," *Man Push Cart*)

“Non actors” in the popular critical discourse is in most cases simply a variation of the “non-professional actors” that have been discussed and defined by Bazin and others going all the way back to De Sica and Italian neorealism. This subtle distinction is noteworthy, however, for how it captures the lack of prior experience and evident formal training often being suggested by references to "non actors," without the technically inaccurate and dismissive nature of the term Bahrani takes issue with above. Bahrani's frustration with the term stems from a desire to focus on the energy, on-screen presence, and chemistry of his actors over their prior professional experience.

Yet often a term like "non actors," especially in the context of realist or verite cinemas, evokes exactly that: a particular style, energy, or rhythm on screen that contrasts with that of professional actors performing in classical and familiar mainstream styles. This again ties to the notion of authenticity as a textual quality evident in departures from and contrasts with classical expected styles, in this case performance. Particularly when it comes to the inexperienced child actors cast in *Chop Shop*, their "unknown" status is situated as a virtue, something that lends their performances an amateur "authenticity" in contrast with the "professional polish" of more practiced actors. Bahrani remembers ultimately casting Alejandro Polanco because he had a "pure New York" quality that encapsulated the character's combination of vulnerability and a more determined, driven nature (VanAirdale).

This attentiveness to less technical, more ephemeral and personal qualities rooted in the actor's own persona is certainly something we see in some casting for studio films as well, but it seems of uniquely high importance given the naturalistic acting style of Bahrani's primarily non-professional actors. By naturalistic here I am referring to a range of textual qualities that differentiate the performances (and consequently the pace and feel of the films) from classical studio filmmaking conventions. These qualities may include: imperfect delivery of lines, including tripping over dialogue or revising sentences mid-way through; a more direct speaking style without the subtle calibrations of tone and expression viewers would expect from classically shot and edited films;¹⁵ heightened ambivalence in emotionally charged scenes, leading to some uncertainty or confusion over a character's inner state; and even muddled or partially inaudible dialogue.

Again, these qualities are not solely a result of an economically bound production. In addition to intentionally working with non-professional actors from the ideation and scripting stage, Bahrani's shooting style on all three films encouraged a degree of uncertainty and improvisational energy. While there was a finished script in place before production began on any of the films, Bahrani made a point not to give anyone the full script while filming. The only exception to this rule was on *Goodbye Solo*, where Savane and Red West were given the finished script in advance. The leads in *Man Push Cart* and *Chop Shop* knew the full story of their films but were never given a full, formalized screenplay. This meant that often the actors playing secondary or background characters (when they were formally cast in the production at all) didn't have any knowledge of the narrative outside of what their characters would have known in a particular scene. Bahrani points out that the actress playing Solo's daughter never knew what

happens to William in the penultimate scene at Blowing Rock, and the actor playing William's grandson never knew who his character was or his specific role in the film (Macaulay 90).

The naturalistic and seemingly improvised dialogue is also carefully constructed through Bahrani's approach to scripting and pre-production rehearsals. Bahrani writes a typical, detailed script and then during the rehearsal phase he gives the actors their lines or the general idea of what they're supposed to say in each scene. He then carries out "weeks or months of rehearsals where I tape them and I tell them what the dialogue is or what the scene is about, and then they don't quite remember all those lines, but they remember the gist of them" ("Director's Commentary," *Man Push Cart*). As the actors recite the lines in their own words "they remember just enough" to maintain the essence of the original dialogue while inadvertently making small changes or additions, coming to memorize the lines in their own way (Macaulay 90). Bahrani records all of the rehearsals and reviews the variations of lines in a given scene, ultimately "reshuffling" the scene with the best versions of the actors' partially-improvised dialogue.

Despite the role of the actors' own changes and additions, he pushes back on characterizing the acting as improvisational, saying that "basically when it comes time to shoot, they're doing memorized versions of their own improvisations from months and months in advance. So it's not improvisation really" ("Director's Commentary," *Man Push Cart*). This collaborative process through which each actor ends up evolving and performing a personalized version of the original script in part indicates how important it is to Bahrani for the final film to be grounded in actors' own personalities and experiences, even if just at the level of dialogue and verbal idiosyncrasies. It is also another example of how certain textual elements coded as spontaneous and authentic—this time rooted in seemingly improvisational dialogue and

naturalistic performance style—can in actuality be intentionally cultivated and engineered in the pre-production and planning process.

Taking a page from one of his Iranian influences, Abbas Kiarostami, Bahrani's main characters often share their actor's real name, including the leads of all three films discussed here. This naming convention signals a deeper connection between actor and character: many of Bahrani's characters are played by non-professional actors whose own lives and experiences often exercise a shaping influence on the story from the early scripting stage. Describing the organic nature of pre-production, Bahrani notes that "[t]he writing of the script, the finding of the locations, the research and the casting of the film all happens at the same time" (Macaulay 53). As a result, details from actors' lives and experiences often make their way into the screenplay. Sometimes this comes in the form of small details, like when Rob Suwolski angrily tells Ale never to count his pay in front of him, a genuine reaction to what the former perceived as a sign of disrespect from an employee. While this moment is brief, it quickly establishes an important element of Suwolski's character and he and Ale's relationship, and it emerged via a scripting and rehearsal process that allowed for incorporating authentic personal experience Bahrani and his co-writer wouldn't have thought of on their own.

In other cases Bahrani intentionally sought to include non-professional actors whose jobs or personal experiences mirrored their characters, as with the man who tells the story of his racist attack in *Man Push Cart*. Sometimes this attention to an authentic non-professional casting remained important even when other major elements of a scene were constructed for aesthetic effect. For example, Bahrani once cast an actual newsstand worker for a brief interaction with Ahmad, but brought him to another more "visually fitting" newsstand across town for filming ("Director's Commentary," *Man Push Cart*). While these two examples highlight actors with

very brief, one-scene roles in the film, they show Bahrani's commitment to bringing "real life" experiences into the fictionalized, narrativized world of the film. Both roles could have been played by actors without the real experiences of their characters, and in the latter case it's almost absurd to expect that audiences would be able to tell whether or not the actor was a real newsstand vendor based on the several sentences he exchanges with Ahmad. The importance for Bahrani seems to go beyond the desire for a noticeable textual quality to emerge from a non-professional performance, and is instead an extension of his broader efforts to make visible individuals and experiences not typically put on screen (albeit here on an incredibly particular, granularized micro scale). Bahrani says, "it's important for me as an artist that the films come from something *real* that I see, and I've made deliberate choices to make those things—characters and locations—be those that we don't normally ever see" (Macaulay 53, emphasis added). The emphasis on making "real" people, places, and stories visible is not just ideological but actually extended to this practice of casting non-professional actors even in the smallest of parts.

In some cases an actor's personal history and experience were so essential to Bahrani they became synonymous with the story he was intent on telling, as was the case with the original inspiration for *Goodbye Solo*. The character of Solo (played eventually by Souleymane Sy Savane) was based on a Senegalese taxi driver Bahrani met one summer when visiting his family in Winston-Salem. Certain details of the man's life—like his geniality and charisma, and the irony of a car-less taxi driver who had to walk or hire a taxi to get around—formed the basis for the story Bahrani and co-writer Bahareh Azimi started writing. The somewhat causal connection between actor and character was so important to Bahrani that they became essentially, inextricably linked in his vision for the film. He recalls returning to the city during post-

production on *Chop Shop* to start working on *Goodbye Solo*, finished script in hand, only to find out the taxi driver didn't want to be in the movie. "[It] was a shock to me," Bahrani remembers, "I was very depressed and I thought the film would be over."

Highlighting the importance of non-actor collaborators not just as sources during the research and scripting stage but also as crucial components of the final text, Bahrani goes as far as saying "I didn't know if I [still] wanted to make [the film]" after learning the real-life inspiration for Solo didn't want to appear onscreen (Macaulay 54). Once he came to terms with having to cast a different actor, he and Azimi changed the character's name to Solo (a shortened casual version of Souleymane) and revised the character to fit Savane's personality (Macaulay 56). While it's certainly possible audiences wouldn't know of these connections between actors' personal histories and the characters they end up playing, such stories do become part of the larger discourse around the films and Bahrani's role as a director. Given the art house nature of the films and thus the importance of the festival circuit in building audience awareness, it's very likely viewers would have encountered these stories in corresponding media coverage.

That eventual star Souleymane Sy Savane and co-star Red West were both cast via more traditional industry channels in *Goodbye Solo* acts as the exception that proves the rule to some extent. Bahrani notes that once his original inspiration for Solo turned down the role they went through a more extensive casting process than on either of the earlier two films. This included putting out a call out to the African Diaspora Film Festival and associated directors, which resulted in their finding Souleymane Sy Savane (Macaulay 57). Savane had a few prior acting credits in very small roles, but Red West had been acting professionally as a stunt performer and in bit parts since the 60s. That neither of the two leads were complete non-professional "unknowns" at the time of casting synches up with the fact that the film is inherently more

staged, polished, and apparently "scripted" than *Man Push Cart* or *Chop Shop*. As discussed above, Bahrani's semi-improvisational scripting process still gives the dialogue a more raw, naturalistic rhythm than the earlier films, and the rough-around-the-edges sound and visual fidelity indicate a kind of authenticity-via-difference from classical invisible styles.

Bahrani does point out that there were some more recognizable actors who expressed interest in the part of William, but he ultimately settled on West instead (Macaulay 57). This indicates a commitment to his earlier philosophy of casting actors for their on-screen presence and the energy they bring to a scene even faced with the option of higher profile, professional performers (and the potentially increased economic viability such casting might bring). However, both in this more professional and industry-connected casting and in one of its two leads being a white American man, *Goodbye Solo* signals the beginning of a transition into the next stage of Bahrani's career, tilting toward the more traditional aesthetic style, production mode, and representational choices of *At Any Price* and *99 Homes*.

American Dream: Ideology and Narrative

The interrelation between economic and industrial mode, production, aesthetics, and authenticity outlined above extends also to the films' narratives and themes. Specifically, the films' micro-budget financing, guerilla and contingent production style, art-house appeal, and formal and aesthetic lineage with realist cinema(s) enable a particular audience address and ideological positioning at the same time that they limit and restrict the types of stories Bahrani and crew can commit to film. The particular narratives of the American Dream trilogy are of course also determined by and in response to the post-9/11 historical context in which the films were made, which saw a rise in anti-immigrant sentiment, specifically that directed at

immigrants of color and anyone (including U.S. citizens) who could be vaguely coded as Middle Eastern.

The films address this xenophobic and racially charged context mostly through the lens of capitalism and each character's participation in an economic system that both motivates and excludes them. The narratives impart a capitalist critique in part through their plots and representational ethics but also with narrative structures that mimic the repetitive, circular drive and illusory upward mobility of the "American Dream." Movement is in fact a central part of the bootstrap narrative, the motivating force of which is a constant pressure to be moving and working in order to attain a higher socioeconomic station (repeating the process again and again). For Bahrani's characters, this repetitive circular motion is fueled by belief, or at least hope, in this narrative while at the same time resulting in stasis rather than economic empowerment and transformation.

These repetitive and cyclical story structures exhibit another key quality of independent cinema often associated with realism or authenticity: verisimilitude. In enacting cyclical but ultimately fruitless routines of labor, each film's narrative engenders audience trust and engagement via sociopolitical "claims of proximity to the way things are in the outside world, rather than the extent to which it accords with the dominant conventions of fictional narrative" (King, *American* 67). Yet more than just enabling a claim to verisimilitude via mimesis of "real-life" rhythms and structures, this attention to that which is normally left out of mainstream and conventional narratives can also help to make visible the very different rhythms and structures that characterize life at the margins. Such narrative verisimilitude works to illustrate elements of each character's subjective experience while also rendering for audiences the perpetual failure and fiction of the bootstrap narrative.

The bootstrap myth is central to each film's narrative, though not in the more exaggerated rags-to-riches iteration often found in Hollywood stories. The protagonists' are each motivated by an illusory goal not of financial wealth but of simply attaining economic autonomy and security. Ahmad wants to afford a bigger apartment so his son can come live with him; Ale wants to afford a safe, permanent living and working space for him and his sister; Solo wants to start a career as a flight attendant. The culmination of the bootstrap myth in these cases involves reaching a state of basic economic security necessary to participate in a capitalist system in the first place—or at least to participate as "insiders" included in that system. By incorporating this capitalist causal logic of "work hard, achieve goals" into each character's respective arcs, the films explore how the American Dream narrative prompts work and investment from those it excludes, functioning as an exploitative engine rather than a real and achievable destination. The characters aren't completely without agency, but the ways they negotiate economic agency are—like the productions themselves—contingent and sometimes at odds with the prescribed rules and processes of the dominant economic system. What hope there is ends up coming in the form of these subversions of capitalist logics of movement and space, with characters each finding ways of carving out small, temporary spaces of agency rather than attaining traditional (narrative) forward or (socioeconomic) upward movement.

Verisimilitude: Cyclical Narratives and Labor as Ritual

The narrative structures of the American Dream trilogy are driven by verisimilitude primarily with regard to the protagonists' labor routines, with Bahrani spending significant portions of each film's running time on scenes of menial work. While these routines initially offer a more authentic grounding in the rhythms and texture of everyday life, they are eventually resignified as capitalist rituals in and of crisis and stagnation. The opening segments of *Man*

Push Cart offer a characteristic example of how such routines drive the action in each film. In the first 10 minutes we are treated to a mostly dialogue-free model of Ahmad's day: he arrives at the garage where his cart is stored and pushes it down empty streets before dawn, picking up supplies on the way; he makes friendly small-talk with customers as he prepares coffee, tea, and bagels; he pulls his cart back to the garage, navigating now-crowded intersections; he makes a long trek back to Brooklyn by subway, carrying his cart's propane tank the whole way; he observes prayers in an apartment we later come to know as his son's current, temporary home; and he's home at 2 a.m. The next day he gets up and does the same thing. There's an almost embodied rhythm that propels the sequence forward even in the absence of any discernible narrative interest. Bahrani focuses on the tactile elements of Ahmad's routine, the clipping of plastic lids over paper cups, tea bags splashing down in steaming water, the crinkling of brown paper bags as he hands his customers their bagels or donuts.

Similar routines factor into the structural rhythms of the other films. We see Ale constantly out in front of Rob's shop, asking drivers what they need and guiding them into the garage, the constant sounds of grating metal and power tools in the background. Countless scenes show Ale retrieving car parts and hauling them to and from the garage, as well as extended takes of him learning how to paint a bumper or buff out scratches (none of which include dialogue or any narrative value). The end of each day is marked by his routine of hiding his pay in a coffee can, making microwave popcorn, and going to sleep in his makeshift office apartment. We also get important variations on this last routine when his sister Isamar comes to live with him. In *Goodbye Solo*, while we hear generally about some of Solo's other fares, we typically only ever see him repeatedly picking up the same two: William and his friend Roc. The other fares we do see are monotonous and interchangeable, with the same generic framing from

the front interior of the cab. There are also frequently repeated sequences of Solo walking to and from work through the streets of Winston-Salem and using flashcards to study for the flight attendant exam, similarly emphasizing the cyclical, routine-based texture of his days.

Canet notes another tenuous connection to cinematic realism here in Bahrani's favoring of repetition, a "hallmark" of neorealist style that puts so much focus on "everyday routine" (Canet 160). Yet it's more helpful to situate this focus on routine and repetition within contemporary U.S. independent cinema's privileging of verisimilitude. In contrast to more mainstream narrative conventions that focus on moments of significant character conflict or plot changes, verisimilitude here refers to how certain independent films may shift their focus to more mundane events occurring between conventional moments of "action." This may include conversations or interactions that have no bearing on the plot or moving the action forward, such as Ahmad and Solo's many brief discussions with customers we never see again. It also applies to the frequent scenes that take place during moments of transit: silent cab or subway rides; characters wandering aimlessly, such as when Ale and Carlos or Ahmad wander the streets bartering and selling bootlegged goods; and characters performing mundane and trivial tasks that only serve to repeat work routines we've already seen.

King argues this kind of narrative verisimilitude carries a significance similar to that of authenticity. Specifically, it prioritizes recognizable moments of daily life often elided in studio films that prize excitement and action over mundane everyday realities:

One of the appeals of this style of filmmaking is the emphasis it places on aspects of life that are usually edited out in the interests of speed and economy of narrative movement... What a mainstream feature would show, usually with great

flourish and spectacle, is often left implicit or shown only at varying degrees of remove. (*American* 73)

However, Bahrani's repetitive focus on each character's labor routines does more than simply imply a commitment to authentic representation of experience by showing audiences boring or transitional moments normally left out of more mainstream narratives. It also denies viewers the satisfaction of narrative progress and/or closure such narratives typically promise—in this case, the achievement of each character's economic goals and a heightened degree of socioeconomic agency.

It's important to note that while some of these routines may be altered or shift slightly throughout the course of each film, they never really change. Even when they're disrupted, the disruption seems like a temporary stop on the way back to the routine. Solo and William fight, but he returns to driving him by the film's end. While this may also be a temporary return, the final scene emphasizes a return to the larger routine governing Solo's life: driving while studying for his flight attendant interview and exam. Ahmad and Ale both encounter serious setbacks to their plans—to buy his own cart and street space and move into a larger apartment with his son, and to restore an old food truck he and his sister can operate, respectively—but these setbacks simply result in a return to their old routines. At the end of *Man Push Cart*, Ahmad is back in a cart serving coffee and bagels to pre-dawn customers, and *Chop Shop* ends with Ale and his sister waiting out in front of Rob's shop for the day to begin. The spaces of commercial agency the characters rely on to propel them to their intended next social and economic stages—and importantly, the spaces that provide most, but not all, of the capital through which they hope to attain this mobility—end up being spaces they can't leave.

Bahrani has said that all three films are inspired in part by the myth of Sisyphus, with the title of *Man Push Cart* a direct allusion to the repeated cycle of pushing a boulder up a mountain (Macaulay 53). While Bahrani himself disputes that the films have an air of failure or fatalism (revisited below), there is at the very least a Sisyphean futility in the characters' constant striving for goals they never manage to achieve in the span of the narratives. For Anna Backman Rogers, this futility is significant beyond just a kind of verisimilitude that signals authenticity. Whereas the stakes of King's verisimilitude may not exceed simple experiences of aimlessness or boredom, Rogers argues that dwelling in such moments of ambiguity and in-betweenness can actually work to critique traditional narratives of progress and transformation. Like verisimilitude, she positions this as a key quality of many independent films: eschewing conventional plot in favor of exploring these moments of "crisis" in which characters are stuck in a "protracted state of threshold" (2). Such films represent crisis on a personal, micro level as a means of criticizing the dominant cultural orders that must fail in order for such stasis and paralysis to occur. This critique is made in part through the films' lack of adherence to traditional narrative structures and the lack of expected closure or fulfillment as described above:

Disruption is extended beyond the mere situation of the main protagonist towards the construction of the narrative itself and the viewer's cognitive reaction in response to what he/she experiences. These films travel between the staging of action, or the possibility of acting, and the complete breakdown of this central structure. (15)

Rogers' notion of crisis is not just about plots in which characters fail to move their stories forward or resolve a conflict, nor is it exclusively about narrative forms being disrupted and

expectations going unfulfilled. Rather, the narrative forms echo and enact the cyclical futility and stasis of the plot and vice versa.¹⁶

Yet Bahrani's narratives also engage more directly with a specific critique of the rituals of capitalism. Specifically, the causal logic of achieving one's goals and increased economic autonomy through hard work is established as a recognizable "cliché" or trope of the bootstrap narrative. Rogers defines clichés as an easily recognizable "form of visual ritual" that the audience can quickly "assimilate" and place within a larger iconographic system evoked by the filmmaker (10). The ritual of work leading to a buildup of financial capital is visually represented not just in repeated labor routines but also in Ahmad and Ale both routinely storing their cash earnings in a lockbox and a hidden coffee can, respectively. This literal accumulation of capital functions as a familiar and symbolic image within the iconographic system of the bootstrap narrative, representing both prior labor and the future promise of a return on that labor. The cliché of protagonists stashing dollar bills away in some hidden container was so strong, in fact, that Bahrani and co-screenwriter Bahareh Azimi intentionally committed to a "no one hides money in a box" rule for *Goodbye Solo* (Macaulay 57). *Goodbye Solo* is still informed by a capitalist logic of saving-for-the-future, but Solo's transition into the next stage of economic agency is signified by a job rather than something he can purchase. Tellingly, this job (flight attendant) is itself symbolic of movement, transcendence, and the stable autonomy of a career as opposed to the more sporadic nature of his current gig labor.

Rogers primarily focuses on traditional "rites of passage," specifically those that signify a movement from one life stage to another—adolescence, mid-life crisis, and death—but her definition of "ritual" easily applies to the labor routines of the American Dream trilogy as well:

Ritual action helps to enforce order within [a rite of passage] by signposting the different stages of this transition... [T]hese rituals are not merely a set of rules that need to be obeyed, but are culturally meaningful to the society that enforces them. Ritual is not only a social act that helps to signal a change in status; it helps to *bring about* this change in status. (10, emphasis in original)

Each character's narrative is motivated by a perpetually-near-future goal attached to and positioned as a direct result of their repeated work routines. Ahmad getting the title to his cart and the permit to his space downtown, Ale buying the title to his food truck, and Solo passing the flight attendant exam all effectively "signpost" their transitions into a higher socioeconomic status characterized by more financial autonomy. That is, the ability to further generate capital, still via labor but labor performed more on their own terms and/or with additional stability and security.

City Spaces as Subjective Landscapes

Bahrani's focus on the characters' repeated routines thus achieves more than just a narrative verisimilitude stemming from the independent realm's claim to authenticity and "truth-telling." It also evokes a subjective experience with the various rituals and city spaces that present each character with options for participating in the capitalist system. In signifying the immobility and socioeconomic incapacitation of these spaces, the repetition of routine in Bahrani's three films also evokes what Justin Horton calls a "mental landscape." Horton points to the way one of Bahrani's U.S. independent contemporaries, David Gordon Green, infuses certain scenes in *George Washington* with a quality that is simultaneously "realist and impressionist," exhibiting the formal and aesthetic markers of realism at the same time they indicate a deeply subjective experience with particular spaces. Horton is mostly concerned with how the film

moves in and out of such perspectives in order to inflect the landscapes the characters inhabit with subjective meaning. Following Deleuze's discussion of Antonioni's (neo)realism, Horton recalls how the director's "framing of the character in relation to the landscape takes on a heightened significance... as if the film's visual scheme had become colored by the psychological particularities of its characters" (34). He argues that in such a mode the landscape seems to be filtered through a character's own subjectivity despite the lack of any explicit POV shots.

