

CULTURE

# How an L.A. Realtor Turned Real Estate Listings Into Cinematic Art

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Screengrab/Ben Bacal

A whole a new genre has been invented — property drama.

Dusk in the Hollywood Hills. A melancholy piano fills the soundtrack with Debussy's haunting "Clair de Lune." The camera focuses on a man in a blue blazer as he enters a stunning glass-box-style modern house. He heads straight into the sleek all-white kitchen and pours himself a tumbler of booze from a crystal decanter. Then he strolls onto the wrap-around terrace and stares moodily at the city lights for a bit until climbing upstairs to the spacious master bedroom, where he encounters his wife applying makeup in their enormous luxury bathroom. "I want a divorce," he tells her, delivering the line so woodenly he'd have Keanu Reeves slapping his forehead.

Believe it or not, this depressing, badly acted but gorgeously shot 10-minute mini-movie is actually a real estate listing. The soon-to-be divorced couple's house at 6654 Emmet Terrace is currently going for \$4.5 million.

Video tours of properties for sale are nothing new, of course. But this one has characters, a plot (sort of) and stars — or, in this case, the house's two owners, Ori Ayonmike and his wife, Nafisa, who are shown enjoying the home's high-tech amenities (like a computerized wine-storage system) as they argue and ultimately split. It's a whole new genre of filmmaking — call it property drama — being pioneered by Los Angeles real estate broker Ben Bacal.

"I went to film school, I worked in the film industry before I started selling real estate," he explains. "So I know that if you can entertain people with storytelling while showing a house, the more eyeballs you're going to draw to that property, the more buzz you're going to generate — and subsequently you get a sale."

Bacal began experimenting with arty video listings about three years ago, becoming the first Los Angeles realtor to use drones to shoot his properties. He later started to incorporate models in his ads — a gaggle of bikini-clad sunbathers lounging poolside at a \$32.8 million estate on Oriole Way, for instance — until finally, earlier this year, he produced his first with a recognizable storyline.

Ayonmike and his wife wrote the script themselves (they're not really getting a divorce), and Bacal hired a production company called Rifiki to shoot the footage (total cost: \$20,000). Bacal has since shot another, much more upbeat short film for a \$48.5 million home in Bel Air, this one about two kids faking illness, Ferris Bueller-style, and spending the day splashing in the infinity pool and watching movies in the personal theater.

He's about to begin production on a third, for a two-acre property next door to Jeffrey Katzenberg's. Bacal has tentatively titled the film *The House Nazi*, but all he will reveal about its plot is that it's about a "very difficult