Bahrani's films don't generally embrace the impressionistic symbolism Horton points to in Green's film, with the exception of one visual motif appearing throughout the American Dream trilogy: characters situated against an indifferent urban background. We constantly see Ahmad carrying the propane tank for his cart everywhere he goes (another symbol of his Sisyphean burden); Ale frequently roams the empty Iron Triangle district at night with the lights and cheers from Citi Field looming in the background; and William walks everywhere in Winston-Salem by foot, constantly framed against the city skyline and rushing traffic often ironically peppered with yellow cabs identical to his own. *Chop Shop* is an especially strong example here: even in the daytime the shadow of Citi Field features prominently as a nearby marker of prosperity, hovering visually and figuratively over everything Ale and Isamar do, and working to situate Willets Point in a larger and more precise socioeconomic context. Like the characters of Bahrani's trilogy, the denizens of Willets Point's auto-focused Iron Triangle district are always working, always in motion, and yet constantly excluded. Canet notes:

For Bahrani it was paradoxical to observe how quickly you could migrate from a place of despair to another where you could read on a giant billboard "Make Dreams Happen." Bahrani confesses he was curious to know "what dreams can

happen in this place?"... [H]ow can the American Dream be so close yet so far away for those who live in Willets Point? (158)

These landscapes haven't been rendered surreal in the same way Horton points to in *George Washington*, but they are loaded with a symbolic value that keeps the characters' simultaneous striving and alienation always in view.

Bahrani's constant attention to the materiality of his characters' work and the frequent repetition of labor rituals—the tactile, sensory details of which become familiar by each film's end—also works to create subjectively embodied spaces. The "psychological particularities" of the protagonists may not always be articulated via the broader symbolism of Green's landscapes, but this is fitting given that Bahrani's characters are so often laboring in small enclosures or cramped urban spaces. Their experiences in these spaces are entirely characterized by transactional, mostly impersonal labor, to the extent that a small, faded dinosaur sticker on Ahmad's cart takes on immense emotional value. Through a flashback we see Ahmad and his wife happily working while their son plays just outside the food cart, with Ahmad eventually leaning out and applying the sticker to the side of the cart to his son's amusement.

The sequence is so loaded with sunny sentimentality that it could only be taking place in Ahmad's memory, contrasting as strongly as it does with the flat realist minimalism of the rest of the film. It's the only time in any of the three films where Bahrani breaks a standard, forward-moving chronology, and also the only time in *Man Push Cart* where we see Ahmad genuinely happy. Several times while cleaning his cart at the end of each day's routine, he lingers on the sticker before carefully washing around it so as not to get it wet. Something as otherwise slight and innocuous as a faded sticker thus takes on simultaneously what Ahmad has lost and what he hopes to reclaim at least in part by regaining custody of his son. This also imposes a particular

lens through which to understand the repetitive, depersonalizing labor we constantly see Ahmad performing inside the cart. Ale's food truck and Solo's cab (and eventually the imagined space of a plane) take on similarly personal dimensions throughout their narratives. Because these spaces signify both that which each character hopes to achieve and the means through which they hope to achieve it—and, crucially, because the characters don't ever move beyond these spaces—their work routines begin to seem like both engines and traps.¹⁷

Movement and Agency

It is significant that each character's mode of attaining some autonomy is something that both grants them freedom of movement while being rendered physically immobile and enclosed. Movement—literal and figurative—is positioned as both a means and a goal, but the often enclosed spaces in and through which the characters labor eventually reinforce their social stratification and stasis. Ahmad and Solo work and move through the city in enclosures—a small food cart and a cab, respectively—having achieved a kind of mobility Ale hopes for when he gets his food truck up and running. In addition to their entire livelihoods being attached to these vehicles, they grant each a degree of movement throughout the urban spaces in which they operate and from which they may otherwise be excluded. Solo uses his cab for his and others' transportation, whereas Ahmad's cart—which, without owning a car, he has to push by hand—grants him access to a streetside space of commerce downtown.

Within these enclosures they can achieve a kind of commercial agency and authority, but even this is limited by the larger socio-economic environment in which they operate. For example, Ahmad's cart affords him some commercial agency, but only so long as it's anchored and occupied at his specific, licensed spot during predetermined hours. Furthermore, he doesn't own the cart or the license to his location, which he must also buy from another character bit by

bit. Solo's cab affords him mobility but is also not his own. At the behest of his partner he is working, somewhat begrudgingly, to restore a cab to use as his own, but this second vehicle must be repaired with the profits he makes from his fares, which in turn he can only collect in accordance with the proper licenses and regulations.

The degree to which Ahmad's cart and Solo's cab enable them to temporarily establish individual agency within these privileged spaces is ambivalent as well. Bahrani notes a desire to flip typical representational patterns in Ahmad's interactions with customers, the latter of which are mostly shown simply as disembodied hands reaching through his cart's window with cash. He points out that "in most movies Ahmad's character would just be a pair of hands" relegated to the role of a faceless service worker ("Director's Commentary," *Man Push Cart*). The decision to show him as fully embodied within the space of the cart does emphasize a kind of autonomy, and yet these spaces are almost entirely indifferent to Ahmad (and Ale and Solo in their respective situations). Despite some knowing him by name, Ahmad's Manhattan customers would go to another food cart or coffee shop if he didn't show up one day, and most of Solo's fares could just as easily find another cab. It is not so much that Ahmad, Ale, and Solo are welcomed into these spaces via their labor as it is that their labor itself is welcome, granted via their cart, truck, and cab, respectively. Despite being in constant motion throughout busy and often affluent city spaces, their spatial containment in their mobile work spaces mirrors their persistent social and economic immobility.

Even when Bahrani's characters can claim small, temporary spaces of commercial agency contingent on their surroundings, moving in and out of these surroundings continually (re)imposes evidence of their own social stratification. Ahmad's customers are overwhelmingly well-dressed, apparently wealthy New Yorkers on their way to high-paying jobs in the high rises

looming just outside his cart window. When one of them, a fellow Pakistani named Mohammad, invites him to do some painting and repair work on his (seemingly expensive) 6th Street apartment, it's clear that the bond they formed over shared cultural origins is overshadowed by their distinctly different socio-economic classes. When Mohammad finally recognizes Ahmad as a famous singer from Pakistan—a past that haunts him throughout the film—his first reaction is to excitedly grab his old CD and ask "What the hell are you doing peeling tape off my windows?... If I'd known who you were I wouldn't have asked you up here to paint my apartment."

In calling attention to the disparity between Ahmad's previous status in Pakistan and his current status in the U.S., Mohammad also subtly reinforces his own socio-economic status over Ahmad, rooted in their respective current orientations to the space of his apartment (owner and service worker). Furthermore, he doesn't stop providing subservient work for Ahmad, who returns to his apartment often to paint, sand and lacquer furniture, and perform other manual labor. Though Mohammad projects an attitude of friendliness and camaraderie—offering Ahmad beers, ordering them Thai food, and offering his couch when Ahmad works late and has a long train ride back to Brooklyn—he maintains a tone of subtle condescension that underscores Ahmad's role within the space as that of a worker. For instance, when he tries to wash his dishes after they eat, Mohammad remarks casually "No don't worry about it, I've got someone else to do that."

While Mohammad originally promises to help Ahmad start booking music gigs in New York, extending the easy offer, "Anything you need, don't hesitate to ask," we soon realize the kind of help he's really willing to provide keeps Ahmad moving more sideways than up or forward. He takes him to parties and introduces him to venue owners in the city, but never

arranges any real meetings; he gets Ahmad a job working the door at a club (keeping his musical dreams firmly in view but still out of reach), but this job makes it impossible to run the food cart in the early-morning hours. Ahmad's presence in these spaces simply confirms and underscores his own immobility, acting as an extension of his food cart located in the middle of Manhattan. Canet makes a similar observation about the constant presence of iconography of prosperity (Citi Field, a tourist-filled pier, etc.) in Ale's traversals through and beyond Willets Point, arguing such visuals ensure the viewer "is constantly aware of the geographical proximity of such socially and culturally distant worlds" (158). These mental landscapes ultimately evoke the crisis and stasis of the rituals in which the characters participate, with Bahrani and Simmonds "enter[ing] into a mimetic relationship with the character's way of seeing"—a technique Horton positions as "a profoundly social act" (35). I would argue political as well.

Each film ends with the protagonists occupying the same socioeconomic stations as when they started. Almost immediately after making the final payment on the title of his cart, Ahmad follows a vendor around a street corner to buy a present for his son and returns to find the cart stolen. Ale spends his entire savings on the title to the food truck he intends to restore only to find that it can't be returned to working condition and must be salvaged for scrap. Solo fails his flight attendant exam shortly before making the somber drive to Blowing Rock, with the mutual silence between him and William echoing their unspoken understanding that the latter will jump to his death there. In *Man Push Cart*, the iconography of the labor ritual that has motivated Ahmad throughout the film remains intact, but resignified for both him and the audience. The last shots show Ahmad doing a favor for a friend by covering the latter's cart for a few hours. Mirroring the beginning of the film, we see him setting up the cart in the pre-dawn dark on a street corner, preparing to open up for the morning rush. That Ahmad ends up in yet another

bagel cart—though not his own, and no closer to his goal of operating autonomously—is a visual representation of both the failure and repetitive, cyclical nature of his labor rituals throughout the film. Bahrani characterizes these final moments in which Ahmad returns to his early morning routine not as "despairing" or lingering in failure, but rather as an "acceptance of life as it is," as if by returning to the familiarity of his morning set-up routine Ahmad is leaving behind the earlier panic and frustrations of his cart being stolen (Porton 46 and "Director's Commentary"). However, even the iconography of the scene—Ahmad looking out the service window of a nearly identical bagel cart—makes clear that if he's leaving the past behind, he's effectively trading it for an identical present.

The endings of *Chop Shop* and *Goodbye Solo* have slightly more hopeful inflections despite the same narrative stasis. The swift upward camera movement as Ale and Isamar playfully feed birds outside of Rob's shop is perhaps the one moment in the film where Simmonds' camera seems to actively and formally reflect a more subjective emotional state, hinting at hope and resiliency on part of the characters. On the drive back from Blowing Rock Solo's step daughter Alex, unaware of William's presumed suicide, refocuses both Solo and the audience on his determination to take the flight attendant exam again by starting to quiz him casually from his study materials. These formal and narrative moves end the films on notes of positive resiliency, but they don't distract from the fundamental failure of the characters to achieve the goals that have motivated their stories from the start. That their various labor rituals have failed and resulted in a return to each character's status and situation at the beginning of their films signals a "breakdown in [the] ritualised modes of thought" they each—and by extension the audience—are prompted to buy into at the start of the narratives (Backman Rogers 5).

Here I am borrowing and broadening Rogers' framework to argue that in response to sociocultural and economic crises Bahrani's films "appropriate ritual" in subjective terms in order to resignify cultural narratives and clichés (like that of the bootstrap myth) within the framework of crisis and failure. By revealing such ritual as "an empty device" that leads to "a protracted moment of liminality" from which the participant is unable to escape, the films resignify their cyclical labor routines and saving-for-the-future motifs as the driving forces of an illusory and predatory system rather than avenues for action and agency (5). Horton refers to this (via Deleuze) as a "falsification" of history, arguing such narratives work as a "collective enunciation" calling attention to the gaps, exclusions, and failings of history and of the narratives such dominant histories uphold (and are upheld by) (43).

"Tactics" as Subversive Use of Space

These mimetic representations of urban spaces (as limiting, indifferent, devoid of potential) invoke the crisis, stasis, and exclusions of capitalism—yet in their indifference they also open up possibilities for contingent action and subversion. Part of the films' lingering in moments of transit and in-betweenness helps illuminate characters' patterns and practices of moving through and embodying spaces from which they are meant to be excluded. Their socioeconomic liminality is echoed in the many sequences set in those transitional, indifferent settings Marc Auge terms "non-places." Arising out of the proliferation of globalism and "supermodernity," non-places in many ways serve as connective tissue between modern capitalist spaces. Borrowing from DeCerteau, Auge argues that the (super)modern city is arranged as a network of distinct "places" within each of which a particular socially recognized type of action occurs: commerce, domesticity, leisure, etc. These places are designed to organize such specific behaviors under neoliberal logics of order, security, and control, and thus also

necessarily reinforce cultural narratives and selective histories that justify such logics (the bootstrap myth being one example). Such an incorporation of history in the service of cultural identity (and in motivating continued action in service of this identity) illustrates for Auge the “essence of modernity... the presence of the past in a present that supersedes it but still lays claim to it” (61).

"Non-places," by contrast, are those "spaces which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity" (63). These, Auge argues, are produced by supermodernity as spaces of transit and flow, not necessarily designed to impose a particular role or prescribe a set of behaviors but rather to facilitate a kind of impersonal, "ahistorical" transitioning from place to place. Because they "do not integrate the earlier places" and thus do not situate history within a duration that has any bearing on the present, non-places enable a kind of passive relationship with cultural and national history—a history easily swept out of view in favor of "a world thus surrendered to solitary individuality, to the fleeting, the temporary and ephemeral" (63). Rogers makes a useful connection between the non-place and the Deleuzian any-space-whatever, which is also "disjointed and anonymous," making it "possible *not to belong anywhere* and *not to be anyone*" (Rogers 125, emphasis in original). Non-places for Rogers act as liminal spaces that afford "non-identity," and yet in many ways non-identity is a state in which Bahrani's characters are perpetually stuck. (Or rather, the denial of a fully realized identity under capitalism is rendered through their inability to move into and out of distinct roles within a capitalist hierarchy, ultimately denied belonging within many of the corresponding "places" of such roles.) This applies to not just economic places like the office buildings in which Ahmad's customers work or the music spaces in which he's unable to perform but also the places of

domesticity such work would allow for, like a larger apartment suitable for Ahmad and his son; likewise with Ale and Isamar having to live in a dilapidated and repurposed office space.

Yet as Rogers notes, the any-space-whatever presents itself not just as "a space of profound crisis (political, personal and existential)" but also as "a space of possibility" (126). While the non-places Bahrani's characters traverse and inhabit are designed to enforce a transitional anonymity that maintains a supermodern capitalist order, they also end up functioning as arenas of contingent possibility. De Certeau's notion of strategies and tactics helps illustrate how the characters' activities in these spaces undermine and subvert their role in maintaining this order by tactically negotiating moments of capitalist and economic agency within spaces specifically designed to exclude them. De Certeau introduces the notion of "making do" as a subversive practice enabling one to operate both within and counter to the dominant social structures and the prescriptions and restrictions they impose. Here he is referring to "ways of operating" that open up new possibilities for action for the subject: "[w]ithout leaving the place where he has no choice but to live and which lays down its law for him, he establishes within it a degree of *plurality* and creativity" (30, emphasis in original). This "plurality and creativity" is enabled in part by the subversive "uses" one finds for products and processes imposed by the dominant social order, but de Certeau is careful to clarify that this range of possible subversive actions is subject to "*power relationships* [that] define the networks in which they are inscribed and [that] delimit the circumstances from which they can profit" (34). He characterizes two modes of action—strategies and tactics—which are contingent on the actor and their relationship to the spaces in which action are taken, and which can help describe the various movements of Bahrani's characters as they extend themselves into otherwise foreclosed spaces.

A strategy, according to de Certeau, involves a subject enacting power through the establishment of "a *place* that can be delimited as its *own* and serve as the base from which relations with an *exteriority* composed of targets or threats (customers or competitors, enemies, the country surrounding the city, objectives and objects of research, etc.) can be managed" (36, emphasis in original). This claiming of one's own space enables the subject to inscribe power relations within it, establishing agency within or against the larger (in Bahrani's case socio-economic) orders. (We see this to some extent already in the characters' use of various enclosures to give them a degree of economic agency in particular city spaces/non-places.) De Certeau continues, "every 'strategic' rationalization seeks first of all to distinguish its 'own' place, that is, the place of its own power and will, from an 'environment'... it is an effort to delimit one's own place in a world bewitched by the invisible powers of the Other" (36). On one hand, the economic plights of Ahmad, Ale, and Solo can be ascribed to their role as "Others" excluded from and neglected by the economic strategies of post-9/11 American capitalism. In claiming their own spaces of commercial agency, however temporary or regulated, they are striving to distinguish their own "place[s] of power and will," and in this context it is even more significant that all three characters are working toward purchasing vehicles that truly are their own, rather than operating out of spaces owned by others.

While strategy entails one carving out a space and thereby partaking in recognized operations within the larger social order, de Certeau uses the term "tactics" to describe actions taken outside of one's own autonomous space. Particularly important when considering Bahrani's characters, "[t]he space of a tactic is the space of the other... it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power" (37). By characterizing Ahmad, Ale, and Solo's operations in this way I don't mean to imply that the viewer should consider them

"others" in a foreign land, but rather that they are already defined as cultural and socio-economic others in the terms of American late capitalism. When they find ways to exert commercial agency outside of their licensed and prescribed enclosures—or when they utilize those enclosures in quasi-legal or unapproved ways—we can consider them as engaging in tactical action(s). This is evident when Ahmad sells pirated DVDs to passersby or barter them for cigarettes with local convenience store and newsstand attendants (who all make it seem like this is a well-established, long-standing agreement). The same goes for scenes in which Ale steals hubcaps or phones and tries to sell them to the operator of a local chop shop.

De Certeau makes a distinction between place and "space" that is worth mentioning here, in part because it forms the basis on which Auge builds his definition of place and non-place. Auge draws from de Certeau's opposition of place as a "geometrically defined" (i.e., planned and ordered for a specific purpose) grouping of structural elements and space as "animation of these places" by human actors moving through them utilizing them for an intended purpose (65). Non-places are (in theory) distinct for their lack of any potential to be thusly "animated" and imbued with cultural or anthropological meaning. De Certeau notes that while strategy is rooted in a place, tactics are mobile, enacted outside of claimed spaces, or at least outside spaces claimed as the practitioners' own. Tactics are then tied to continual movement through these strategic spaces, as we see Bahrani's characters "making use of the elements of the [urban] terrain" they traverse during and between their economic routines (34). De Certeau characterizes these movements in terms of the dominant systems through which subversive subjects pass and operate, arguing that "while these 'traverses' remain heterogenous to the systems they infiltrate," acting subjects "use as their *material* the *vocabularies* of established languages... [and] remain

within the framework of prescribed *syntaxes* (the temporal modes of schedules, paradigmatic organizations of places, etc.)" (34, emphasis in original).

We can see both of these techniques utilized by Bahrani's characters. When Ale and his friend Carlos board the subway to sell candy to riders, he delivers a well-rehearsed, rhetorically calculated speech, leveraging their status as kids to their advantage when he addresses the car with, "excuse me ladies and gentlemen, pardon the interruption... We are not going to lie to you, we are not here selling candy for no school basketball team. In fact, I don't even go to school, and if you want me back in school today I got candy for you." His sudden transformation of the subway car into a commercial space to be marketed to (and the creation of a marketable story inflected with pathos) indicates an understanding of capitalist language and methodology even as he subverts regulations of capitalist activity. Solo's use of his cab could also be seen as "remain[ing] within the framework of prescribed *syntaxes*," or the formal rules of his profession, reliably driving passengers where they ask him to go. Yet the only passengers we actually ever see in the film are two addicts lighting up a crack pipe, his friend Roc who he ferries to a number of implied drug deals across town, and William, who's hired Solo to drive him to a suicide attempt at Blowing Rock. Solo operates within the prescribed rules and patterns of his profession, enabling others to utilize approved systems of transit to carry out unsanctioned (and in Roc's case, commercially lucrative) activities.

Part of the whole reason these movements can be subversive for de Certeau is that they reinscribe choice and opportunity into spaces the intended use of which is (supposed to be) limited and predetermined. For Bahrani, who often shies away from discussing the films in explicitly or overtly political terms, the films are motivated by questions of free will—by asking "[w]hat choices can a person make [and] what choices have been made for them?" (Macaulay

54). Certainly Ahmad, Ale, and Solo regain some degree of agency in their tactical engagements with capitalist language and practices outside of sanctioned and regulated spaces of action. Yet more than just a matter of personal agency, these actions can also function as subversions of sociopolitical myths and narratives when performed in "non-places" intended to facilitate flow between the various other "strategic" spaces of capitalism. There is power for the characters in disrupting the ease with which subway riders and pedestrians are (or otherwise would be) able to anonymously move through such non-places, blissfully unaware of the characters' economic plights.

For Auge this lack of awareness is an essential component of how non-places operate: "[t]he non-place is a space in which identity is actually equated with anonymity. Once in the non-place, one becomes a liminal entity in which identity is removed and one is but an entity among many others" (128). Through their tactical subversions and, more importantly, reintroductions of capitalist logics and syntax within these spaces, Bahrani's characters disrupt "the passive joys of identity loss" through which such non-places subtly facilitate the flows of capitalism (Auge 103). Similarly, Rogers notes that in tactically deploying capitalist rituals in non-places the characters manifest "[i]mages of sustained and extended liminality," which in contradistinction to the ahistorical anonymity intended of non-places "can function as a form of critique because they demonstrate the failure to contain and assuage crisis" (7). In manifesting this failure Bahrani's characters disrupt the comfortable anonymity and group (non)identity and belonging non-places impose, if only momentarily.

Concluding Thoughts: Inhabitation and Empathy

It's relevant also to think about how the presence of those coded as Other disrupts the familiarity and neutrality of the non-places in which Bahrani's characters operate. More than just

acts of agency, their presence works to resignify the non-places they traverse by manifesting the very Otherness the strategic spaces of capitalism work to exclude (and consequently manifests the historical roots of this exclusion in/via capitalism). Sara Ahmed offers a helpful way to consider these movements as an embodied extension of the characters' othered selves into space in order to create familiarity. In discussing how orientation is embodied,¹⁸ Ahmed argues that "space is dependent on bodily inhabitation" because an embodied awareness of the physical contours and relationality within a space creates a sense of familiarity that allows us to both "find our way" and "feel at home" (6-7). For Bahrani's characters, inhabitation in these non-places works to create a temporary sense of familiarity and belonging at the same time that it may disrupt others' sense of familiarity and orientation within the space.

Ahmed continues that this "work of inhabitation involves orientation... ways of extending bodies into spaces that create new folds, or new contours... If orientation is about making the strange familiar through the extension of bodies into space, then disorientation occurs when that extension fails" (11). Bahrani's characters aren't so much disoriented as they are closed off from the opportunity to more permanently "extend" themselves into new socioeconomic spaces and develop some familiarity via commercial success—per Ahmed "we could say that some spaces extend certain bodies and simply do not leave room for others" (11). Ahmad, Ale, and Solo are not granted the "room" within the capitalist spaces they aspire to occupy, and must find ways of moving through and within such spaces on their own terms. Furthermore, by operating as commercial actors within otherwise liminal spaces of transit, the characters not only serve as reminders of the capitalist systems and economic structures that routinely exclude them, but also—in serving narrative purposes for Bahrani—resignify these non-places as distinctly cultural spaces of heightened contemporary significance. More than just theoretically subversive "play"

(as de Certeau suggests), we may read their repeated routines and "tactical" operations as traces of history showing through the ahistorical, identity-free veneer of the transitional spaces in which they operate.

Bahrani notes that while the three films are of a distinct moment, there was a slightly different motivation for *Goodbye Solo* that arose out of a more conscious and timely response to the war in Iraq. Regarding Solo's "spirit" of connection, community, and empathy, many of those to whom Bahrani showed the script replied "Why is he so friendly to a stranger?" to which Bahrani responds "Why aren't you asking that of yourself?" (Macaulay 56). While the final scenes of all the films are inflected with subtle hints of resiliency-bordering-on-hope, *Goodbye Solo* seems to more consistently look toward an ideal future. The implication of the film, echoed by Bahrani's thoughts above, is in some ways very simply, and perhaps naively, that there is value in reaching out to those we don't know or understand. Situated against a cultural and historical backdrop that saw the U.S. involved in two wars and increasing hostility toward not just immigrants but also citizens/civilians of those countries—so often characterized as a dehumanized mass of enemy Others—this emphasis on connection and empathy becomes a distinctly political statement. It is significant that the protagonist is an immigrant person of color reaching out to a white man who is at times openly hostile toward him, but Bahrani is also careful to note that the film is not a "shitty magical black guy saves a white guy" kind of movie (Macaulay 56). Empathy is positioned not as a means of agency over the fate of another—also evident in the inverted subject-object relations of white savior narratives—but rather as an end and value in and of itself.

III: Crossover to Mainstream in *At Any Price* and *99 Homes*

Following the American Dream trilogy, Bahrani made a distinct shift in his production mode. He moved away from many of the contingent and alternative filming practices discussed in chapter 1—such as semi-improvisational scripting and impromptu, non-permit shooting on live sets—in favor of a more studio-influenced Indiewood model. The shifting economic and industrial contexts in which Bahrani produced his fourth and fifth films—*At Any Price* (2012) and *99 Homes* (2014)—entailed changes to the cultural myths and perspectives engaged by both the films themselves and the press and marketing discourse around their respective releases. The most obvious change here involved casting Hollywood actors and shifting his narrative focus to white, middle-class U.S. families caught up in post-financial crisis economic turmoil. These changes raise questions about how such industrial shifts may influence the degree of independent "vision" so often touted of microbudget films like those discussed in the previous chapter. Specifically, how does a director like Bahrani continue to engage critically with U.S. cultural narratives while embracing more mainstream models of cultural production?

Introduction: Mainstream Dreams

This move coincided with two interrelated factors: increasing critical attention to his first three films in popular criticism and independent cinema discourses, and the relative breakthrough commercial success of *Goodbye Solo*. Bahrani received back-to-back Independent Spirit Awards for his first two features, including a Best First Feature nomination in 2007, as well as a Best Director nomination and Someone to Watch award in 2008. In popular criticism, he was championed by U.S. critic Roger Ebert as the "new great American director." Bahrani

gave multiple interviews with Ebert, who provided a substantially more visible platform than he'd received prior. The two grew so close that Bahrani dedicated *99 Homes* to the late film critic. This helped position Bahrani in the mainstream while also situating him within a distinct cultural milieu. Additionally, the box office staying power of *Goodbye Solo* demonstrated a commercial viability not shown by the more limited releases of his first two films. *Goodbye Solo* remained in theatrical release for over 6 months and nearly hit the \$1 million gross mark, far exceeding the final grosses for both *Man Push Cart* and *Chop Shop* combined.¹⁹

At Any Price and *99 Homes* not only had higher budgets and wider releases than any of the American Dream films, but the involvement of Hollywood actors and larger independent distribution/production companies operating as small studios brought with it significant changes in production mode (and the resulting aesthetic). The films are more traditionally shot and edited, embracing the classical invisible style over the frenetic, faux-documentary look and feel of the earlier films. Even the overt stylization employed in *99 Homes* trends firmly toward the formalist end of the spectrum versus the naturalistic styling discussed in chapter 1. Likewise, contrary to the semi-improvised quality of Bahrani's first three films, the acting and dialogue match the more calibrated emotional performances audiences expect of classically trained Hollywood actors. In terms of the production style and aesthetic, there is no illusion of documenting "real life" as it unfolds or blurring of boundaries between rehearsed fiction and documentary.

For his first three films, Bahrani was straightforward about how his minimalist style and microbudget guerilla production mode stemmed from economic necessity, rather than some notion of a more "true" or unrestricted artistic vision that is so often a self-declared prerogative of independent cinema. In an interview following *Goodbye Solo's* release, he reflected with some frustration on how difficult it was to get wider distribution for his first three films outside of the

studio system. Pointing to directors like Robert Altman and P.T. Anderson, Bahrani pushes back against the notion that bigger budgets necessitate a "compromise" of one's directorial vision. On the contrary, he notes, "my dream is to somehow do that" (Macaulay 90). Mainstream critical favorites like directors Altman and Anderson may seem like curious examples to invoke here given the microbudget mode and extremely limited release strategies of Bahrani's first three films. However, they are telling in how they reveal a larger scope for his own directorial ambitions. There is little of the posturing we often get from new filmmakers in the microbudget independent sector, in which openly expressing a desire for higher budgets or wider releases may be seen as a betrayal of some more authentic "indie spirit."

This sense of material restrictions as a badge of honor or a marker of true ingenuity has been reinforced, if not always intentionally, by many critics and scholars—often through discussions of how the independent sector participates in cultural production. As Geoff King and others have argued, the closer small, independent production companies get to operating as full-fledged producer-distributors the more that sector operates according to many of the same economic and cultural factors that have shaped Hollywood production. These smaller production companies thus end up creating an ostensibly independent yet even more Hollywood-entangled "Indiewood" sector. Bahrani's move toward a more mainstream production mode thus echoes a larger question in independent cinema: how possible is it, really, to present aesthetically or ideologically alternative creative visions when working in a mode closely modeled after the mainstream studio system, if not directly infrastructurally and industrially linked with it?

Additionally, these production shifts corresponded to a broader historical moment in the United States: the Great Recession and financial industry fallout from the 2008 housing crisis. This period saw the apparently sudden collapse of the "American Dream" for many middle-class

families, often particularly in the form of loss of property, the material and symbolic significance of which I'll return to later. It may be a reach to say this historical context dictated Bahrani's shift in protagonists and the characters and lifestyles represented in *At Any Price* and *99 Homes*.

However, the representational, narrative, and thematic elements of both films certainly reflect and strongly correspond with this broader context. Whereas the critical dialogue around his first three films focused uniformly on how they told stories about "invisible America"—whatever that exceedingly relative term means—the films in this chapter turn their focus to mythologized American archetypes already rendered constantly visible in mainstream cultural dialogue and media (Austerlitz D5). In this chapter I argue that the above confluence of changing production contexts and a distinct emerging historical moment pushed Bahrani to inhabit not just a different sector of the film industry but also of cultural production. This is evident in both the changes to Bahrani's operational mode and orientation within and against the studio system, and in the particular socio-cultural representations and myths with which the films are concerned.

This isn't to say the shift in production mode suddenly aligned Bahrani with the dominant capitalist or cultural values he critiques in the American Dream trilogy. Rather, the films in this chapter exhibit a somewhat more complicated, though also more common, move to reflect the prevailing anxieties and frustrations of the historical moment from within the confines of traditional formal and production modes. In these films he moves toward critiquing values of American capitalism through the perspectives and experiences of those who have already achieved a kind of success within the system and whom the system is designed to serve. I'll revisit what, according to the films, is made to constitute "success" later in the chapter, but broadly speaking the films give us white, middle-class U.S. families with traditional homes and income from jobs that are part of recognized and regulated economies. These modes of economic

activity are at least initially in contrast to the alternative economies or subversive engagement with various economies portrayed in the American Dream trilogy—though this is complicated in the second and third acts of each film here. The films don't necessarily have a "taking down the system from the inside" attitude, but rather seem concerned with bringing to the surface particular values that have always undergirded the mythologies of U.S. capitalism. The American Dream films do this by showing us who is excluded and exploited for these mythologies to be upheld. *At Any Price* and *99 Homes* do so by drawing out hidden or less visible elements in more traditionally told narratives in order to challenge the values those narratives attempt to mythologize and uphold.

Both *At Any Price* and *99 Homes* engage with murkier notions of success and failure than in the American Dream films. In those earlier films yearning is a subjective force through which each character is connected to a mythologized notion of the American Dream, represented by material markers of success and autonomy. Possession is important—of a permanent living space, of a food truck, of a cab—but only insofar as it promises a specific future. The characters' material concerns are always a means to something else: a less precarious life with one's family, heightened autonomy and security, etc. In the films discussed in this chapter, this yearning for a particular future is still a distinctly American value, but ownership and possession—largely of property but also generational—becomes a kind of trap. It is significant that in moving into a more funded, studio-connected production mode the stakes of Bahrani's conflicts change in such a way: that which the characters are here threatened with losing (houses, jobs, personal legacies), the characters of the American Dream trilogy are never able to achieve despite all their striving. The trap of the particular mode of capitalism explored by the films comes not from yearning for a better life via certain, ultimately unattainable markers of success, but rather of the desperation

required to maintain one's economic security. One of the undercurrents throughout both films is a question of what is owed from one generation to the next, and wrapped up in this are additional questions about the value of capitalist notions of legacy and inheritance. While the films do still engage glancingly with questions of who is left out of such systems, Bahrani seems more interested in asking what values are required (or abandoned) to uphold the myth of economic and cultural "success."

The above shifts in production, narrative and representation, form and aesthetics are intertwined also with a shift in audience. The films' ideological orientations toward the capitalist and cultural values they explore necessarily align more closely with the broad demographics scholars like Sherry Ortner and John Berra have long pointed out as the primary audiences of independent cinema. Any critique Bahrani offers is thus complicated by how independent cinema so often uses its implicit role of truth telling to cater to primarily white, educated, upper-middle class audiences—often as a way of stoking audiences' images of themselves as critical, empathetic, and socially engaged. Identification also comes into play in a different way when audiences are being asked to reflect on cultural mythologies that closely align with those in and through which they situate themselves. Because Bahrani is moving into a production mode and a formal/aesthetic style that is more ubiquitous and recognizable, the points of departure from dominant modes of visual storytelling lie primarily in the narratives—specifically the story points in which audiences may see themselves or frequently mythologized notions of the "average American." Rather than employing aesthetic and formal elements to convince audiences what they're seeing is a more authentic "slice of life," the films make use of invisible style to elicit emotional and intellectual engagement at the level of narrative.

Budgets and Star Casting

Production on each film modeled a more recent evolution of the Indiewood model of the mid-90s to early 2000s (referenced in chapter 1). While the films weren't made by any of the major studios' specialty labels, Bahrani did get a distribution partnership with Sony Pictures Classics for *At Any Price*, resulting in a limited release which slowly expanded to a high point of 81 theaters, far exceeding the reach of any of the American Dream trilogy films.²⁰ *99 Homes* was produced by Hyde Park Entertainment, a full-fledged independent studio that frequently solicits the involvement of Hollywood stars. It was distributed as one of the early offerings of Broad Green Pictures, a short-lived Wall Street-fortune-funded startup that, like contemporaries A24 and Annapurna, attempted to operate as a small studio handling both production and distribution. Broad Green opted for a platform release for *99 Homes*, with significantly more extensive advertising than any of Bahrani's previous films and culminating in an eventual rollout to 691 theaters at its high point.

At Any Price was also initially financed in part by Christine Vachon's Killer Films, which eventually led to Bahrani working on side projects with KillerMoxie Management (a partnership between Killer Films and Moxie Pictures). Bahrani produced short-form and commercial work for KillerMoxie between production on *Goodbye Solo* and *At Any Price*, such as 2009's environmental-themed, Werner Herzog-narrated short *Plastic Bag* and a music video for Icelandic band Sigur Ros (Goldrich (*Shoot* profile)). This is not the same as working with a major studio's specialty label, a move that brings with it additional pressures regarding actors, style, and narrative content; rather, it is a fairly common practice for independent and art house directors to work in commercials as a means of getting a paycheck in between, and sometimes for funding, feature film projects. However, this contrast with Bahrani's earlier microbudget

production mode, during which his only non-filmmaking work was occasional teaching at Columbia University, does show how movement toward an Indiewood mode entails becoming more imbricated in an economically dominant cultural production sector, beyond just working directly alongside studios.

Each film also had a significantly larger budget than the films of the American Dream trilogy, with *At Any Price* reportedly made for \$4-5 million and *99 Homes* with a production budget of \$8 million. This is no doubt in part due to the involvement of Hollywood actors like Dennis Quaid, Zac Efron, Andrew Garfield, Michael Shannon, and Laura Dern.²¹ This reciprocal relationship between attracting participation from recognizable Hollywood names and a resulting budget that necessitates broader commercial viability is a key component of Indiewood productions (Tzioumakis, *American* 37). Geoff King argues the historical movement to an Indiewood model of production resulted in an "increasing tendency to favor more conservative or star-led properties," as the involvement of studios' specialty labels and the cost of paying Hollywood stars drove up budgets and reconfigured what was deemed financially successful (*Indiewood* 110). On this last point, both films were clear financial failures when measured against their respective budgets, with *At Any Price* earning \$487,965 worldwide and *99 Homes'* worldwide gross coming in at \$1,828,232.

The question of whether the larger budgets Bahrani was offered necessitated the involvement of Hollywood stars or whether the star-led production demands of each film necessitated higher budgets leads to a chicken-or-egg situation. Rather, there is a concomitant and mutually evolving relationship between the resources available and the approach to telling each story. It's fair to assume that if Bahrani wanted to continue working in a microbudget mode using non-professional actors he could have, and it's not difficult to imagine broadly similar

versions of each film made with non-professional actors, on limited sets, with an aesthetic like that of the American Dream films. That said, there are distinct aspects of each film's execution that would not have been possible without higher budgets and additional production capabilities, so there is good reason to suspect that the availability of Indiewood-level resources shaped Bahrani's sense of what was possible in production.

For example, the stock car racing sequences in *At Any Price* are far more technically challenging than anything Bahrani had filmed prior, something he credits with "having the resources to handle some action sequences" in addition to the more mundane demands of the story (Goldrich). While he jokes in interviews about being asked to direct "the next *Fast and the Furious*," these sequences would in fact be right at home in a summer blockbuster. The rapid editing between multiple in-car and exterior camera angles during the action and visceral sequences of scraping metal and collisions (not to mention significantly more complicated sound editing) are a far cry from the most technically demanding scenes Bahrani had shot prior to this film: *Goodbye Solo*'s nighttime driving sequences, requiring a standard process trailer and a crew of about 20 people. *99 Homes* doesn't feature any of the same sort of technically challenging sequences. Yet, it does make use of many more distinct shooting locations that wouldn't be accessible via Bahrani and Michael Simmonds' earlier non-permit, under-the-radar guerilla shooting style. We consistently see Carver and Nash in expensive repossessed homes, in sequences that make extensive use of multiple exterior and interior shots, many of which would require advance setup—hardly the kind of filming a small, guerilla-style crew could get away with.

Even the shift toward more "star-led properties" seems to register for Bahrani not as a fundamental change in production mode or approach, but as presenting alternative options for

achieving a particular kind of performance and audience response. He regards the frequent independent practice of star casting not in terms of box office appeal but rather with curiosity about what it enables. Much like the personalities and experiences of the American Dream films' non-professional casts shaped their characters and performances before filming began, here the unavoidable offscreen baggage brought by recognizable stars made certain characterizations possible. Bahrani notes that choosing Dennis Quaid for the co-lead role was linked directly with his persona as a multi-decade Hollywood star, having cultivated a particular kind of "iconic" status at the intersection of wide-smiling, charismatic "glad-handing" charmer and the dramatic gravity of someone who's "gone to space" (referencing, as seems to be required in pieces about *At Any Price*, Quaid's role in *The Right Stuff*). Bahrani points out that it wasn't these qualities in and of themselves that put Quaid in mind for the role, but rather that he could play against them: that "all these things could be turned upside down" (Anderson). The presence of Hollywood actors in this case is positioned not in opposition to an independent ethos or authenticity of vision, but as simply another means of addressing certain audience expectations and reception.

This is a common Indiewood practice in which star casting pivots to casting against type: a recognizable and bankable Hollywood star is cast in order to widen the commercial reach of a movie by appealing to viewers who may not otherwise take note of smaller independent films. Here the process of watching Quaid's superficially friendly, charming persona crack under increasing desperation to reveal a cold and ethically compromised cut-throat capitalist runs parallel to viewers' evolving understanding of Whipple himself. In the star-casting mode then, this meta-awareness of Quaid-as-actor is meant to underscore the dramatic stakes of the narrative while also allowing the audience to admire the dramatic range of a Hollywood star. Such a move by actors was seen increasingly during the Indiewood period as a career-minded trade-off, with

such productions offsetting the reduced financial incentive of an indie paycheck by offering stars an opportunity to show their range and accumulate artistic and cultural capital. Star casting as a kind of industry manipulation is only possible because audience awareness of an actor's prior roles and public persona shapes reception.

In some ways Bahrani is making use of similar audience manipulation tools in the casting process as he did with the American Dream films. The production and marketing narratives around the involvement of non-professional actors primed audiences to situate these performances into a meta-narrative about the actors-as-their-characters, with the un-polished acting styles and seemingly improvised line delivery ultimately channeled into the films' larger appeal to documentary realism. In *At Any Price* (and potentially even more so in *99 Homes*) the acting style is clearly, markedly different—the most "naturalistic" things get is that Bahrani asked Quaid and Efron to forego typical hair and makeup before shooting. Yet his awareness and incorporation of their movie star profiles into the films' characterizations reveals a similar willingness to use meta/extra-textual audience knowledge to position reception. The budgetary constraints of the earlier films made it necessary to identify what kinds of performances Bahrani could get from non-professional actors, who he saw as bringing an intensity and rawness that the polished styles of professional actors couldn't. In turn these possible performance styles were worked into the broader stylistic and aesthetic approach of the films. However, these values are context-dependent, not attached to some absolute or inflexible sense of independent directorial vision but rather a means of achieving a particular stripped-down realist effect given the available production resources. With the shift to star casting in *At Any Price* we see a similarly adaptive attitude, with Bahrani praising the range and finely tuned calibration of Quaid's

performance, saying of the role, "I would not have been able to do it with a nonprofessional" ("Tribeca Film Festival").

Performed Authenticity

The necessity of star casting and a more controlled and structured production mode leads to a more superficially performed authenticity in both films. Sherry Ortner argues that while much attention is given to their specific narrative or stylistic content, independent films are often “counter-hegemonic” in their production, with their very means of constructing themselves functioning as industrial critique (Ortner 10). Per Ortner, this counter-hegemonic critical function takes place discursively not just in "the nature of the films themselves"—the characters and narratives represented, and the formal elements employed—but also on the “level of cultures and practices,” the production styles and paratextual dialogues positioning independent films to receptive audiences (30). Here we can see Bahrani struggling to maintain the counter-hegemonic nature of many of the alternative production modes he embraced when making the American Dream films. He often attempts to recreate a similar kind of research-informed authenticity and contingency within the stricter production, staging, and shooting practices of mid-level Indiewood productions. Yet compared with the maneuverability of his earlier guerilla-style shooting, the significantly more restrictive conventions and the presence of a more formalized marketing and promotion-level discourse limit the degree of contingency and adaptability with which Bahrani can operate. While still not exercising the level of control filmmakers traditionally face on Hollywood productions, these industrial restrictions ultimately shape the broader representational and narrative elements of the finished films in more noticeable ways than the economic and industrial restrictions imposed on the films in chapter 1.

Despite his professional actors not bringing real-world biographical experience to their character portrayals, the role of location and place in pre-production research remained important to Bahrani. Much like his process for the American Dream films, Bahrani spent a lot of pre-production time doing on-site research. He stayed with farm families in Iowa and Indiana for 6 months while writing the screenplay for *At Any Price*, an experience he references frequently when discussing the messaging and ideological lens of the film ("Tribeca Film Festival" + Anderson). Similarly, while researching *99 Homes* he traveled with real estate brokers in Florida and witnessed evictions, which he describes as "even worse than what the movie shows" (Murphy, NY Times). His research into the housing crisis and the often loosely regulated activities of real estate brokers in Florida made such an impact in fact that it necessitated a shift in the style and generic conventions of the finished film. Bahrani frames himself as a passive observer and conduit through which this research shaped itself into a screenplay, saying "I went down [to Florida] to write a social drama, but when I saw all the guns and the violence and the scams and the corruption and the pacing of everything, the location told me 'no, you will write this in another way'" (*99 Homes*, Director's Commentary).

Garfield and Shannon did some of their own on-site research as well: Garfield met with families who had been evicted while briefly living in a roadside motel in Florida, and Shannon met with real estate brokers, refusing to attend any evictions but going with a broker on several post-eviction walkthroughs of homes that had been repossessed as shown in the film. While this is a fairly common move among Hollywood actors researching roles, Bahrani embraced a collaborative relationship with both actors based on their own independent character research, funneling their observations and feelings into revisions of the script. He specifically notes that he talked to Garfield nightly while the latter was living in an Orlando motel like the one the Nash

family moves into in the film. Garfield's own thoughts and reflections about the experience made their way into the script, specifically in how the setting echoed the ironic juxtapositions of *Chop Shop*, located "on Highway 142, which leads to Disney World" (Mitchell). It's evident how the collaborative process established with his non-professional actors on the American Dream films carried over and informed Bahrani's approach here, with a similar emphasis on "authenticity" translated to screen via experience.

Yet Bahrani's attempts to bring researched elements of "real life" into the films' representations of a particular experience are here significantly limited and shaped (and in some cases curtailed completely) by the conventions of Indiewood-style filmmaking. First and foremost, a globally recognized Hollywood star's brief secondhand foray into the experience of poverty and housing instability is obviously not the same as non-professional actors bringing their lifetime experiences to a role. The discourse around authenticity and realism stemming from a materially bound and minimalist approach on the earlier films here gives way to a more typical studio-connected kind of socio-economic and emotional tourism. In interviews Garfield even gives typical indie talking points about how "important" films like this are, subtly elevating the actors' roles in "honoring the people who are living it every day" and praising Bahrani's "dedication" to the material (Mitchell). It's not necessarily that the discourse becomes more superficial or inherently disingenuous in the move to an Indiewood mode—the notions of authenticity and realism discussed in chapter 1 are also trafficked in independent cinema as a means of positioning particular directors', films', or studios' cultural capital and value. Rather, the desire to *seem* authentic, especially within marketing and journalism discourse, takes priority over actual ontological questions of authenticity or realism.²²

This reflects a self-expressed desire on part of the independent sector to perform cultural criticism by acting as a mirror of "dark realities in contemporary life" through films which "make demands on the viewer to viscerally experience and come to grips with those realities" (Ortner 29). While these "demands" are often tied to questions of textual authenticity as discussed in chapter 1, this broader desire to function as cultural criticism is constantly re-articulated in marketing discourse around independent films, as in Garfield's comments above. In fact, the perception of one's own participation within a field of cultural critique is often seen as one of the incentives for Hollywood actors to participate in Indiewood-level productions in the first place. The cultural capital gained by taking part in such non-studio (but always studio-adjacent) productions comes from a mutually reinforcing relationship: the opportunity to participate in more artistically challenging roles brings with it the possibility of awards and accolades, and these accolades and the prestige of such roles is often undergirded and reinforced by a sense of social importance or responsibility. In this way many Indiewood productions participate in a discourse that both creates and sustains itself, even without a direct connection to questions of ontological realism-in-representation that motivated the production decisions of the American Dream films. This still leaves the question about what audiences are being asked to accept as "real" and how these versions of contemporary life are being selected for representation (vs. what was selected for the films of chapter 1).

Filming Local(s)

While the role of place retained a similar significance to those of the American Dream films in Bahrani and his actors' pre-production research, the movement to more studio-influenced production practices necessitated more controlled and formally demarcated sets. This brought with it yet another shift in representational mode: in the American Dream films specific places

essentially represented themselves and were treated as live sets to blur distinctions between real and narrative/created fictional space; in *At Any Price* and *99 Homes*, recreations of the rural Midwest and Florida, respectively, act as purely symbolic representations. For budget reasons the latter was shot almost entirely in New Orleans, standing in for Orlando, Florida. *At Any Price* was shot in DeKalb, IL and takes place somewhere in Iowa. The most specific geographical reference point we ever get comes early on when a character refers to the family of a recently deceased farmer as "living down in the big city of St. Louis."

These locations have their own symbolic value (returned to below), but moving into an Indiewood production mode changed the degree to which Bahrani was able to co-opt the natural unpredictability of live sets during shooting. For that reason, it's worth discussing the ways Bahrani and crew attempted to recreate the contingency and ontological connections to real-world places forged in the filming practices of the films in chapter 1. Bahrani took advantage of relationships and connections made during pre-production research on both films in order to get permission to film on a number of homes and farm locations. In *At Any Price* he got agreement from family farmers in Dekalb to use their farm as a stand in for the Whipple's property, and he got similar permissions from homeowners in New Orleans for a number of the expensive repossessed homes Carver and Nash live and work in throughout *99 Homes*. He also notes that a significant number of the extras—townspeople and other local farmers Henry encounters—were played by actual townspeople and farmers Bahrani or various members of the cast and crew had met, continuing to a less prominent or immediately visible degree his earlier trend of casting "real" people to play themselves.

The early stock car sequences in *At Any Price* were also partially filmed at a track in Sycamore, IL that had been family owned for generations and whose family Bahrani says

"believed in dreams and in our dream to make this movie, so they let us shoot [t]here"

(Commentary). These scenes were shot over the course of 2 ½ days, though Bahrani says he thinks they could have done 5 days. He credits their ability to get these scenes shot convincingly and within budget on this timeline purely to the voluntary participation of the local community: people in the area, drivers and extras, brought their cars out and filled the set in order to get the setup shots before and after the race sequences themselves. These are not just establishing shots of audiences in stands—there are several dialogue-heavy exchanges between Dean and his family as well as other drivers, set against a backdrop of a fully operating track. Dennis Quaid notes his surprise several times at how Bahrani had "a way of making the film look like it [cost] millions of dollars more," with these race sequences as a prime example.

In a few circumstances, these research-based relationships also allowed very limited filming on live sets. In these cases, the clout and professional connections of studio-adjacent Indiewood-style filmmaking may have opened up opportunities that wouldn't have been available to Bahrani working in his earlier microbudget mode. However, his familiarity and facility in working with actors on live sets to achieve specific, intended results also enabled the productions to get more out of these scenes for less. For example, Bahrani was allowed to film briefly on the site of a New Orleans mansion that was under construction for the scene that introduces Andrew Garfield's character in *99 Homes*. Talking about this decision he emphasizes the same interrelation of economic necessity and aesthetic qualities discussed in relation to the American Dream films in chapter 1, saying that while such a move is "economically in your favor... it adds a life and energy to the scene just to toss [the actors] in there" (Commentary).

Similarly, the scenes before and after Dean's first professional race were shot on a live set at an actual track on race day. The effect is a sense of frenetic energy and scale that contrasts

appropriately with the earlier stock car racing sequences filmed at the family-owned, community populated Sycamore, IL track. Those earlier sequences feel so convincing in part because it's clear the principle actors' interactions are taking place in an actual location bustling with hundreds of extras, conveying a sense of life and familiarity even though it's a purely constructed set. In this later professional racing sequence, the contrasting unpredictability and general indifference of an actual live set helps to create the impression that Dean—well known by all the locals at his community track—is no longer the "big fish in a small pond." This narratively important contrast between small town familiarity and the broader social indifference of professional racing ends up being echoed by and embodied in the sets themselves.

Negotiating Control and Uncertainty

There is also some continuity with the contingent and adaptive production practices of chapter 1, but here those practices are manufactured within and fitted to a more traditional studio approach to production. Even though live sets couldn't often be used to incorporate real-world locations and activity into the filming process (with exceptions noted above), Bahrani did attempt to incorporate a kind of contingency to a greater degree than larger, more traditionally studio-modeled sets would allow. *99 Homes* is an especially noteworthy example here for the emotional intensity and controlled chaos of its eviction scenes, the faux-"documentary" aesthetic of which is discussed in greater detail in the next section. Of the scripting process he describes a similar sort of structured improvisation as on the first three films: his and the actors' research results in "a very detailed script for the scene based on how [eviction] really happens," within which he then "allow[s] the actors the freedom to improvise within that structure" (Murphy).

Bahrani and cinematographer Bobby Bukowski went so far as to light the Nash home entirely through high-power exterior lighting and interior practical lighting so that during the

eviction scene—shot with two handheld cameras simultaneously—the actors could move freely wherever they wanted throughout the house without having to worry about hitting lighting or grip equipment.²³ Rather than stitching together multiple shots from different discrete sets—one for the entryway, one for each bedroom, one for the kitchen, etc.—to create the illusion of a unified space, the sequence is shot in real time with two simultaneous single takes and cut together using footage from both. This all creates a kind of planned uncertainty. Regardless of rehearsals and other preparations made ahead of time, this approach to filming guarantees there will be specific factors actors will have to respond to in the moment, with these in-character improvised reactions caught on camera.

This approach carried over to shorter, less pivotal scenes later in film, during which Nash works on Carver's behalf to remove property from repossessed homes, offer Cash for Keys settlements to foreclosed-upon homeowners, and carry out evictions. To create a degree of uncertainty and anxiety that mirrored Nash's subjective state during these sequences, Bahrani employed a mixture of actors, non-professional actors, and often a property's actual homeowners, never telling Garfield who was and was not a professional performer. In some cases, this involved no more than precise extra casting, such as hiring actual eviction movers for the various eviction sequences. In others Bahrani employed strategies he used on the *American Dream* films (and to a lesser extent in *At Any Price*), inserting non-professional actors into a scene to create an arguably more authentic degree of unpredictability and tension. This is especially significant during scenes in which homeowners are playing themselves in their own houses. (A choice that again doubled as economically beneficial: Bahrani notes that he was able to get many additional shooting locations by convincing people to let them shoot briefly in and around their homes.) During these scenes, Bahrani gave Garfield "essentially the script for a real estate broker" so that

he was effectively following the spiel normally given to people about to be evicted and had to respond to their often unscripted responses on the fly. This approach illustrates a kind of hybrid filmmaking in which Bahrani pulls on his experience and knowledge of how non-professional actors and live sets added a degree of energy, contingency, and documentary authenticity to the earlier films. Here he works to create a similar degree of contingency on controlled sets, and the result is that these scenes—many of which are intercut together during montages—carry much more narrative and subjective weight while still embracing something akin to the earlier films' aesthetic of authenticity.

In interviews promoting the film Bahrani even notes that he referenced his prior work with non-professional actors on set as a way of motivating more raw and uncalibrated performances from Garfield and Shannon. Noting that both actors were nervous about Bahrani's refusal to shoot coverage during the several highly charged long-take eviction sequences in *99 Homes*, he referenced his work on his earlier films, telling the Hollywood stars "my non-actors... were never nervous" (Schmidlin). Beyond just teasing, this reads as a conscious attempt to break down his actors' sense of comfort and safety in something like coverage, which would traditionally be able to smooth over imperfections in one take or another. By forcing the actors to rely on unbroken long takes during these emotionally fraught scenes, Bahrani is attempting to recreate some of the unpredictable conditions of live sets. He is also evoking a discursive sense of non-professional actors' fearlessness or willingness to work outside of traditional production conventions as a means in itself of eliciting a particular kind of performance. These practices are then fed back into the discourse positioning the films and performances via notions of "authenticity."

These practices are part of an approach to the Indiewood model of production that ultimately complicates notions of directorial control within the independent sector. On the earlier films discussed in chapter 1, Bahrani embraced a lack of control, to some extent necessitated by the economic and material restrictions of the productions. On *At Any Price* and *99 Homes* he attempted to retain a paradoxically strict control over every element of production, even and especially when working to re-create some of the contingency and unpredictability of the earlier films. Some of this seems tied to expected, run-of-the-mill directorial obsession, as when Bahrani notes that he avoids using second units and even casts extras himself when he's able rather than allowing someone else to do it. And yet at other times Bahrani's attempts to negotiate the degree of oversight he was used to on his prior, microbudget guerilla-style work reveals a site of potential within the more strict confines and established practices of Indiewood production.

For instance, Bahrani recalls being frustrated and worried with Dennis Quaid, who showed up to production on *At Any Price* directly from another movie and was "in a foul mood, mumbling and refusing to rehearse." He was so worried that he went to Quaid's hotel at 10:30 the night before the first day of shooting to confront him. Feeling something was off, he called Werner Herzog, who he knew from his voiceover work in Bahrani's short *Plastic Bag*. Herzog chastised Bahrani, saying, "[Quaid] is a 30-year professional, he doesn't need to rehearse. When you turn on the camera, he'll deliver" (Director's Commentary). Bahrani is routinely effusive about Quaid's performance in press for the film, frequently relating one anecdote or another about his ability to intuit what the director wanted without him having to say it. It's almost possible to track Bahrani's sense of discovery in real time here—that professionally trained actors have skillsets to offer that are not necessarily better or worse than non-professionals, but that can be equally effective while distinctly different. While that's relatively obvious, it also undermines

some of the narratives of authenticity circulated around the use of non-professional actors discussed in chapter 1 (and echoed around so many similar low-budget independent films that tilt toward social realism).

Another Indiewood convention that threatened to reduce Bahrani's control over the production was the extremely tight shooting schedule necessitated by the involvement of Hollywood actors. Bahrani had only 29 days to shoot *At Any Price*, reflecting, "I almost had more time on my smaller films." This meant breaking up production to fit his stars' schedules, noting he shot for 2 weeks and then Quaid and Efron left to shoot other movies before coming back to finish their scenes. To prepare for this short, inflexible production schedule and to make the most of their actual shooting time, Bahrani called on a strategy from the production of *Chop Shop*: he shot the whole movie on a handi-cam before principal shooting began, using himself and other crew as stand-ins for the actors. This allowed him and Simmonds to effectively shoot, edit, and assemble an entire rough cut in order to get a sense of pacing and visualize certain changes that might be required in blocking or camera setups at each shooting location. So while many scenes were planned and shot in such a way as to leave room for contingency and unpredictability, this flexibility was a product of Bahrani's prior microbudget experience. The techniques that enabled Bahrani to be highly adaptable while shooting the American Dream films here enabled a strict control in response to the very different limitations of an Indiewood production.

Many of the above-mentioned practices show Bahrani adapting a more studio-influenced production mode to his own ends via techniques gleaned from his earlier microbudget films. Such practices are frequently evident of a typical model of "crossover" success, in which a director's films in the independent sector act as a calling card to studio-affiliated work. Often one's status as an indie filmmaker carries over into the discourse around their first studio

production, with thematic and aesthetic threads and occasionally a kind of production ethos being tied back to their earlier work. However, Bahrani is still working in too independent of a mode to neatly fit the model of a crossover filmmaker here, and he is also clearly not capitulating entirely to the demands and restrictions of studio-influenced production. This is neither clearly pushing against or falling in line with accepted notions of Indiewood, in which some control is ceded to the dominant cultural institution for expanded visibility and access to additional resources.

Rather, Bahrani is eagerly embracing the expanded resources of this model while attempting to recreate many of the elements of his earlier productions that arose out of and in response to economic boundness and material restrictions. This functions as a way of smuggling in previously subversive, anti-hegemonic practices into a filmmaking system that typically enforces deference to mainstream narratives and cultural values. It also illustrates the nebulous ways "realism" and "authenticity" as perceptual and textual qualities are tied to relative notions of hegemonic and hierarchical control. Directorial control over production elements in this case results in a discursive and aesthetic/textual sense of authenticity that is positioned in opposition to control imposed by "the system," be that the studio system, financiers and executives, or mainstream narratives.

Form and Aesthetics

The production shifts described above also correspond with stylistic changes in *At Any Price* and *99 Homes*. Both of these move away from the realist minimalism of the American Dream films toward styles that embrace more classical modes of audience address. Both films feature a more traditional structure, with a distinct conflict leading up to an emotionally and stylistically heightened climax, the stakes of which are clearly established in their opening

scenes. Some of this is inextricably linked with the movement into a higher-budget, more studio-modeled mode of filmmaking that necessitates broader marketability. However, as with many of the production elements discussed above, the imposition of these additional stylistic boundaries create opportunities as well as barriers to Bahrani's anti-capitalist and anti-hegemonic approach. Below I'll quickly describe the films' styles, followed by a reading of the opening sequences from each film—both of which are clear departures from the minimal realism of the films discussed in chapter 1. These sequences also exhibit distinct differences from each other, particularly in their generic and narrative modes, which help articulate each films' mode of audience address. Finally, I'll close with a discussion of how each film's ending disrupts the expectations set by these opening scenes and by the more traditional and generic styles of the films themselves.

At Any Price: Classical Narrative and Hollywood Style

At Any Price resembles the classical invisible style in its use of traditional framing and editing, with few formal touches that are likely to take the audience's attention off the narrative action. In contrast to the objective, realist approach of the earlier films, the vast majority of scenes follow the rules of typical continuity editing, with dialogue edited in shot-reverse shot sequence, the use of standard establishing shots, and no unconventional camera placement or movement. The action feels intuitive and natural, but not realist (which, as articulated in chapter one, can actually call more attention to itself than the aesthetic and formal elements described here). Michael Simmonds remained Bahrani's cinematographer for this film, and he maintains still, often distanced compositions in which the urban frenetic energy of *Man Push Cart* and *Chop Shop* is replaced by an empty-feeling pastoral calm. Calling even more attention to the artifice of the American Dream trilogy's realist aesthetic, Simmonds' continued use of static

tripod shots here yields strikingly different, and ordinary, results compared to the apparent urban chaos of so many scenes from the earlier films.

At Any Price follows a traditional plot structure, with a clear conflict introduced early on and building to a third-act climax. We're introduced to Henry Whipple (Quaid), a third-generation farmer and seed salesman for the Monsanto-esque, ironically named Liberty Seeds. Henry pulls his son Dean around with him on sales trips and to meetings, excited to pass down the family business to his youngest, who in turn has dreams of driving for NASCAR. We soon learn Henry is under investigation by Liberty for washing and reselling their genetically modified seeds from one growing season to the next. Henry explains the crime to Dean's girlfriend Cadence, likening Liberty's ownership of specific seed genetics to copyright over a pirated DVD. The dialogue in this scene is so calculated and on-the-nose that it also makes clear Bahrani's stance on big agriculture. Replacing the semi-improvisational nature of the films of chapter 1, this conversation ends with an ideologically loaded statement from Henry, who tells Cadence, "These guys didn't just copyright movies, they copyrighted life." The rest of the film follows parallel plot threads: Henry's attempts to cover up his illegal activity and find out who reported him to Liberty in the first place, and Dean's attempts to break into the professional racing scene.

Contrasted with the more subtle visual symbolism persistent in the backgrounds and settings of the American Dream films, Bahrani leans hard on traditional narrative symbolism and foreshadowing devices in *At Any Price*. A side plot about Henry's rivalry with another local farmer, Jim Johnson (played by Clancy Brown), for the title of Liberty's #1 regional salesman foreshadows a moment late in the film when Dean accidentally kills Johnson's son in a fight. The murder, and Henry helping Dean to cover it up, is what seals the latter's fate in giving up his

racing dreams to stay and follow in his father's footsteps working the farm. Even though this subplot runs in the background to the Liberty investigation for most of the film, it involves more narrative development and is loaded with more overt symbolic significance than the entire plots of any of the American Dream trilogy. Even the title clearly foregrounds the film's stance on Whipple's increasingly desperate capitalist ethics: securing his family legacy "at any price," even his own moral standards. Additionally, Bahrani uses the highly formalist move of a voiceover for some of Grant's letters and postcards, lending Henry's oldest son a continuous, lingering offscreen presence through which he takes on a symbolic significance that frames much of Henry and Dean's relationship. Grant's relative freedom traveling the world—only returning to the family as a disembodied voiceover—frames both Dean's desire to leave and ultimately the tragic quality of having to embrace his generational inheritance.

99 Homes: Subjective Style and Contemporary Politics

99 Homes employs more overt stylization than Bahrani's prior films—faster pacing, flashier camerawork, and ideologically loaded dialogue—to evoke a broader cultural and political sense of panic and indignation over the housing crisis. It is by far the least ambiguous of Bahrani's films up to this point. Much like with *At Any Price*, the title itself reflects the film's moral and ethical terms up front. The audience is likely to recognize the symbolic value of "99" homes, as the number invokes the familiar rhetoric of "the 99%" employed by Occupy Wall Street to refer to income inequality and the upward concentration of wealth. In fact much of the dialogue in the film directly references specific political rhetoric of the moment. Carver's frequent references to "winners and losers" when lecturing Nash about his role in the U.S. economic system directly references the Trumpian rhetoric that would hit critical mass in the pre-election cycle by the time *99 Homes* was in wide release. Ari Mattes argues that these overt

references to current political rhetoric lead to the American Dream being "nostalgically critiqued in *99 Homes*, which (in an almost Capraesque fashion) draws attention to the inequality sustained and promoted by the 2008 financial crisis" (639).

The story follows Dennis Nash, a local Orlando contractor whose family home is foreclosed on by the bank. Forced to move his family into a motel—which is occupied almost exclusively by other recently evicted locals—he eventually starts doing work for the real estate broker who evicted him, Rick Carver. Nash is initially conflicted about working for Carver, doing so begrudgingly only to save up enough to move his family back into a home. Eventually he takes on more and more work, getting deeper into Carver's orbit and becoming more familiar with the various scams and tricks he and other brokers use to profit off of foreclosures. *99 Homes* builds to a crisis of conscience for Nash when he's asked to deliver forged foreclosure notices to a court proceeding to help Carver repossess the home of a family introduced earlier in the movie.

99 Homes was Bahrani's first film not shot by Michael Simmonds. New cinematographer Bobby Bukowski brings a much more visibly edited, stylized, sometimes handheld look and feel appropriate to a genre thriller. The film was shot on a mix of Steadicam and handheld cameras, with the cinematography taking a more direct and formal role in evoking subjective states compared to the more objective camera of the American Dream films. In the earlier films, subjectivity was often constructed in relation to the landscape or via juxtaposition. The frequent slow crawl of the Steadicam here is more active and dynamic than Simmonds' tripod setups, evoking the perpetual forward momentum of both the eviction process and Nash's ethical and moral descent. Handheld cameras are used primarily for claustrophobic and confrontational scenes inside homes as well as for more intimate family moments. Bahrani and Bukowski also used a 24mm lens to film closeups of Andrew Garfield during certain more emotionally

subjective sequences. These closeups emphasize a subjective state in a direct, more obviously formally manipulative way, creating the sense of an encroaching realization or the weight of a situation Nash can no longer avoid. These moments stand out stylistically from the rest of the film and are in especially stark contrast to the invisible style of *At Any Price*, much less the ragged minimalism of the American Dream trilogy.

The pacing of *99 Homes* is also heightened, again formally suggesting the conventions and expectations of a thriller. Bahrani sped up everything in *99 Homes*—the editing is faster, the dialogue is often sharper and snappier, the character changes and narrative shifts happen very quickly. Nash moves from doing odd jobs for Carver to running involved scams and overseeing full crews of workers over the course of a few montages. When he first pockets a portion of cash from a Cash for Keys deal and lies to his crew about their share, Bahrani lingers on his expression for 2 or 3 seconds and then moves on to the next scene. In fact, most major narrative shifts are given a matter of seconds to set in before moving on to the next plot point—such as when Nash first agrees to help with Carver’s evictions, or when he negotiates his role in the larger real estate deal that sets up the film’s final act. Bahrani notes this was an intentional effort to make the form mimic the bewildering pace at which so many evictions happen, inspired in part by the real-world "rocket docket" foreclosure courts we see represented early on, where a judge rules on Nash's foreclosure in 60 seconds.

Verisimilitude and Realism

This last point raises again the notion of verisimilitude discussed in relation to the various aspects of textual authenticity cultivated in the American Dream films. The earlier films were structured to mimic the often arbitrary, repetitive, and monotonous nature of the characters' daily lives as opposed to the more strictly causal logic of most Hollywood plots, aiming for a narrative

verisimilitude-in-mimesis. The plots of *At Any Price* and *99 Homes* are structured in fairly traditional fashion, establishing a conflict with clear stakes and working toward a climax and resolution—mimicking not the rhythms of everyday life but the conventions of mainstream storytelling. That there are recognizable conventions being employed right from the start is important not just in situating the films within an Indiewood model and style, but also for how such conventions appeal to audiences' expectations about the "reality(ies)" about to be represented.

Steve Neale's discussion of verisimilitude in relation to genre is helpful here in clarifying how the more traditional style(s) and mainstream conventions of Indiewood impose a different relationship to socio-cultural "authenticity" than the textual immediacy of the American Dream trilogy. To be clear, Indiewood is a production sector, not a genre, but Neale makes a point to note that contexts of production, exhibition, and marketing/discourse also convey verisimilar conventions and expectations (38-39). Here the intersections of studio-affiliated production and increased financial investment necessitate an appeal to what are perceived to be the commercially lucrative white upper-middle class target audiences for Indiewood films. The terms of this audience appeal impose similarly recognizable narrative and stylistic frameworks, especially given each film's self-presentation as an "issue movie." This is particularly important given Bahrani's (and his actors') continued emphasis on the films accurately reflecting the current national events and experiences being represented.

This in turn is reflected in marketing for each film and the narratives through which its ideological import is positioned to audiences and entertainment press. The pre-screening introduction for *At Any Price* at the Toronto Film Festival included Bahrani and his cast telling stories of Midwest farmers struggling under the "Expand or Die" ethos depicted in the film, and

Bahrani was praised for his "incisive examination of character and of societal power structures." The marketing efforts for *99 Homes* similarly addressed audiences in terms of the socioeconomic issues at the root of the story, employing some of the same familiar neoliberal logic and values the film critiques. Broad Green Pictures promoted a "*99 Homes: 99 Good Deeds Initiative*," partnering with 20 local organizations in major U.S. cities ahead of the theatrical premiere to "encourage individuals to perform one good deed to help a member of their community and to underscore the positive impact that even the smallest amounts of assistance can have." Such an initiative serves as an obvious marketing ploy: it gave Broad Green an opportunity to hold "benefit screenings" in several cities to help build word of mouth in advance of the film's national opening. Even the title of the promotion (repeating "99") ensures more recognition for the name of the film. The language here emphasizes that neoliberal value of individual responsibility, placing the burden on individuals to help lift each other out of poverty. It is somewhat ironic, though not at all unexpected, that marketing targeting more economically empowered upper-middle class audiences would appeal to the same neoliberal values of individual autonomy and empowerment that the film seeks to undercut and complicate.

Neale defines verisimilitude broadly as a "recognition" and "understanding" of what is plausible given both specific textual qualities and cultural expectations (31). Verisimilitude in this context isn't so much a textual mimesis of daily recognizable experience as it is a mechanism through which films assure audiences that what they're seeing aligns with preconceived notions of what is true—that which is plausible or expected given prior experience. This happens simultaneously on two overlapping levels: at the level of generic expectations (what is expected according to audience-recognized narrative and stylistic conventions) and at the level of social and cultural discourse (what seems believable or realistic in relation to larger discourse and

cultural narratives). This notion of verisimilitude is therefore important in thinking about the more Hollywood-influenced formal and stylistic shifts Bahrani is embracing here—even if the films do not adhere strictly to a single major genre—because these conventions determine how the films establish authenticity and prompt audience trust that what we're seeing accurately reflects some larger social "reality."

Furthermore, such conventions can work to homogenize and promote a dominant cultural narrative in the face of audience diversity, aligning with the homogenizing forces of more studio-affiliated Indiewood production. Neale notes that the expectations of verisimilar authenticity audiences bring to bear on the film during the viewing process are likely to vary at least slightly from individual to individual. Yet at the same time, generic conventions at the Indiewood level are working to reinforce a notion of “reality” that audiences are meant to subscribe to. The “recognition” that happens here applies not just to formal and stylistic conventions but also to particular cultural narratives meant to situate the narrative action within a paradigmatic worldview.

At Any Price: Nostalgia and Discursivity

In the opening scenes of *At Any Price*, Bahrani uses a documentary/home movies aesthetic and nostalgic framing to both establish a cultural narrative and situate primarily white, upper-middle-class audiences within this shared notion of "reality" (here rendered as a version of history the film will ultimately critique). The film opens with its only departure from the classical invisible style: a mix of actual historical documentary footage with faux-home movie footage shot by Bahrani and Simmonds. What appears to be old newsreel and/or documentary footage of farmers progresses from pre-depression black and white footage up through images of increasingly modern farming, contrasting equipment like technologically advanced tractors and

irrigation systems with early wood-and-steel plows. As the footage continues, we start seeing home videos of the Whipple family (at a backyard cookout, racing stock cars, harvesting corn from their field) situating the recognizably fictional family within not just a long diegetic history of farming but also a very distinctly American cultural memory.

The fact that audiences are going to recognize Dennis Quaid and Zac Efron as the footage shifts to the Whipple family—if not also Kim Dickens, Red West, and the other actors involved—is significant in that it draws attention to the faux-documentary aesthetic as a formal choice. Part of the aesthetic of *Man Push Cart* and *Chop Shop* relied on the audience not being able to reliably tell the non-professional actors and bystanders apart during busy scenes on Manhattan streets or in Willets Point. Here the formal characteristics of documentary film (broadened to include home movies in this case) suggest what we're seeing is "real" non-fiction footage before that assumption is undercut by the sudden framing of the fictional narrative within the same formal terms. Such a move is certainly not rare or innovative, especially when trying to quickly situate the characters and events of a film within a recognizable historical or cultural context. Yet while not apparent from the outset, this bit of formally manipulative framing introduces a sentiment that will be echoed louder and louder as the film progresses: questioning with subtle skepticism how "real" or accurate certain widely accepted nostalgic and historical notions of farming are. Through this introductory sequence the audience understands intuitively that the fictional Whipple's are representative of "real" American farmers while simultaneously having the reality and authenticity of the previous footage (and the notions of American farming it presents) called into question.

Nostalgia here functions as one of Neale's "regimes of verisimilitude," prompting audiences to "recognize" a particular historical narrative and a cultural historical discourse within

which to understand the events that follow. Bahrani even uses some familiar language of nostalgia when describing why he put this sequence at the beginning of the film, saying he wanted the audience to get "a sense of what it used to be like in the old days." Dennis Quaid echoes this sense of a nostalgic version of the past being invoked by this early footage, describing it as an image of the "idyllic family farm that used to be" (Commentary). This language indicates a conscious effort to construct and evoke for the audience a kind of shared imaginary, one that aligns with and caters to the dominant cultural narratives of primarily white upper-middle class audiences. This is also the only time in the film we see Grant, the otherwise-absent older son who leaves home to play football as the movie starts and is heard from periodically throughout the film as he updates the family on his world travels. Grant's voiceovers get to the point of being almost parodic in tone, as the various adventures he describes get progressively grander—at one point casually revealing he's decided to go climb the Himalayas—always in response to Henry's continued insistence that the prodigal son is on the verge of returning home. Seen here in home movie footage, Grant becomes representative of a nostalgic past that also serves to motivate Henry's actions throughout the narrative.

Leaving a legacy is so important for Henry in part because he sees it as a kind of return to this earlier period. He is driven primarily by the need to not "let down" his own father, who passed on the farm to Henry after having inherited it from his father. Henry's increasingly desperate and cut-throat maneuvers are undergirded always by this panic: of being the generational failure point—the one responsible for finally letting so many years of proudly earned land and success falter. Bahrani sets up this nostalgic view of the past only to undercut it completely in the third act. Henry asks his father if things weren't "simpler" or "better" decades ago, when they dealt in livestock and weren't subject to the oversight and discipline of Liberty

and current regulations around GMOs. His father—played with gruff, perpetual irritation by *Goodbye Solo's* Red West—responds almost with anger, losing his patience with what he sees as Henry's (and by extension Dean's) lack of appreciation for the work of the past. He challenges Henry's nostalgic memory, reminding him that the "reality" of the old days involved "backbreaking work" versus the modern simplicity of "a 48-row planter with air conditioning that drives itself with GPS." It's West's insistence that "no, things are better now," that eventually pushes Henry to destroy the records of his seed reselling and clean up the evidence of Dean's crime.

Bahrani notes that the early home movie clips were shot on days where "we had less crew, and a little more freedom," with Simmonds shooting on video and editing the visual style in post-production, an approach similar to what they did on the *American Dream* films. Yet the grainy, handheld, more choppily edited aesthetic of this prologue sequence gives way right from the start to quiet, contemplative establishing shots of farmland. This will be an unavoidable visual motif throughout the film, one often used to situate the characters against a landscape that minimizes and envelopes them—from an early funeral set against an empty backdrop of cornfields to the relatively imposing size of the Whipple homestead, dotted with grain silos and massive outbuildings. Despite the style and framing of most of the film being much more expected and familiar within the conventions of Hollywood-adjacent filmmaking, the landscape takes on a symbolic quality similar to the earlier films. Simmonds' many broad, sweeping establishing shots of flat farmland for miles and miles are almost Ford-esque at times, but as the film progresses this pastoral beauty is resignified in an unsettling way, emphasizing not nostalgia so much as lack—of movement, of inhabitation, and eventually of choice (Dean's) and peace (Henry's).

This opening leads immediately into a conversation between Whipple and his son Dean, presented in traditional shot-reverse shot format as they prepare to approach the family of a recently deceased local farmer in an attempt to bid on his land. Many of the reviews and pre-release press for the film points out the significantly more didactic, on-the-nose quality of the dialogue in *At Any Price*, a noted point of differentiation from the naturalistic, seemingly improvised style of the American Dream trilogy. In fact Henry's opening lines are so on-the-nose, so completely a collection of capitalist mantras and cliches, that it's hard to mistake his dialogue for the way any actual person would talk in a casual conversation with a family member. Yet by the more formalist conventions of a mid-budget social drama, Whipple's lines (and Quaid's heavily calibrated delivery) are not out of place or unexpected.

Neale is clear that the markers of generic and cultural verisimilitude audiences are meant to recognize do not "equate in any direct sense with 'reality' or 'truth'"—they are not objective or indexical but rather discursive, situating the text in relation to external social and cultural narratives (32). Whipple's over-eager regurgitation of inherited cliches like "when a man stops wanting a man stops living" and "people like winners—people with good attitudes" situates the nostalgic images and cultural narratives of the prologue within discourses of capitalism, work and legacy, and working-class identity. That Whipple seems to embrace such cliches knowingly also says something about his character. When he tells Dean that "when Grant gets home next week he'll be ABC—always be closing," Quaid even delivers the line like Whipple is in on the joke, a layer of humor covering up the degree to which such mantras have taken over his worldview. So while the dialogue and aesthetic of these opening shots don't attempt to mimic a "documentary" realism, they do indicate for audiences the ideological grounding and set of

cultural values to be recognized as a basis for the narrative action, character arcs, and conflict likely to occur over the next hour and 45 minutes.

99 Homes: Generic Expectations and Stakes

99 Homes adheres more strictly to a particular genre—that of the financial thriller—though mostly in the broad strokes of its plot and narrative development. As mentioned above, the pacing and editing does a lot of the work of creating suspense and tension in service of the thriller elements that become more prominent as the film progresses. However, Michael Shannon's character also provides a narrative basis for many of these conventions in the first place. As the closest thing the film has to a traditional antagonist, Carver represents the larger real-world institutional forces for which he both figuratively and literally acts as an agent. While Bahrani and Shannon actively challenge some of the generic conventions that would have Carver act as a one-dimensional villain, it is still his specific actions that generate the main conflicts of the film, which in turn introduces the possibility for more thriller elements in the narrative structure and plot developments.

The opening sequence offers a good example of how the film situates a current cultural and political discourse (foreclosures and economic insecurity) within a generic framework, as well as how financial thriller conventions shape audience expectations in a way that's at odds with (or at least complicates) Bahrani's more nuanced intentions. Opting for a very different formalism than the faux-home movies of *At Any Price*, *99 Homes* opens with a roughly 3-minute long take. The first shot opens on the immediate aftermath of a suicide, the camera slowly panning around to the face of Rick Carver (Michael Shannon). We soon learn Carver is a real estate agent who moments earlier came to serve eviction papers on the family living in the home. Carver's gaze on the scene of the suicide is broken by a ringing cellphone, which he calmly

answers as the camera follows him down the halls of a small house filled with police and paramedics. The blocking of the continuous tracking shot emphasizes familiar, lived-in qualities of what is unmistakably a family home turned inside out: the cluttered bathroom spattered with blood and a pistol on the floor, a hallway crowded with emergency workers, a row of family photos arranged on a dresser Carver pauses at as he takes his call. Everything from the unbroken shot to the gradually intensifying score to the rhythm of the dialogue is, if not stylistically obvious, then at the very least calculated to make a distinct emotional impact right from the start.

Carver is so without nuance, positioned so strongly within the conventions of a compellingly watchable villain that the whole sequence by design lands with the effect of a punchline. As a police officer follows him through the house and onto the front lawn trying to get his attention, Carver explains to whoever is on the other end of the phone how to scam another family out of a soon-to-be-foreclosed-upon home (or so we're given just enough context clues to gather). The climax of the sequence arrives around a minute-and-a-half into the scene: when the police officer asks for more details about the situation, Carver responds with a flippant joke about the homeowner's suicide so calculatedly callous it calls attention to the line-as-written despite Shannon's incredibly sharp delivery: "We arrived here with two pizzas for Mr. Kadwell, the property owner, but he didn't want anchovies, so he went into the house, pulled out a gun, and blew his brains out. That set off Mrs. Kadwell, who was expecting Chinese for dinner."

When the officer reminds him that he's talking about a person who just died, Carver pauses dramatically before turning and indignantly listing off details about the family—Mr. Kadwell's wife's name, how long they've been married, the names and ages of their children—as if to signal his personal knowledge of each member of the family entitles him to empathy. He reminds the officer that he is "the last man who knocked on Patrick Kadwell's door in his life,"

asking, "what official statement is going to encapsulate the tragic absurdity of this fucked-up situation?" The scene has the tone and pacing of a macabre Sorkin walk and talk, and the dialogue itself references that degree of acknowledged constructed-ness. And yet it's also a sequence that seems written for Shannon, with his twitchy pauses and weary eyes, and the dramatic effect is so well constructed that it's difficult to read Carver as conflicted and nuanced despite that being Bahrani and Shannon's stated intentions.

Bahrani clearly has some sympathy for the real-life real estate brokers he followed during his research, noting that they "were in personal great pain and deep moral conflict about" their role in enforcing evictions (Murphy). It's somewhat puzzling to see how he describes these brokers compared to Michael Shannon's portrayal of Carver in the film. As Bahrani tells it, Carver's real-life counterparts suddenly found themselves in a post-housing crisis setting in which their jobs shifted from "put[ting] people into homes and speculat[ing] on property" to having no choice but to carry out the orders of the banks for which they worked. Shannon echoes this in his own experience shadowing a broker in Florida, whom he describes as maintaining the same "numb" facade as his character during work hours and then breaking down in the evening. For his part, Shannon sees Carver's twitchy tics and constant drags from an e-cigarette as "compartmentalization.... [he] wants to scream but [he] can't scream" (Tapley 14). This suggests an ideological perspective in which "the system" is to blame for putting individuals in positions from which there are no ethical or moral choices and options left. Yet the quickness and sharpness of the dialogue in this opening sequence is so unnatural that the flippancy comes off less as a defense mechanism of a conflicted and nuanced real human being and more as a stylistic convention, a snappy written hook to grab the audience from the start. Even Carver's wardrobe has obvious symbolic value, with his white blazer remaining immaculate despite the

bloody opening. The generic conventions and more heavy-handed style flatten what nuance there is, introducing Carver as a wholly representative encapsulation of the predatory and amoral nature of the banking and financial sector.

There is arguably a kind of tactical value in this dread-saturated, cynical opening: it conveys the mood and intensity of a thriller and the generic promise of action, here seen only in its aftermath. The stakes of the broader economic conflict are made clear in the image of suicide, and Rick Carver is established as a villain almost unbelievably devoid of empathy or compassion, an easy narrative distillation of the moral and ethical vacuity central to much the broader discourse (and anger) around the housing crisis. That this is the bloodiest and most violent the film gets until its final scene does two things. First, on a narrative level it establishes a constant threat that looms over the rest of the film, with the audience's awareness, if not expectation, that the increasingly desperate situations in which Carver, Nash and his family find themselves could become deadly (as if the perpetual economic devastation at the core of the film was not enough). Second, it indicates for the audience what type of film *99 Homes* is going to be, bringing with it expectations for the narrative arcs, central conflicts, and character development likely to unfold over the course of the film. This last point is important in considering how Bahrani so directly engages the tropes and narrative moves of a financial thriller only to subvert them in the final scenes in order to direct viewers' focus back toward the messiness and ambiguity of the story's real-world economic issues.

Concluding Thoughts: Lack of Closure as Authenticity

It is through this ultimate subversion of generic conventions and expectations that both *At Any Price* and *99 Homes* make any claims to realism, albeit of a very different kind than what is articulated in chapter 1. As discussed with the American Dream films, understanding cinematic

realism as perceptual—as a reaction to elements of a film text that are made to seem authentic—returns us to Neale's discussion of genre as a cultivated set of expectations indicating what is and isn't plausible. Neale argues that many genres are marked by the moments and established patterns through which generic verisimilitude contradicts or departs from cultural verisimilitude—that is, where the formal elements deviate (in a consistent and expected way) from that which would be considered realistic. He points to murder mysteries as a prime example, where the obvious suspects and solutions are always red herrings since the solution needs to be surprising. However, he also notes that these departures are essential to genres like comedies (humor comes from “deviations from the norms of sense and logic”) and musicals (“characters burst[ing] into otherwise unmotivated song”). The moments that break from the "real world" confirm and articulate the genre.

Part of what distinguishes the endings of both *At Any Price* and *99 Homes* is how each film suddenly pivots back to a more ambiguous, culturally verisimilar turn of events, right at the moment when generic expectations would suggest a more clear, conventional resolution is around the corner. Before turning to the ending sequences, it's worth reiterating that the films here don't adhere strictly to specific genres—rather they pull in certain genre elements in their narratives, styles, and intertextual positioning (their overall “narrative image”) to ease the audience into a framework of expectations that will be necessarily disrupted. Rather than the rules of the genres being confirmed via their breaks with cultural verisimilitude, the intrusion of cultural verisimilitude on the comfortable familiarity of generic expectations reorients the viewer somewhat dissatisfyingly toward the unresolved ambiguity of real-world events. This suggests the Indiewood model being explored here might be loosely described as a generic formation of its own. One that is dependent on an audience's ability and willingness to ultimately see the

conventions as artificial, and consequently reaffirm their pre-existing understanding of the more complex “real-world” conditions the films represent.

The somewhat ambiguous, less-than-fulfilling endings present clear examples of how each film's sense of realism comes not from the production-linked stylistic factors discussed in chapter 1, but from the degree to which the generic conventions are ultimately bent into a more culturally verisimilar shape. A more expected ending for *At Any Price* may feature Henry and Dean coming to understand and respect each other's worldviews, with Dean ultimately able to go on and live his own life. Rather, he inherits a generational burden bound to the same guilt, desperation, and logics of “expand or die” capitalism that have plagued Henry throughout the film. The father-son bond is reinforced in the end not through mutually earned respect but through the shared knowledge of Dean's crime. Henry doesn't even really manage to dispel the sense of impending doom that follows him throughout the film by avoiding charges for reselling seeds at the 11th hour. Rather, it gets displaced onto the search for Brad Johnson, which resembles and rearticulates the sense of persistent dread Henry has been facing from the Liberty investigation.

While *99 Homes* ends with a somewhat more traditional resolution, with Nash completing his moral arc and revealing city-level corruption, the actual consequences of his final confession are ambiguous at best. The final scene finds the homeowner Nash helped Carver cheat out of his home earlier, Frank Greene, holed up in his house with his terrified family, shooting at police officers in an armed standoff. In a dramatic moment in full view of Carver and the police, Nash reveals to Greene that the latter did correctly pursue his eviction appeal and that falsified evidence was inserted into his court file so he would lose his case. Does Nash's moment of conscience overshadow the irreparable damage he has helped create leading up to this final set

of events? Whatever proof of forgery and wrongdoing Nash ends up being willing to testify to after the fact is not going to change the near certainty that Frank Greene will face charges and jail time. Nash also participated directly in the illegal act—he's arguably even more legally culpable than Carver, since he delivered the forged proof of publication document and admitted it in front of police officers and sheriff's deputies. There's no real indication beyond the audience's hopes and generic expectations that Carver will be held accountable for anything, especially given the involvement of a County Commissioner and powerful real estate developer in the initial crime.

Bahrani points to the open-endedness of events, both here and in *At Any Price*, as a way of reorienting the audience's attention back to the real-world events the films endeavor to represent. This is again a kind of reversal of Neale's model: the lack of generic fulfillment brings the narratives more in line with culturally verisimilar expectations (which is in turn generically surprising, and a bit jarring). The film's point of view and narrative structure positions the audience to perceive the ending of *At Any Price* as tragic, at least on a narrative level. It builds on an empathy for Henry and Dean that's been cultivated over the course of the film: we want Dean to escape the generational trappings of the family farm, and for that matter we want Henry to be free of the oppressive oversight of the Liberty corporation. Yet Bahrani indicates his hope was that it would provoke anger at "what was happening in the country, that people were lying and cheating and stealing and getting away with it" (Commentary). The lack of narrative fulfillment for Henry and Dean pivots from a sense of tragic sadness to something more complicated when their actions are situated back into an extra-textual discourse.

Likewise with *99 Homes*, the failure to provide a resolution with clear punishment for the criminals, redemption for Nash, and justice for the Greene family creates a disjointedness and

disruption of the expected formula. Normally genre trappings would offer a solution so that audiences can leave the theater with the real-world issues of the housing crisis neatly wrapped up and resolved. Here those expectations go unsatisfied, and that formal dissatisfaction is transposed onto the film's framing of what ultimately—given its representation of evictions and the financial system—the audience can and should consider “plausible.” (Which is, as Bahrani and his actors never fail to note in press for the film, that no one involved in the financial crisis was held accountable.)

Put differently, the audience is asked to reconcile two different “regimes of verisimilitude” here—put into a receptive mode via the genre markers of the films and then confronted with a narrative authenticity (cultural verisimilitude) that's unexpected. Neale is careful to point out that the assumption of realism is itself rooted in generic conventions, often those which call less attention to themselves as formal or aesthetic manipulations (this is echoed in the discussion of chapter 1) (35). The disjoint between these different regimes of verisimilitude characterizes the distinct production space in which Bahrani is working here. The “generic status of realism” is at the forefront of discussions of the American Dream films, with the audience expected to take certain formal and aesthetic elements as markers of authenticity. This is completely expected of a micro-budget independent film. Here the realist regime works instead as a disruption of and meta commentary on the genre elements that would otherwise provide a kind of escapism, and this disruption ultimately serves a critical function.

As Geoff King and others have pointed out, this type of narrative ambiguity, especially in the vaguely hopeful but uncertain endings, is a key quality of “art-leaning indie cinema.” A genre in and of itself according to Bordwell, such cinema occupies a middle ground between the neat resolutions of Hollywood and overtly political filmmaking “more radically distanced from

the mainstream" (*Indie 2.0* 209). Viewed through the context of Indiewood, this ambiguity can be construed as evidence of a compromise toward something more palatable to the mainstream—an act of maintaining a kind of political neutrality that "would not generally be seen as virtuous by those committed to a more insurgent film practice or one dedicated to more immediate aims of raising political consciousness" (*Indie 2.0* 209). But when situated as a disruption of the generic expectations tied to an Indiewood mode, such ambiguity can in fact appeal to broader public consciousness—here by activating the kind of anger Bahrani expresses above. Without making the films too risky or seemingly unmarketable to distributors, Bahani's refusal to wrap up the narratives according to more expected and satisfying genre conventions can be seen as actively employing a powerful rhetorical tool: lack of closure as a political strategy.

Teshome Gabriel articulates how this strategy has been used effectively as a call to action in the more overtly political and directly engaged films of Third Cinema.²⁴ He argues that "closure in Western films contains and separates the work from everyday life." This is in direct contrast with the political utility of open endings, which make direct appeals to the audience, "conflating the film's text with the everyday reality of the spectator" ("Third Cinema"). There are obviously significant differences between both the aesthetics and cultural-political context of Third Cinema that Gabriel is discussing and the relatively more culturally dominant production mode of Indiewood. But while Gabriel is talking about a fundamentally different filmmaking tradition deeply tied to folkloric storytelling and culturally specific practices, the way he describes a denial of closure as reorienting an audience toward "everyday life" applies here.

Central to Gabriel's ideas about closure is the notion that cinema can act as a site of struggle between "official history" and "popular memory." Official history refers to those accepted and entrenched narratives which "tend to arrest the future by means of the past,"

whereas popular memory functions as a public discourse of constant contestation, a re-examining of the past "not only as a reference point but also as a theme of struggle" ("Third Cinema"). This concept of popular memory as a means through which the marginalized achieve a voice to participate in the creation of cultural and political history applies more to the contingent practices and creation of authenticity discussed in relation to the films of chapter 1. However, the denial of closure described above does work as a tactical disruption of the "official history(ies)"—of nostalgic rural life and inheritance, and the American Dream of homeownership—being evoked by *At Any Price* and *99 Homes*. Denying closure encourages the events of the film to bleed into audiences' encounter with everyday life and collective consciousness—a sense that the characters' lives and stories are still occurring outside of the theater in the "real world." While this may seem like a small victory within the dominant system of studio(-adjacent) filmmaking, it's commensurate with the level of control Bahrani both gains and surrenders in moving from the microbudget guerilla production mode to one with more infrastructural support and access to resources.

IV: Digital Cinema and Mediation in *Fahrenheit 451*

Less than a year after the U.S. release of *99 Homes* it was announced that Bahrani would be adapting Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* for HBO. This marked a departure from his prior works in both production mode—a higher-budget TV movie for a major streamer—and content—an adaptation vs. an original, heavily researched concept based on real-world events. The relationship between production, aesthetics, and ideological and narrative modes is evident here not only in the pronounced departure from Bahrani's previous style, but also in the reduced role of certain previously important production strategies. Prior elements of enduring importance for Bahrani, like on-location filming and research as well as leaning on actors' real-world personae, become less distinct amid the restrictions of more studio-bound production. What options Bahrani still has in this regard become purely concerns of production—choosing specific Toronto locales to stand in for the film's futuristic version of Ohio, for example. They don't play into the film in a distinctly textual way.

Adaptation of a fictional work also introduces narrative constraints Bahrani previously worked without, including a pre-established ideological framework embedded in the novel's own period-specific allegory. Whereas the production shifts in chapter two brought narrative and generic elements to the fore, the work of adaptation here results in stylistic decisions doing much of the heavy lifting in drawing out the specific parallels between the film's already well-known story and the contemporary issues it allegorizes. While Bradbury's novel is engaged in a mode of social critique not totally dissimilar from Bahrani's previous films, the dystopian sci-fi setting and style are distinct from the more grounded realist work of chapters 1 and 2. This results in a

stylistic shift both to match the speculative content of the film as well as to emphasize the elements of contemporary social and political critique. Making the film for an at-home audience likely to be distracted by multiple additional screens and devices while streaming also marks a clear difference from the theatrical exhibition of previous films. Bahrani notes that he attempted to capture a feeling of "energy and momentum and movement" he identifies with youthful restlessness, hoping the film would appeal to teenage viewers (Jackson). However, the quick editing and attention-grabbing stylistic choices are also conveniently aligned with TV aesthetics often calibrated to maintain increasingly distracted viewers' attention.

Bahrani's move into the realm of digital streaming is significant for a few reasons. While the stylistic shifts in *Fahrenheit 451* skew more mainstream than anything else Bahrani did prior, HBO is not operating at the polar opposite end of the production spectrum from the independent sector. In the evolving streaming landscape, HBO functions much like streamer-studios Netflix and Amazon as neither independent nor Hollywood. The premium network represents a degree of mainstream clout and influence that many independent films operate in opposition to, but this itself is in part a result of years of hybrid functioning as not-quite-TV and not-quite-Hollywood. This hybridity is similar to the Indiewood mode discussed in chapter 2. However, where that mode referenced a type of Hollywood-adjacent production that by the mid-2000s had already been mostly assimilated into the studio structure, filmmaking within the space of digital streaming is still relatively nascent territory. This hybridity suggests that *Fahrenheit 451*'s relatively more mass-appeal aesthetic and narrative approach is not so clear cut as simply a filmmaker compromising prior aesthetic affinities to cross over into the mainstream. What does it mean for a director whose prior work has been so strongly shaped by oppositional aesthetics and production practices to move into this hybrid, albeit distinctly more mainstream mode?

Introduction: Complicating Digital Cinema

The film itself also raises questions about digitality that reflect contemporary real-world conversations about the mediascape into which Bahrani here makes his first foray. Bahrani's move to HBO represents a significant shift from a more traditional production-distribution model into the relatively new space of digital streaming. However, it would be oversimplifying things to characterize this entirely as a move into the mode of "digital cinema." As discussed in the first chapter, Bahrani was using digital cameras from the start, in part due to economic constraints but also for how they afforded the ability to manipulate the aesthetic qualities of the image (ironically, to avoid a particular "digital" look and appear more like film). So what does the shift to a predominantly digital mode—in which not just production but all forms and stages of distribution and exhibition are also digital—mean for a filmmaker who was already steeped in digital production?

One answer might be to look at the more "digital" aesthetic of *Fahrenheit 451*, which completely abandons any trace of realism or even the classical invisible style of Bahrani's prior films. Another is to consider how digital presentation changes not just the nature of the image but also the context of viewership and reception, and how this affects Bahrani's relationship to realism and verisimilitude. Early conversations about digital cinema's relationship to the index and realism prefigure some contemporary concerns around the manipulation of media—and consequently knowledge and history—that the film enacts in its own aesthetic and narrative. Ultimately *Fahrenheit 451* works toward an experientially mimetic kind of realism in the heavily digitally interfaced way it presents its diegetic world, even though there's nothing typically "realist" in the aesthetic, form, or narrative structure. Here Bahrani is still concerned with verisimilitude—not in terms of audiovisual fidelity (the realist aesthetics of chapter 1) or in terms

of what is narratively plausible given events in the real world (the lack of closure of chapter 2), but in terms of the ideological referents and social interfaces replicated in the film, albeit through the lens of sci-fi. The film takes as its subject the notion of a connected digital mediasphere which both shapes and simultaneously performs and reifies public consciousness, while also employing the aesthetics and production/exhibition technologies of the real-world mediasphere in which it was made and will be consumed.

Additionally, making a film for a streaming platform with substantial industry power and economic resources comes with significant trade-offs, not just in how the film is positioned to audiences ahead of its release but also in the degrees of complexity and scope. *Fahrenheit 451* is by far Bahrani's most ideologically straightforward movie. It is exactly what it presents itself as: an easily digestible social critique whose sci-fi trappings are directly relevant to the current discourses it references. This is the most obviously scripted of Bahrani's films, and also the film with the least naturalistic performances. Characters seem to recite big ideas at each other rather than having conversations, and both Michael B. Jordan and Michael Shannon tend to erupt into overdetermined and sometimes melodramatic displays of emotion during climactic moments. It's a polar opposite to the naturalistic, seemingly improvised dialogue and performance styles of Bahrani's early films. The dialogue is so flattened, in fact, that it only leaves room for thinly veiled invocations of current political rhetoric within the sci-fi/dystopian framework.

Fahrenheit 451 consequently takes aim at contemporary U.S. political rhetoric more directly than any of his prior films. Bahrani insists he did not focus his adaptation directly on the recent election of Donald Trump, and in fact the film is more directly critical of social media and its influences on public communication. However, he does invoke Trump's MAGA rhetoric repeatedly, both in the slogan-heavy public speech of Jordan's Montag and the other firemen as

well as the ideologically loaded diegetic language used to describe notions of nationality and freedom. This in turn brings to the forefront the persistent importance of language in the construction of the narrative(s) through which all Bahrani's characters interact with and are positioned against various notions of "America."

Streaming as Evolution of Indiewood Model

Both the production and release strategy for *Fahrenheit 451* followed a more recent evolution of the traditional studio model—albeit updated for streaming exhibition. In chapters 1 and 2, I discussed how independent studios like Annapurna, A24, Blumhouse, Hyde Park and others have come to occupy the production/distribution space once dominated by 90s-era mini-majors and specialty divisions. This was made possible primarily through such independent production companies gaining greater power of distribution through previously studio-dominated channels. With the establishment of their own production labels, major streamers like HBO, Netflix, and Amazon have similarly come to constitute a growing segment of the evolving non-studio space once tentatively framed as "Indiewood." While that term held onto some discursive value when discussing Bahrani's production mode in chapter 2, it falls apart when entering the contemporary production-for-streaming space. Whereas Indiewood implies a scaled down, more austere set of production practices primarily modeled on those of the studio system, many newer digital studios are operating with full Hollywood-level budgets and other production resources.

HBO Films has the significant studio power of Warner Bros. behind it, and while Netflix and Amazon Studios are relative newcomers in production, they operate at a level far from the independent margins. Both Netflix and Amazon Studios benefit from the experience of long-term Hollywood executives having been absorbed into their ranks, as well as high-profile filmmaker partnerships and heightened visibility (i.e., marketing budgets) during awards season

campaigns. As the most highly valued media company in the world—in a constant neck-and-neck battle with Disney—Netflix often operates at the level of a Hollywood studio through sheer force of capital. Amazon and HBO Films more closely resemble the scale and cost of high-profile Indiewood and specialty label productions, generally in the low tens-of-millions when budgets are reported at all. However, even Amazon and HBO Films have an advantage in terms of the visibility and distribution/exhibition reach that posed a hurdle for so many Indiewood-era productions. Whether at the mid-budget Amazon/HBO level or at the budget-record-shattering level of Netflix productions like *The Irishman*, streamers are able to invest in their productions with at least some guaranteed visibility and audience—and, crucially, without the necessary involvement of Hollywood distribution companies or major theatrical exhibition. This higher visibility and near-complete control over how and when audiences encounter exhibited films is a significant point of differentiation between current streaming producer-distributors and the smaller production companies that comprised most of the traditionally defined Indiewood sector.²⁵

Stepping into this distinctly different production sector afforded Bahrani access to additional resources and a broader audience than on his prior films. However, this also entailed a shift in the production style and release strategy for the film, as well as the pre-release discourse around the film's historical import and Bahrani's role as director. Despite HBO Films going straight to streaming, *Fahrenheit 451* saw both a higher profile debut and a wider general release than any of Bahrani's previous films. The film had a special out-of-competition premiere at Cannes on May 12, 2018, and then began streaming on HBO a week later. This release pattern follows a growing trend in which festival exhibition is used to promote streaming distribution rather than to build word-of-mouth publicity and critical acclaim for a future theatrical run

(Tryon *On-Demand*, 158). However, this also shows Bahrani's evolving status in the industry, backed by the considerable power of WarnerMedia-owned HBO Films. After making his first appearance at Cannes in 2007 with *Chop Shop* as a selection in the Director's Fortnight program, Bahrani now returned just over a decade later to debut *Fahrenheit* out of competition in what amounts to an elite preview screening.

The additional resources and support afforded by an HBO production brought several trade-offs, restricting even further some of the flexible, contingent practices Bahrani had been able to hold onto even on *At Any Price* and *99 Homes*. Marking a departure from Bahrani's prior heavily researched on-location shooting style, *Fahrenheit 451* was shot in Toronto over the course of 43 days. The move to use Toronto as a stand-in for the film's version of Cleveland, OH is not unexpected: this is a common practice when trying to reduce the overall cost of studio film and TV productions. Yet utilizing the existing production infrastructure already in place in a larger filmmaking center like Toronto brings with it less flexibility for the kind of contingent and collaborative shooting practices embraced on the earlier films. This shift could arguably be less important on a film like *Fahrenheit* compared to the films of chapters 1 and 2, since Bahrani's habit of incorporating locally gleaned knowledge of an area and incorporating locals' stories into his films is rendered moot by the speculative sci-fi setting. However, even with the additional resources, a dedicated team of production designers, and highly configurable studio space, filming in Toronto still brought with it a need to compromise and tailor certain elements of the production to budgetary and other constraints.

Fahrenheit 451's recognizable near-future setting and look is one example of how budget and ideological intent can be intertwined and mutually co-constitutive. The film world's design is a far cry from the unrecognizable dystopias of so many big-budget sci-fi tentpoles. When his

production designers raised questions early on about how to design cars and buildings for the film's exterior sequences, Bahrani told them to remember "[w]e are not making a movie about the future. We are making a movie about an alternate tomorrow" (James). The idea of an alternate tomorrow carries potentially more immediate import and consequences in its depiction of a recognizable world without the extra layer of distancing you get in hard futuristic sci-fi. It also cuts down on the need for a lot of budget-draining sets and props. Bahrani notes that he specifically told his design team he wanted to keep vehicles out of frame as much as possible, since they represent a particularly budget-intensive hurdle for future-set productions. One result: Montag's crew drives around in a normal contemporary fire engine—the only alteration being that their unit's "Salamander" logo is painted on the side rather than the standard department name and number. The landscape and set design is treated similarly: vast digital projections turn the sides of buildings into constantly streaming media feeds, lending a vaguely futuristic-but-plausible appearance to an otherwise blandly contemporary cityscape; brutalist architecture and stark red and blue lighting reflect a sense of foreboding futuristic minimalism in interior spaces that on closer look seem to be pretty standard if once-fashionable office buildings.

With this more restrictive production, however, also came a longer shooting schedule. While still a significantly shorter filming window than a standard studio film, the 43-day shoot is a significant extension from the 30-day shooting periods for the American Dream films and the 29-day shoot for *At Any Price*. The latter is a particularly noteworthy contrast for how the shoot was compressed and broken into two separate periods specifically to accommodate for its Hollywood stars' limited availability. *Fahrenheit*'s July-to-August filming schedule was sandwiched between the shoots for *Black Panther* (January to April 2017) and *Creed II* (early-mid 2018) to similarly work around Michael B. Jordan's schedule. So while the roughly 50%-

longer schedule didn't yield a tremendous increase in shooting days, the clout and higher profile of an HBO production still brought with it an extended, continuous shooting period on dedicated sets.

Working with HBO translated not just to additional shooting time and a pre-existing production infrastructure, but also more economic resources—the most of Bahrani's career so far. In fact this is a piece of information that comes up in most pre-release interviews and articles about the film, and it subtly contributes to a larger narrative about the one-time-indie filmmaker going big. HBO's combined production/distribution/exhibition model makes it difficult to get exact numbers on budgets and revenue, but Bahrani estimates that making *Fahrenheit 451* cost more than double the budgets of his five prior films combined (Debruge 51).²⁶ If accurate, this suggests a production budget in the low \$30-million range, not unusual for a mid-budget genre film with relatively few special effects or action set pieces. It's telling, however, that despite HBO being tight-lipped about production budgets, Bahrani can be found consistently referencing this very general, comparative "double all my prior films combined" figure about the budget, usually when asked about his experience working with the streamer for the first time. The emphasis shifts focus away from the budget itself and onto a comparison with Bahrani's previous films. The discursive importance becomes not the precise dollar amount of the production (which is unremarkable), but the implication that previous productions must have been constrained by the economic limitations of independent filmmaking.

All of this suggests the "crossover filmmaker" narrative that was so significant to the indie period of the 90s, which in turn helps HBO draw on (and to some extent assume) the cultural capital of an independent director. There's a suggestion in the comparative budgets—one movie vs. all prior 5 combined—that it should be naturally exciting to see what a director like

Bahrani could do with a larger budget and more studio-esque resources at his disposal, despite none of his prior movies being of a type that would obviously benefit from either. Bahrani's prior status as an independent filmmaker comes up in HBO's own pre-release positioning of the film as well. Then-President of HBO Films Len Amato explains the thought process behind hiring Bahrani specifically in terms of his prior films, which he describes with a level of corporate remove as "very indie" and having "a unique point of view" (Debruge 50). Some of this narrative is extended to Michael B. Jordan as well. While Jordan was by this time a recognizable and bankable star, he followed a similar indie-to-mainstream trajectory, with Bahrani noting that he knew he wanted to cast Jordan after seeing him in *Fruitvale Station*.

Independence in the Streaming Era

Much like Hollywood studios, major streamers like HBO benefit from positioning themselves as champions of industrial diversity, democratization of resources and access, and representation—and it's impossible to separate Bahrani's pre-release comments about the film from these larger cultural and industrial narratives. Much of the pre-release media strikes a different, seemingly more calculated tone than press done in advance of his prior releases. Even the publications running interviews or features about the film are distinctly different: whereas the earlier films were featured in niche interest or industry publications like *Filmmaker*, *Cineaste*, *Sight & Sound*, and *Screen*, most of the press for *Fahrenheit* ran in *Variety*, *The Hollywood Reporter*, or the entertainment sections of LA or New York-based newspapers. Each piece also seems to hit the same points and soundbites from Bahrani: wanting a younger audience to identify with the feeling of anger and momentum in the film; the conscious decision to include a more diverse range of authors and titles among the books being burned; a disclaimer about

working with limited special effects for the first time and the decision to eliminate the novel's ominous "mechanical hound."

In addition to these materials circulating certain ideas about Bahrani as an independent filmmaker himself, they also position the film in relation to current discourses around representation and media. There is a complicated and mutually reinforcing relationship between the expanded resources and viewership many streamers grant independent creators and the way in which economic returns for those streamers are tied up in narratives of democratization and representation. Like many major studios and platforms, HBO never seems to simply greenlight and produce something for an independent or marginalized creator, often publicly leveraging that creator's identity into a narrative about the platform. Amato's comment above illustrates a typical attempt to subtly align the platform's image with a broad openness to ideas and a willingness to showcase independent filmmakers. This pulls on earlier discourses about the potential for digital production and exhibition to radically democratize access to not just filmmaking resources but also to films themselves.

Yet as Virginia Crisp and others have argued, digital platforms act as gatekeepers in many of the same ways as Hollywood distribution and major exhibitors. Streaming titles are not, for example, "presented in an unmediated form where audiences are free to pick and choose the content that interests them," but are rather highly curated, with streamers able to create more visibility for certain higher profile or more profitable titles (56). Crisp goes on to point out that beyond a platform's own curation and in-app library arrangement, there are various other factors that often perform a gatekeeping function, including uneven global distribution/coverage of major streaming services, limitations imposed by internet providers, reliable infrastructural support (internet and electricity), and lack of disposable income for these services. Given this,

the myth of an inherently more democratized and accessible field of media texts only ever becomes accessible to those already enjoying the broadest cultural, technological, and economic access to media in the first place.

This is all complicated by Bahrani's filmography and prior commitment to issues of social and cultural advocacy. Actively highlighting characters, experiences, and subject matter normally excluded from the mainstream isn't out of character for Bahrani, who casually says of his casting choices, "I probably cast it the way I see the world, so it's a mix of all kinds of people — which reminds me of myself and most of my friends" (Debruge 50). Bahrani even went so far as to publish a short essay in the *New York Times Book Review* about the contemporary relevance of his adaptation that includes reflections on the process of selecting which books to feature in the film. He advocates for expanding the books referenced in the novel to include not just the white Western literary canon but also works by Toni Morrison and the Persian poet Hafez's Divan (particularly important to Bahrani for the reverential place the book occupied in his family home growing up). The only time the representational politics of the film are addressed in a more complicated way than simply mentioning the diversity of actors and books/authors on-screen comes from Michael B. Jordan. Jordan initially hesitated to take the role of Montag before reconsidering when Bahrani explained his character's full arc, saying "with the cultural climate and being a black male, playing characters that represent so much to my community, playing an oppressor at first glance wasn't sitting right with me" (James).

This is not to say that Bahrani wasn't in fact given the freedom to make the movie he wanted. He notes that HBO's initial approach was fairly open ended and that he chose to adapt the novel, which he did with the help of co-writer Amir Naderi. That he wasn't presented with the opportunity in a director-for-hire scenario breaks with current trends for studios to get

directors with name recognition, often at a more critically acclaimed or indie level, to headline adaptations or continuations of existing IPs. In fact, HBO had to negotiate for the rights to adapt *Fahrenheit* for around 6 months before securing them for Bahrani, as they had just become available and were also being pursued by several other studios. While I'll discuss some subtle connections to the earlier films' emphasis on representational realism later in this chapter, *Fahrenheit 451* marks a much more striking departure from Bahrani's previous styles than the films of chapter 2 did compared with those of chapter 1. If some of Bahrani's particular production practices and distinctive stylistic features were compromised in exchange for the expanded structural and economic resources of a major streaming platform, then the ability to acquire rights to a work like *Fahrenheit 451*—with all its contemporary resonances—can be seen as part of the tradeoff. Additionally, adapting a property like *Fahrenheit* could have further incentivized HBO to greenlight the production, as it would bring with it name recognition and a pre-existing fanbase.

Even the content of the novel can arguably be seen as increasing the perceived marketability of an adaptation, given the timeliness Bahrani himself points to. This is especially significant because it's here, with Bahrani's continued engagement with contemporary U.S. history and politics, that we can see the strongest connections to his overarching filmography. Again, there is a narrative many streamers and mid-level studios attempt to cultivate in their marketing about empowering independent creators to tell their own stories that I don't want to reproduce uncritically here; however, it is worth noting that even in following the trend for adaptations this partnership with HBO created an opportunity for Bahrani to yet again engage themes of U.S. historical narratives and economic and cultural marginalization. Bahrani started writing before the 2016 election and says that after Trump won the New Hampshire primary he

started "layering things into the script assuming he would win" (Romig). The film closely incorporates issues of fake news and media manipulation of information, anti-immigrant and nationalist rhetoric, and media platforming of authority figures who in turn become distinct kinds of celebrities. The parallels were so clear that after reading the script following the election, HBO executives asked Bahrani how he'd been able to predict the outcome (Debruge 50).

This more simplified, consistently on-message press discourse could also be in part due to the fact that a sci-fi allegory about our current, highly technologically mediated state begs fewer questions about its motivations. When compared with a movie about farmers fighting a seed company, the appeal is relatively obvious. In an interview shortly before the film's release, Bahrani addresses a question about why he wanted to adapt Bradbury's novel by pointing to the interviewer's iPhone and responding "[t]his thing" (Romig). Several articles feature a similar anecdote about a friend asking Bahrani why they would care about burning books when they can read anything and everything (including his current draft of the screenplay) on their tablet. For prior screenplays Bahrani engaged in a kind of adaptation by building narratives up around places and real people's stories, attempting to elevate and reflect a range of experiences he felt were otherwise going unnoticed or ignored. Here, with the core narrative already bound to an existing and very well known story, the act of adaptation became instead about using the world of the film to reflect issues Bahrani felt were being ignored in plain sight. That the film is a high-profile adaptation also changes the degree to which Bahrani could embrace ambiguity and nuance—qualities already pretty scarce in a lot of dystopian allegories. The question of why this story is worth telling becomes more important and needs to be answered explicitly, especially since it's already been told before on film (Bahrani's *Fahrenheit* being not just a cross-media adaptation but also a remake).

Adaptation: Updating Fahrenheit for a "Post-Truth" Age

Bahrani and Naderi's adaptation attempts to bring a more urgent, heightened ideological import to the story by both updating the technological framework of the book and directly referencing current political discourse. Many of the narrative updates were motivated by the question: what does the authoritarian political spirit of book burning in Bradbury's original novel really translate to in a digitally networked culture? Some of the early scenes in the film address this in the most obvious ways, speculating on how attempts to control documented and accumulated knowledge might extend beyond text as a physical object. One of the first sequences shows Montag and his crew raiding a house where a group of people are attempting to upload texts in mass to the film's equivalent of the dark web. Here Bahrani and Naderi's script introduces some interesting questions on the permanence and materiality of digital media compared to the purely physical texts of Bradbury's novel. One person frantically asks another what they should prioritize uploading in the limited time before the firemen break down the door: "Shakespeare or Wikipedia?" Control of information here extends to more concealable, quickly transmittable yet also more fragile digital code, with Montag destroying what appears to be hundreds, if not thousands, of digitally preserved texts by anticlimactically taking an ax to a stack of servers and a laptop in a bedroom closet. Later, when they come upon a hidden room in a storefront with a packed, wall-to-wall library, Montag mumbles in shock that he's never actually seen a physical copy of a book so close in person before.

For the most part these changes simply serve to update the novel's outdated technological reference points. As Bahrani has noted, Bradbury was as concerned with new media forms simplifying and erasing complex thought as he was with actual censorship, and the film needs to make some changes in order for the novel's media technology to present an appropriate level of

threat. Bradbury's immersive and interactive "wall-TVs" and portable in-ear "seashell" speakers don't seem like particularly ominous technological overlords at a time when massive flatscreen LED TVs and bluetooth headsets are commonplace. One way the film updates these concerns over communications technology is through the existence of a singular, constant media stream referred to without explanation as "the Nine." Throughout the film the Nine acts as a stand-in for the internet in general as well as a monolithic, government-controlled conglomeration of all social media and streaming networks. Rather than distinct channels or programming blocks, the Nine runs a perpetual stream of interactive, propaganda-fueled media coverage—part reality show, part sensationalist journalism. In a subtle nod to how close the Nine's programming comes to our current streaming mediascape, Bahrani cast former YouTuber Lilly Singh as Raven, *Fahrenheit's* version of a vlogger-celebrity-journalist. Raven appears throughout the film addressing viewers as "natives" (more on that in a minute), broadcasting Montag and the firemen's raids and updating viewers on current events. Viewers can be seen interacting with this coverage of current events through emojis that scroll across the lower part of the screen as well as short comments, often also in pictorial language, in what resembles a live chat sidebar off to one side of the frame.

The task of addressing Bahrani's earlier question about the exigency of Bradbury's story in a contemporary media age required updating more than just the technology through which knowledge and information is shared, controlled, and manipulated. The authoritarian structure and rhetoric of Montag's society is also modeled after and makes reference to our own in recognizable ways. In broad strokes, the film follows conventions of so much dystopian film and fiction in which a violent and oppressive police state is concerned with maintaining order, always for the "greater good." Yet the specific terms of this order, the language and tactics it uses

to prop itself up, and the consequences of upholding and enforcing it are overlaid with the contemporary political reference points and ideological markers that really constitute Bahrani's interventions and voice within the film. This is worth noting specifically because the increased restrictions of an HBO studio-level production coupled with the creative/narrative boundness of an adaptation narrows the opportunities for Bahrani to impose his own mark onto the film. Both the more mainstream style and the act of adaptation arguably obscure some characteristics that so strongly distinguished Bahrani's earlier films. This illustrates again how access to more resources and industry support can act to flatten and homogenize at the same time that it makes work more visible.

An early scene establishes the role of the firemen in the diegetic world of the adaptation as well as the style and contemporary reference points for the film. Montag and Beatty deliver a presentation at a school during which they explain the dangers of books and the role they play in keeping society safe. The pacing of the scene and overdetermined dialogue help establish some of the rhetoric Bahrani and Naderi will invoke and critique throughout the rest of the film, while depicting diegetically a familiar cloaking of authoritarianism in spectacle. The firemen are framed as brave protectors whose use of force is as justified as it is exciting. When Montag incinerates a book on stage Bahrani cuts to the children's faces, eyes gleaming right before they launch into applause. Bahrani also translates one of Bradbury's original concerns—media oversimplifying discourse and eroding complex critical thought—via the visual forms of contemporary digital communications. Montag explains to the schoolchildren that all books have actually been "preserved" by the government and can be read by anyone, any time. We see a few examples displayed on a large screen behind him, all in comically condensed, emoji-laden form: *Moby Dick* is shown quickly as being around a page long, half of which is pictograms.

The above is all pretty standard sci-fi dystopian fare, however calibrated within the bounds of convention to echo current discourses on willing assent to authoritarianism. This willing and enthusiastic cooperation of the majority of the diegetic society is Bahrani's main focus, and he connects it directly to a control and manipulation of language. While technology is shown to make this assent to power easier (and in fact enjoyable), it's the very flattening and de-complicating of language that gives Montag and the firemen their power. Bahrani depicts this through some direct invocations of Trumpian language around immigration and nationalism. In *Farhenheit's* "alternate tomorrow" version of the U.S., citizens are referred to as "natives," emphasizing both a brazen colonial erasure of indigenous populations and the prideful entitlement of a xenophobic in-group. Natives are most frequently addressed as such during broadcasts of the firemen's activities rooting out and apprehending "Eels": small groups of individuals charged with possessing and preserving books and other digital texts. The origins of this latter term are never explained, though it carries with it a visceral sense of disgust and otherness.

As confusing as this slur is initially, Bahrani and Naderi do manage to capture a sense of how such terms, particularly as wielded in political discourse, are often loaded with affect. "Eel" evokes a sense of slipperiness and stealth alongside its revulsion—implying a constant threat without sacrificing the sense of comparative superiority it conveys to those who might construct themselves in contradistinction. While all of that is operating at a level of symbolic remove, Bahrani frequently includes dialogue and references which explicitly link the Natives/Eels distinction to U.S. sociopolitical rhetoric. During one raid Montag is featured on the Nine stoking fears that Eels are there to "take our jobs and steal our tax money," lines which call directly to contemporary racist discourses around immigration. Another example follows

immediately: as the firemen pile up confiscated laptops and hard drives to burn in front of the cameras, Montag delivers the line, "time to burn for America again." This is such an obvious and direct invocation of Trump's MAGA slogan that, like much of the more overt political commentary in these early parts of the film, it creates something of a jarring, clunky disjointedness. During these moments the fictional, speculative setting shifts suddenly from an analogy referencing certain recognizable contemporary themes to a direct performance of these discourses themselves.

Bahrani and Naderi use this diegetic discourse around Eels, including the punishments inflicted for their allegedly dangerous actions, to illustrate the process through which certain groups are made to signify a threat to dominant cultural identity and safety. The Nine frequently broadcasts warnings for citizens to be on the lookout for "Eels pretending to be Natives," echoing the xenophobic and racist sentiment that reached new levels of fervor during the Trump era: that undocumented immigrants are not "real" Americans. Montag and his crew frequently echo another recognizable slogan, telling citizens to "stay vivid on the Nine. If you see something, say something." Multiple times throughout the film we see Eels sentenced to "deletion" for a certain number of years. Deletion is just that: an Eel's fingerprints are logged (maybe burned off? the details are unclear) and they're labeled as disenfranchised pariahs devoid of many rights and access to social services. This literal deletion of identity as punishment reflects a contemporary weaponizing identity and Othering for political gain. Clarisse, who works as an informant for Beatty in the early parts of the film, is offering information in exchange for having years taken off her sentence. When Montag later goes to Clarisse for help, we find that she lives in a run down, recognizably contemporary apartment in a part of the city

cut off from diegetically modern conveniences and technology. She is bartering with Beatty for the chance to rejoin *Fahrenheit's* modern society from a position of exclusion and erasure.

Despite the relative lack of nuance or complexity of political engagement here, Bahrani is still attempting to reflect contemporary social and political realities (as with the films discussed in chapter 1 and 2). However, when a more realist style and aesthetics aren't possible, these reflections become more overt, embedded at the level of narrative and discourse. In fact, Bahrani's prior investment in narratives of race, nationality, class and socioeconomic status is brought to the forefront through the depiction of language as a central tool of oppression, with technology as the medium. This is a key update in Bahrani's version of *Fahrenheit 451*: Eels come to stand in for many marginalized groups who are politically mythologized as always potential threats. The process of signification is different here because anyone can be labeled an Eel by the firemen—the term isn't rooted in an individual's perceived racial, ethnic, or immigration status. Yet the way that Eels are referred to as part of a larger group constituting a persistent, phantom threat to society mirrors much of the contemporary rhetoric around immigration stoked further by Trump's border wall discourse.

Digital (Cinema) as Manipulation of Information

Bahrani's persistent engagement with realism—through aesthetics and narrative structure in prior chapters—is incorporated into the actual narrative content of the film here. His shift into a more complete digital mode in both production and exhibition is appropriate given the film's concern with how certain types of information are manipulated and legitimated by those with access to technology. While the film's basic narrative comes from Bradbury's book, published well before the advent of digital cinema, it echoes many early conversations on how digital recording technology breaks the ontologically essential bond between cinema and the index.

These conversations often orbited around the idea that if the image was constituted by pixels and not indexical impressions, then it became essentially an illustration or animation. Trust in the image was therefore at the foreground of what could be considered and not considered cinema.²⁷

As Markos Hadjioannou notes, "digital technology makes this relation [between the viewer and indexical reality] much more difficult as it substitutes indexicality with mathematical symbolization and exceptionally increases the means and effects of manipulation" (19). The film articulates the potential for such digital manipulation in a short clip of diegetic news footage. In an early scene an Eel resists being taken by the firemen, instead dousing herself and her books in gasoline and saying the word "Omnis" before self-immolating. This term comes to be an important part of the plot later, referring to a plan to digitally preserve a broad canon of texts and other literary materials. When Montag later sees footage of this incident on the Nine, the image and audio have been altered so that the woman says "cowards." *Fahrenheit 451* considers audiovisual media as a technology for shaping and presenting an image of reality, and in so doing it ends up performing similar questions about the truth and believability of media on a much more culturally and politically specific level.

More than even trust in the indexical fidelity of the image, these early conversations were focused on how digital cinema broke an essential link between the causal relationship between profilmic action in space and time and the viewer's experience of this continuum. Hadjioannou describes this shift in terms of digital dis-unity: the physical, indexical unity of space and time in the analogue, celluloid image gives way to a dis-unified array of data in the digital image. The digital image is detached from both real space—and therefore from an immediate perceptual link with the viewer—and also from the unity of each single frame, which are instead broken into a collection of re-assembled pixels. For Hadjioannou, the digital is therefore not a Bazinian

material encounter with the “real,” but rather “an image of thought” enabling the audience to reflect on the experience of perception in real-time-and-space.

Ariel Rogers argues that such ontological questions disregard the varied ways that digital (and non-digital) manipulations of the image have always been an integral part of cinema. For that matter, she points out that major formal shifts and manipulations have often been aimed at increasing immersion—that is, at reducing the perceived distance between the viewer and the image, making one's experience of the image seem more ontologically continuous and "real." As Rogers frames it here, cinema is and always has been an "image of thought" insofar as it endeavors to construct a phenomenologically real experience for viewers that resembles actual subjective perception in time and space. However, the ethical implications of such immersive technologies are different when the context shifts from a media text that is obviously intended as fiction (a movie or a TV show) to one purporting to truthfully and objectively represent events in the actual world. These ethical concerns have manifested in popular media with the rise in discourses around fake news, deepfake algorithms, etc. It is this suggestive power of the digital to create a believable image (of thought) untethered to objective physical reality that for Hadjioannou truly distinguishes digital cinema from its analogue roots: digital cinema primarily raises "ethical concerns... with regard to the individual's existential positioning in the world" (36).

Fahrenheit 451 reflects much of this anxiety over indexical and perceptual notions of "reality" inherent in cinematic and other audiovisual forms with its focus on manipulation of knowledge and history through technology. Bahrani and Naderi's screenplay is particularly interested in the potential for technological mediation to alter people's understanding of real-world events and shape historical narratives. While many of the smaller non-narrative changes

discussed above involve updating the specific technology of the novel, Bahrani still includes some of the basic revisionist history of Bradbury's book. For example, Montag first starts to question official accounts of history when he's told that the first fire departments were created to put out fires, not to "burn English-influenced books in the Colonies" as is their officially accepted origin. It's significant that Bahrani chose to pull this element of the novel into his adaptation not just because it illustrates the power inherent in control of media technologies, but also for the ways it echoes current heightened discourse around the history of the institution of policing in the U.S. The revisionist history here isn't just about upholding an official narrative about the purpose and benefit of an authoritarian institution, but about imbuing that institution with a culturally and politically virtuous function.

Bahrani and Naderi are more concerned, however, with how control over digitally disseminated information enables the flattening of critical discourse—and how such manipulation is essentially linked to a totalitarian control over history and public opinion. In some cases, this is linked to contemporary concerns over a free press that reached new levels of urgency in the Trump era. A pivotal sequence revealing the roots of the diegetic world's oppressive model of censorship is worth a closer look here, specifically for how the technological mediation and manipulation of history is connected to a broader ideology of fascistic control. Montag and Beatty are led by an informant to a secret library hidden behind a storefront, where they find a man recording videotaped historical lectures about how things were before the rise of the firemen and the Nine. Watching a clip from one of the videos, Montag is specifically struck by details on the extent of research and readable material the man claims was available during pre-Nine-era journalism. Bahrani zooms in and fades the audio to emphasize Montag's sudden interest as the man explains how journalists would "spend weeks, sometimes

months investigating a story, and then publish a series of articles hundreds, even thousands of words long on physical paper and the Internet." This is contrasted with the form news now takes on the Nine, which the man says is an extension of his generation's apathy and impatience with anything more than "headlines generated by an algorithm." The parallels here are, again, not subtle. In these moments Bahrani and Naderi's script suggests that the foundations of *Fahrenheit's* dystopia are not simply "like" or analogous to our contemporary mediascape, but rather that they are one and the same.

The script also takes aim at the increasingly contentious current U.S. sociopolitical discourse in the way it frames the film's accepted diegetic history. The firemen's oppressive enforced consensus and control of media is framed as having emerged as a means of achieving happiness and peace during a conflicted and violent past. Here Bahrani makes another slight change to the novel: as opposed to the "two atomic wars" Bradbury is careful to note the U.S. "started and won" in the novel, Bahrani's "alternate tomorrow" has been formed in the aftermath of "the Second Civil War." Bahrani and Naderi reference contemporary hand-wringing over a lack of "civility" in sociopolitical discourse, the stakes of which have been exaggerated in the film to match our own heightened rhetoric. Beatty specifically is made to embody—on behalf of the firemen and the diegetic government—the contemporary discourse on civility that is so often used as a front for efforts to dampen social movements and halt progressive action. He counters the Eel's description of an era of free journalism with more revisionist propaganda: that "too many opinions" led to a constant state of conflict in the past. The totalitarian ideology of *Fahrenheit's* world is here rooted in and equated with a prizing of civility and respectability politics over the critical discourse or disruptive politics of change.

Beatty takes this one step further by directly connecting the firemen's control of information, the manipulation of historical narratives, and the strict representational regulations of the Nine to the U.S.'s history of racism—or more specifically, at efforts for racial justice and political unrest. Guiding Montag through a recently discovered library, he frames their work as a solution to the U.S.'s historical racial and gender inequalities, saying that books like *Huck Finn* and *Native Son* created unrest, functioning as the source of anger over inequality and racism rather than critical reflections of their times. Beatty performs a kind of post-racial posturing when he explains that the books were dangerous in part because they illuminated people's differences within an unequal society. This echoes a Trumpian conservative sentiment that racism is somehow constructed at the level of contentious public discourse rather than a complex quality of institutional histories and practices being targeted by calls for justice.

We get another, even more on-the-nose version of this ideological sentiment toward the end of the film, when Beatty reveals to Montag (as the audience has known for most of the film) that he has also in fact read many of the books they've burned. He frames his choice to continue as a fireman as one of solidarity, telling Montag, “I would rather walk with my brother in the darkness than go alone in the light.”²⁸ Yet underneath the veneer of solidarity that Beatty is trying to evoke as a virtue here, he's really saying “I would rather be ignorant and comfortable than deal with uncomfortable realities.” Choosing the illusion of community over the complicated and challenging realities of historical knowledge is of course more appealing when you still have access to all the benefits and luxuries that community is afforded. Here again it's worth noting that Beatty and most of the other firemen are white, while Montag and the majority of the Eel activists in the last act of the film are played by people of color.

Bahrani shies away from depicting the actual digital manipulation and reshaping of historical events and texts outside of the early examples mentioned above. However, the integration of screens and ambient technology into every facet of the environment underlines how essential digital technology is in presenting to Fahrenheit's populace a particular version of the reality (past and present) in which they live. In the opening scenes Montag casually browses and then purchases a pair of shoes in a screen overlaid on his bathroom mirror, with his AI assistant reminding him how important it is to look good "for his followers on the Nine." Throughout the film we see quick variations on this culture of immediate gratification through digital purchases and other interactions, all of which reflects a neoliberal fixation on personal choice as the all-empowering solution to social ills.

In Montag's fire station there is a large neon sign with the slogan "Freedom is Choice." We also frequently see the phrase in the Nine broadcasts emblazoned across the sides of buildings out in public. This replicates the self-referential, reifying nature of much contemporary discourse as it occurs in digital spaces. It also encapsulates the comforting self-delusion of Beatty's version of history, which of course ends up being extremely beneficial to the diegetic authoritarian power structure. Freedom framed as a matter of consumer "choice" is really just control resignified in more pleasant neoliberal terms. In this sense the film suggests the virtuous self-centeredness of neoliberalism is fertile ground for fascism—more a reflection of contemporary history than prescient foresight given recent events in U.S. politics.

"Digital" Aesthetics (as Affect)

Bahrani's move to digital streaming also corresponds with a radical shift in form and aesthetic, which ultimately end up reflecting and commenting on this mode of exhibition itself. Given his prior production history, this shift can help explore some questions around what

exactly is meant by "digital cinema"—particularly in accounting for the differences between actual digital production practices (already discussed in previous chapters) and the sense of a "digital aesthetic." Digital aesthetics are sometimes defined in relation to a film's industrial positioning and/or the role digital technology itself plays in its marketing narratives and intended reception, but there's no consistent set of characteristics this term necessarily indicates.

Fahrenheit 451 certainly has a digital aesthetic in a more colloquial sense, with a visual texture aligned more closely with what we expect digital filmmaking to look like. This is especially true in contrast to the aesthetic of *Man Push Cart* and *Chop Shop*, in which digital manipulation was used to achieve the "look" of film.

There is also a growing and contentious argument that the now-overwhelming role of streaming in post-theatrical viewing, and even first-run distribution, has accelerated an earlier digital-driven shift in which "cinema appears to be taking on the characteristics of broadcast television" (Tryon, *Reinventing Cinema* 73). More than just the vivid but obviously manipulated qualities of the image, *Fahrenheit's* framing, editing, and cinematography style do have more in common with high-profile TV productions than traditional film language. However, this isn't surprising given the context of production and exhibition on HBO. The film also doesn't exhibit any of the more industrially determined markers of a digital aesthetic. It looks far too polished and professional to be mistaken for an imitation of an early digital video or DIY "desktop" aesthetic (the same style Bahrani and Simmonds were trying so hard to avoid early on). Neither does it embrace the spectacle-driven, effects-heavy distortion of onscreen action a la *The Matrix* and so many early-2000s films that followed in its wake, in which digital manipulation of the image was meant to literally signal the digital or otherwise unreal nature of diegetic space.

Yet while there is no overwhelmingly, ontologically distinct "digital" cinematic language on display here, Bahrani is using more traditional cinematic language to evoke an experience of the digital in the film's aesthetics and style. The quick editing mimics the fragmented attention of much modern home viewership, frequently jumping between a direct view of the action and the same action remediating through diegetic screens such as security camera footage or broadcasts on the Nine. In fact, as with the multiple screens viewers are likely to encounter over the course of a single film or TV episode while streaming at home—phone, laptop, TV—*Fahrenheit's* world has screens everywhere: surrounding Montag's living room, embedded in the mirrors in his bathroom, on the sides of the city's skyscrapers. In this sense *Fahrenheit's* digital aesthetic acts as a means of addressing viewers' own reception context.

This reflects a tendency for cinematic forms to incorporate and perform changing modes of viewership that has been theorized by Chuck Tryon, Ariel Rogers, and others. Tryon notes that a heavily platformed "on-demand culture contributes to a changing level of engagement with movie culture... turning streaming video into an updated form of flipping channels to seek out content that can fill an empty moment" and thus "changing our expectations about the processes of cinematic engagement" (Tryon, *On-Demand* 178). This in turn has potential to influence the way filmmakers construct their films as well as how audiences are positioned to understand the aesthetics, narrative, and other formal elements of a film. Rogers agrees that as form tied to production and technology changes, cinematic experience changes, but argues further that there is a reciprocal relationship here—that examining some of these formal shifts can also be culturally illuminating. Specifically, cinematic technologies' various appeals to audiences in the 21st century "provide a glimpse into broader ideas about how human experience was changing... along with an increasingly digitally mediated environment" (Rogers 89). The film's own mode of

technological exhibition is thus reflected in the post-cinematic conglomeration of interactive, fragmenting, and displacing screens through which *Fahrenheit's* diegetic world is constituted and revealed.

By "post-cinematic" here I am describing a particular textural quality of the film via the larger framework Steven Shaviro defines as post-cinematic affect. Shaviro defines this as a "structure of feeling" emerging in relation to the increasingly ubiquitous digital mediascape within which digital devices, screens, and audiovisual feeds exercise increased influence and interference in our daily lives via "flows of affect." He argues that in formally incorporating and performing the "social relations, flows, and feelings that they are ostensibly 'about,'" certain films have mobilized affect in order to simulate the way we experience and are constituted by the constant and various media flows to which we're subjected as a result of an increasingly digital culture (6). Bahrani's fragmented, often hyperactive rendering of the diegetic world of the film enacts the all-encompassing, often paranoid texture of our "excessive, overgrown post-cinematic mediasphere... an incessant flow of images and sounds." The film mobilizes post-cinematic affect here by "foreground[ing] the multimedia feed that we take so much for granted, and ponder[ing] what it feels like to live our lives within it" (67). In describing the formal and aesthetic shape this structure of feeling takes, Shaviro points to a typical example in which:

traditionally 'cinematic' sequences are intermixed with a sensory-overload barrage of lo-fi video footage, Internet and cable-TV news feeds, commercials, and simulated CGI environments... [which] often appear in windows within windows, so that the movie screen itself comes to resemble a video or computer screen. (68)

We see this in the constant array of surfaces that are also screens, as in the skyscrapers lit up with Nine broadcasts and ambient technology set into the walls and mirrors of Montag's home

mentioned above. A sequence toward the end of the film illustrates how Bahrani employs a multi-screen, constantly shifting reality TV aesthetic to mimic both the fragmentary nature of contemporary media viewership and the inescapability of this screen-saturated mediascape. As Beatty confronts Montag in his home after discovering his cooperation with Clarise and a group of Eels, Raven and a team of Nine broadcasters follow. We see the Nine broadcast itself in the various hanging media screens that surround Montag's living room, with Montag himself positioned in the middle. As Beatty starts to interrogate and berate Montag, Bahrani starts switching rapidly back and forth between standard medium and close shots of Montag and Beatty inside the home, to matching shots of the Nine broadcasts on the sides of buildings and other exterior screens in the streets, and then back to shots of Montag's own living room bisected with even more screens.

On a superficial level this mimics the number and variety of screen interfaces viewers are likely glancing back and forth between while watching, but it also emphasizes how this proliferation of screens and audiovisual feeds both fragments and unifies. As Montag first walks into his home, facing a pile of contraband the firemen have staged in his living room, several hanging media screens on each side of him show his approach via the Nine broadcast. He then looks to a larger screen on the wall, which is playing a feed from a camera somewhere outside on the streets, where a crowd stands watching the same Nine broadcast displayed on the side of a skyscraper. The broadcast the crowd is watching features Montag looking out at the crowd through the camera in his own living room. The film also quickly cycles through four cuts that replicate the different framings of each screen and camera feed: first we see Montag from behind, with the Nine broadcast in front of him on his living room wall; then a reverse shot of Montag's face in close up; then a street-level shot from behind the crowd watching Montag on

the Nine (the broadcast image they see is the same exact close-up we just got in the previous shot); and finally back to Montag in his living room framed against the broadcast of the crowd and their view of him. There are so many nested screens and layers of viewership here that in Bahrani's framing of the shot Montag stands in diegetically "real" space, watching Natives watch him watch a feed of himself. It's not the only time in the scene that Bahrani has Montag staring face-to-face with his own digital double, as virtually every direction he turns during the following confrontation with Beatty features one angle or another of his face plastered onto one of the broadcast screens.

One effect of the scene is to demonstrate how inescapable and totalizing the "audiovisual continuum" of this post-cinematic digital mediascape really is, directing and homogenizing the views of all those still allowed to tap into it. As Montag faces arrest and deletion on the Nine he comes face to face with an image of himself as an enemy of the state, mirroring back an unfamiliar but now effectively historically "true" identity he's helpless to change. Of this ubiquitous and unifying hypermediacy Shaviro notes that "such a world cannot be *represented*, in any ordinary sense. There is no stable point of view from which we could apprehend it" (131, emphasis in original). This is in part because all "points of view" or individual perspectives are subsumed into a single flow of homogenized, controlled data; for Shaviro, the perpetual circulation of capital, for Bahrani, that of information. Bahrani repeatedly states that the central threat of Bradbury's novel, and part of his sense of urgency for the film, is the eager complicity of individuals to embrace the means of their own destruction through consumership. During this sequence Montag's angry prior fans interact via emojis and denunciatory comments across the bottom of the Nine broadcast, illustrating one way in which this digital continuum encourages a willing and participatory homogenization of viewpoints. In *Fahrenheit* this mediascape allows

for and encourages a channeling and amplification of voices such that fascist othering and totalitarian control "does not need to be imposed from above. Rather... it 'emerges,' or 'self-organizes,' spontaneously from below" (Shaviro 69).

Bahrani also aligns the funneling, homogenizing quality of this fragmentary-yet-singular digital aesthetic with surveillance and digital intrusion in the name of security. This concern is rooted most specifically in Yuxie, the Amazon Alexa-esque AI that's present in seemingly every room in Montag's home and the firehouse. The device hangs unobtrusively from ceilings or extends off the edge of desks, small camera lenses positioned 360 degrees around a "Yuxie"-branded black orb. Bahrani's production designers resisted any urge to make Yuxie particularly menacing or futuristic in its appearance. It looks very much like any current smart home device, maybe a bit smaller. Yuxie serves as a combination digital assistant-home security-Big Brother all-seeing-all-hearing media recorder which Montag periodically addresses with questions—though which also occasionally addresses him about his behavior or observed vital signs. Montag and Beatty will sometimes tell Yuxie to "go dark," a version of incognito mode in which the device seems to power down but is still, as always, physically present in the room. Bahrani invokes concerns over the persistent listening, recording, and tracking of contemporary digital devices by having Yuxie respond to something Montag mutters while reading a copy of *Notes From the Underground* he's smuggled out of a crime scene. Montag's sudden panic that Yuxie is still listening even after he's told her to go dark is contrasted later with the knowing way Beatty calmly, quietly covers Yuxie with the hood of his desk lamp before he does any reading or writing of his own.

In addition to these narrative nods to current issues of digital privacy, Bahrani frequently employs a surveillance aesthetic by cutting to Yuxie's point of view. An early scene features a

quick cut to a fisheye lens surveillance camera-style feed as the device records Montag and Beatty leaving the firehouse armory. On a narrative level this foreshadows their eventual showdown after Montag steals a transponder for Clarisse's Eel group from an equipment locker. This isn't the only time Bahrani uses this sort of Yuxie-vision shot. We also get one from the device's perspective when Beatty covers it with a lamp before writing and reading in his office, as well as numerous other match cuts to cameras and the firemen's drones surveilling Eels and city streets throughout the film.

Even when these shots are relatively inconspicuous, they contribute collectively toward an aesthetic that emphasizes the surveillance and security element of this mediascape. As Montag escapes directly following the climactic showdown with Beatty described above, Bahrani cycles through 10-12 quick cuts: of Montag running, people watching the Nine broadcast on the streets, the skyline lit up with screens of the broadcast, drones flying overhead, a drones-eye-view of the street. The sheer number of cuts in a 15-second scene is like something out of an action movie, but the effect isn't one of frenetic, incomprehensible action so much as a sense of persistent vision across a wide, geographically disparate set of places. This surveillance aesthetic contributes to a larger "affective constellation" of fear, distrust, and ultimately othering at the hands of the totalitarian regime that the firemen represent, particularly now that we experience it through Montag's perspective.

Participatory Realism

While this aesthetic is distinctly different from Bahrani's prior films, it does share an overarching concern with verisimilitude. Mimicking a viewer's typical media environment enables Bahrani to engage with the mode of viewing itself, prompting reflections on how that environment influences one's engagement with and understanding of the world. Similar to how

contemporary rhetoric is deployed by Montag and Beatty above, there is a referential quality to the verisimilar aesthetic here. Viewers are not likely to confuse the images for the "real world" as in the films of chapters 1 and 2, but by rendering the events in a familiar fragmentary remediative style, Bahrani associates Shaviro's contemporary structure of media feeling with the totalitarian manipulation of the film's oppressive government.

Bahrani follows Montag so closely throughout the film that we only really ever get glimpses of the world outside his orbit in two ways: his brief excursions into Clarisse's low-tech, disconnected Eel lifestyle, and the anonymous, overcrowded city spaces we see only in relation to the Nine broadcasts. These shots of the city are so impersonal that while it's assumed they're all taking place in the film's Cleveland setting, they could very well be different identically engaged cities across the nation. The effect is that *Fahrenheit's* larger diegetic world is constituted strictly in terms of this homogenizing single flow of media. While Clarisse and the other Eels are presented as individuals with autonomy and motivations of their own, the Natives that make up the general populace are generic and faceless, seemingly only ever in the frame to remind us of the Nine's massive captive audience.

Like Shaviro's post-cinematic mediascape, Bahrani presents the city itself as "a vast, open performance space, carnivalesque, participatory, and overtly self-reflexive" (68). Images from the Nine carry over from one building to the next, extending into interior spaces and holographic projections that occupy three-dimensional space on sidewalks. Here we get another subtle but significant change from the novel, where Montag's wife is representative of the perils of contemporary communications media, sitting at home all day surrounded by parlor wall-TVs and occasionally participating in an interactive play. Bahrani presents a more insidious alternative, one in which the mediascape demands participation and follows you anywhere you go. Even the

leisure spaces in the film are just bars filled with silent, motionless individuals wearing VR headsets.

Gesturing beyond the streaming media situation in which most viewers of *Fahrenheit 451* will find themselves, Bahrani is pointing to not just media saturation but participation—both the eager, willing participation of the populace but also the necessity of this participation to prop up the larger media regime. This participatory intermingling of viewers and observed media object has also been a more hypothetical concern of many digital cinema theorists since the earliest appearances of the digital technologies that have come to define our current mediascape. Ariel Rogers' early discussions of speculative digital cinema spectatorship focus on notions of heightened "immediacy" and bodily address in which the separation between audience and film text is blurred. Albeit in a very different way than discussed in chapter 1, this futuristic sense of immediacy is reflected in Bahrani's updates of Bradbury's immersive televisual technology. While sensory engagement with the image remains limited to sight, the above examples demonstrate a clearly heightened, more immersive visual field than a single cinema screen.

Additionally, Bradbury's (mostly) one-directional viewership here gives way to a multi-directional participatory environment. The emoji-speak that flows across the screen during Montag's broadcasted exploits on the Nine references more than just social media platforms' engagement mechanisms of "liking" or "favorite"-ing content. Viewers consistently rearticulate the firemen's nationalist rhetoric ("Eels steal jobs!" "Natives only," "Burn burn burn"), while a chaotic stream of emojis articulating base emotional responses cascade across the feed in real time. These visual representations of emotion—happy, sad, angry faces, a flame symbol—even stream up the sides of buildings at night, a visual representation of affective production from street level. Shaviro describes this as a "surplus of affect": commodified emotional engagement

which is left to circulate and saturate everything without boundaries, even in the face of the "disappearance of the individual subject" in late capitalism. It is this surplus of affect—speech condensed down into raw yet flat displays of emotion—that supports the entire nationalist media apparatus of the film. Without it the *Nine* would simply be an audiovisual feed of the movie we're already watching.

Concluding Thoughts: The Digital Mode

So much of the above is so strikingly different from what came before in Bahrani's career that it's difficult to resist chalking it all up to HBO's more mainstream, dominant role in the larger cinematic mediascape. Certainly something is lost in the film's ability to engage with its social and political issues with the degree of nuance so essential to the films in chapters 1 and 2. This is in some ways dependent on *Fahrenheit*'s stylistic approach and structure, which more closely resembles a scaled-down summer blockbuster. All of the action needs to build to climactic showdowns: between Beatty and the Eels, Montag and Beatty, the firemen and Clarisse's group. This structure flattens some of the potential for the more open, complex and troublingly unresolved conflicts of Bahrani's earlier films. However, this is not to make a purely determinative connection between production mode and final form and aesthetic any more than in previous chapters. In fact, HBO is not a Hollywood studio, appeals to its own audience(s) in a distinct exhibition context, and has shown a willingness to put out relatively boundary-pushing and ambitious work. The demands of adapting a book with its own pre-existing narrative, cultural cache, and audience also presents a unique set of limitations Bahrani hasn't faced with other films, necessitating changes to his otherwise consistent research and (co-)writing process.

Above Hadjioannou argues for understanding digital technologies as applying a new "function" to existing cinematic practices. *Fahrenheit 451* illustrates this in both its narrative and

the ways we can understand the film at a meta level, as part of a network of still-in-flux digital production and exhibition practices and technologies. Through the film plot Bahrani attends to the digital's functional manipulation and determination of reality, but the post-cinematic aesthetic applies its own function as a reflection and mimesis of viewers' interfaced, fragmented experience. Here we can see Bahrani attempting to maintain a focus on realism and verisimilitude despite the increasingly restrictive industrial and formal expectations imposed by a new production mode. While not the kind of aesthetic hyper-realism often referenced in discussions of realist cinema, the film's formal and aesthetic structure is still geared toward prompting a particular type of "perceptual involvement [from] the spectator" predicated on "believing in the reality of the image while simultaneously knowing it has been manipulated" (Hadjioannou 19). This relation between form/aesthetics and the viewer's direct, phenomenological perception of the world has always undergirded discussions of cinematic realism(s). Formal and aesthetic elements historically identified as realist (such as the long take and deep focus) were privileged as such for their power to "allow for a direct sense of the spectator's involvement in the creation of meaning" (Hadjioannou 19).

The main point of difference between the hybrid digital streaming mode and the production styles explored in chapters 1 and 2 may be this direct incorporation of the various interface and aesthetic elements involved in the creation of meaning. One of the functions of the digital that Bahrani is attending to here is the ability for mechanisms of interactive and participatory viewership to reify particular narratives and ways of seeing the world. In some ways Bahrani is foregrounding the formal manipulation and audience participation that has always been at the heart of cinematic realism—and any social/cultural meanings such narratives of realism produce—via the sci-fi exaggeration of recognizable digital and social media

interfaces. That's not to say that he's intentionally commenting on the subtle relationship between particular aesthetics and audience perception in the production of realism from the earlier films—rather that this diegetic attention to how media forms produce notions of socio-cultural reality is neither surprising nor coincidental here. In this way *Fahrenheit 451*, and Bahrani's career as a whole thus far, offers an insight into how the socially engaged "truth-telling" prerogative of independent cinema may carry through a variety of shifting industrial, economic, and formal configurations.

V. Conclusion

A study of Bahrani's trajectory through the increasingly more mainstream spaces of independent cinema explored here not only reveals key relationships between production mode, aesthetics, and ideology—it also poses questions about the evolving meaning of "independence" in a contemporary cinematic landscape dominated by streaming. The prior chapters ultimately look both backward and forward: at more traditional modes of independent filmmaking on the industrial and cultural margins, and toward possible future modes in which the increased visibility of digital streaming platforms complicates binary notions of independent vs. mainstream. The emerging hybrid of streaming cinema—of streaming productions, not just streaming as a distribution platform—is different from both traditional notions of independent cinema and Hollywood. This hybridity has of course always been part of the independent sector, since it constantly evolves in relation to the dominant industry modes. Streaming as a distribution and exhibition method has also picked up and supplemented TV's long-term role in reducing the major studios' power. For this reason, Bahrani's move to HBO and then Netflix is more lateral than the "moving up" trajectory of the 90s-era crossover filmmaker narrative.

The developing space of streaming production is not really Hollywood, but can it necessarily be considered independent either? If the major streaming production studios offer much of the same industrial mobility, production resources, access to IP, and visibility and platforming traditionally granted by the studio system, then characterizing these productions as "independent" raises the same question Janet Staiger asked about Indiewood a decade ago: "independent from what?" What is this new hybrid mode into which Bahrani and so many other

filmmakers are moving? Besides shifting the primary terms of exhibition, are the production arms of major streamers acting in a fundamentally different way than prominent independent mini-majors of the indie era? Additionally, Hollywood has traditionally stood as the industrial entity with the widest reach and visibility, with independent cinema often defining itself in contradistinction based on films' appeal to niche audiences or the vaguely defined art house crowd. How does the independent sector's oppositional and counter-hegemonic cultural framing function when exclusive film festivals and geographically bound limited releases give way to film premieres on mass-appeal home streaming platforms?

For his part, Bahrani has never seemed to strongly buy into discourses of oppositional ethics and artistic purity that so often swirl around the independent sector. As the chapters here have shown, he seems more motivated by the different opportunities and challenges presented by various hybrid modes of filmmaking. The guerrilla hyperrealist mode discussed in chapter 1 was born out of economic necessity, but Bahrani also treated it as a kind of hybrid between documentary and fiction. The lack of a large production apparatus allowed the crew to work more intimately with locations and actors, taking advantage of the immediacy and aesthetic distinctions such a form allowed. The films of chapter 2 made use of a much scaled-down model based on studio filmmaking, one that took advantage of the Hollywood star interest and marketability of Indiewood while still presenting a degree of autonomy and freedom. HBO represents yet another transitional mode—a set of tensions between television and film, between a historically established production studio and the new media space of streaming.

Returning to *The White Tiger*, Bahrani's 2021 film is another departure from his prior filmography in both its content and production mode. The global nature of the shoot and Netflix's indeterminate, nascent role in production are in stark contrast to what Bahrani went

through making *Fahrenheit 451*. Even though that was another novel adaptation for another major streaming service, HBO's history in prestige television production and audience recognition of the channel-as-brand imposed a particular style and set of expectations on the earlier film. Netflix's significantly more developed global distribution structure also increased the likelihood of a more global appeal for an American film not set in the U.S. *The White Tiger* also, perhaps not coincidentally, navigates its anti-capitalist sentiments in ways that are more openly hostile to the U.S. and other global economic powers, making its critique similarly direct but ultimately very different from the films discussed in the previous chapters.

The endings of all the films discussed prior are inflected with, if not always hope, then at least a turn toward a future that contains potential for something different. The American Dream films feature more ambiguous endings that are nevertheless characterized by an acceptance of present circumstances. *At Any Price*, *99 Homes*, and *Fahrenheit 451* feature characters who have compromised their own ethical integrity to participate in exploitative and oppressive systems, and thus the films must build to climactic third-act reversals to resolve these moral conflicts. By the end of each, recognition and regret over the consequences of their actions prompts the characters' final actions. *The White Tiger* is a bit more cynical—or, one might argue, simply more realistic. Balram doesn't magically transcend his circumstances—he claws his way up and out, quite literally over the dead body of his former master and sometimes-sort-of-friend in order to start his own business. Bahrani has finally made the rags-to-riches story resisted by the narrative structures of the American Dream trilogy, but one that trades the superficial uplift of so many Hollywood narratives for the resentment and complicated morality of a hero who ultimately utilizes the system for his own gain. Balram doesn't regret his ruthless turn in the

end—in fact he celebrates that he did what he had to in order to get to the "other side of the cage" that is the caste system.

One of the defining features of Bahrani's career is that it's never been quite so starkly oppositional as Balram's inside/outside positioning, which itself is an extreme version of the insider/outsider dichotomies suggested in all of the films here. For that matter, the various stages of independent cinema's oppositional co-evolution with Hollywood have never been as clear cut as the divisions of the economic and cultural systems depicted in Bahrani's films. Critical discourse often positions the studio system as a monolithic entity that independent cinema operates in constant opposition to, but the terms and forms of this opposition are myriad and constantly changing. Bahrani has always been clear about his higher budget and more mainstream ambitions (see chapter 2), and so his movement into the realm of higher profile streaming seems natural. This isn't a case of an indie filmmaker turning their back on an earlier philosophy of scrappy, minimalist production when given the opportunity to enter the Hollywood fold. Nor is it an act of callous professional self-preservation on par with Balram's ruthless turn toward capitalism. Rather, the trajectory of Bahrani's career illustrates the degree to which distinctions of independent and Hollywood, niche art films and mainstream have been further blurred in the era of streaming. This raises questions about how prior discursive notions of independence—particularly those used to construct an impression of realism or truth-telling—may operate without a clear dominant or hegemonic "mainstream" to be positioned in opposition to.

Notes

1. Technically his second time shooting outside of the U.S. if including his Columbia University thesis film *Strangers*, which he made in Iran.
2. John Berra notes that the beginnings of what we consider contemporary U.S. "independent cinema" arose out of a coincidence of the industrial rupture of New Hollywood with the counterculture movement.
3. Interestingly, the term "American Dream trilogy" is applied predominantly in discussions of these films in non-U.S. publications and online forums, and in the title of a DVD collection released by Dutch distribution company Imagine Films, available in North America only via import.
4. For recent examples of how extremely the release strategies and budgets can vary even for films made by the same indie studios, see Annapurna's star-studded Oscar-bait release of *Vice*, budgeted at \$60 million with an initial release of 2,442 theaters vs. the studio's 4-theater initial release, expanded eventually to just over 1,000, for the \$12-million-budgeted *If Beale Street Could Talk*.
5. Suwolski, who uses his real name in the film, actually owns and operates the shop where Bahrani and his crew filmed and where Ale's room in the film is located.
6. I'll revisit this point below, specifically with regard to the notion of capturing some sort of unmediated "reality" and the degree to which cinematic representations—documentary or otherwise—are always inherently constructed.
7. Bahrani's enthusiasm for the diversity and contained chaos of Willets Point echoes his affinity for the "complexity and energy" of Tehran—where he lived for several years after graduating from Columbia University—and the way so many people and flows are funneled into urban centers and forced to interact (Scott).
8. See particularly Geoff King's parallel analysis of Bahrani and Kelly Reichardt's early films in *Indie 2.0*.
9. In this group of films he specifically names Bahrani's first three U.S. features as well as Kelly Reichardt's *Wendy and Lucy*, Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck's *Sugar*, So Yong Kim's *Treeless Mountain*, and Lance Hammer's *Ballast*, among others.
10. See "About Neo-Neo-Realism" (<http://www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/about-neo-neo-realism>)
11. For instance, Bahrani points out the inconsistency with which "neorealism" is applied as an aesthetic or generic title to two directors of so-called "Iranian neorealism," Abbas

Kiarostami and Mohsen Makhmalbaf, who he acknowledges as important influences (Porton 47).

12. Various "realist" film movements would agree with this, I think—realism as reaching out from the film text as a kind of awakening or call to action.
13. For an extended version of this argument see Quiroga (236-239), who refers to realism, Bazinian and otherwise, as a "perceptual form" (233).
14. The exceptions here being some of the aforementioned scenes when mobile, close-quarters shooting was required on live sets, such as *Chop Shop*'s subway scenes.
15. Partially resulting from and partially heightened by the lack of traditionally alternating mid-shot/close-up editing in dialogue-heavy scenes.
16. This use of narrative verisimilitude toward ideological ends prefigures a technique Bahrani will employ to more pronounced effect in the conclusions of *At Any Price* and *99 Homes*, discussed in chapter 2. Specifically, that denying closure encourages the events of the film to bleed into audiences' encounters with everyday life and collective consciousness—a sense that the characters' lives and stories are still occurring outside of the theater in the "real world."
17. Bahrani notes this circular logic as well, specifically pointing to the absurdity of Ahmad's panic when he loses his cart: "It's the thing that traps you but you have to fight so hard to get it... to get that which you're trying to escape from" ("Director's Commentary").
18. Ahmed offers a broad enough understanding of "orientation" to apply not just to sexuality and gender but to a wide variety of ways one may be embodied within space and time, particularly in relation to normative bodies and experience. (For example, migration creating a rupture in one's orientation and the need for reorientation within a new cultural/economic context).
19. *Goodbye Solo*: \$870,781 domestic/\$942,209 worldwide; *Man Push Cart*: \$36,608/\$55,903; *Chop Shop*: \$125,045/\$222,776
20. Of which *Goodbye Solo* had the widest release: 33 theaters at its high point.
21. Beyond noting that "Dennis's and Zac's trailers were either their cars or the sofa at the farm where we shot the film. Literally," Bahrani doesn't say what any of the actors' rates were, whether they worked for scale, etc.
22. Part of Dennis Quaid's willingness to star in *At Any Price* in fact revolved around a perception that working with Bahrani would help yield a particular type of performance. "I want to be like that kid in *Chop Shop*," he told Bahrani, "when he closes the garage door and locks it with a screwdriver, just that mechanical action... Can you make me like that?" (NY Times, Tribeca Interview). The noticeable absence of a classically calibrated

professional performance—contributing to so much of the earlier films' authenticity—ends up being constructed and trafficked as a professional commodity.

23. Or marks, for that matter. Bahrani seems exasperated by the very idea of blocking out a scene, saying that if you give actors specific marks to hit then "they aren't thinking about their performance, they're thinking about hitting their mark."
24. This is not to falsely paint the films here as more "radical" than they are, but rather to acknowledge the way more Hollywood-linked independent cinemas draw from and assimilate the techniques and aesthetics of other, often more explicitly and directly political cinematic traditions (which here I argue Bahrani is doing selectively and intentionally within the constraints of the Indiewood model). In fact King argues that lack of closure was a strong link between U.S. black independent cinema of the 80s and 90s and Teshome Gabriel's formulation of Third Cinema.
25. It's significant to note that the major streamers discussed here all had strong roots in or evolved dependent on models of TV production. HBO Films is the current iteration of the premium channel's in-house production arm devoted to films and mini-series, while Netflix and Amazon Studios got started in production via TV series made for subscribers of their own platforms. That these eventual film studios evolved out of TV production complicates discussions around their broader role(s) in cinema production and distribution beyond the scope of this chapter. However, I'll return to the mutual influence between TV and cinema production in the discussion of aesthetics later in the chapter.
26. This seems feasible given a Canadian MPA report right before the film's HBO debut estimated that the production spent nearly \$10-million on local extras, crew, and other on-site services. (<https://www.globenewswire.com/news-release/2018/05/16/1507594/0/en/HBO-Brings-Classic-Novel-to-Life-as-Fahrenheit-451-Heats-up-Ontario-s-Economy.html>)
27. The ability to manipulate digital images via code being in this discussion somehow fundamentally different from prior practices of editing and special effects.
28. An adaptation of a quote often apocryphally attributed to Helen Keller—ironically even in signaling his act of subversion to Montag, Beatty fails to act with individuality.

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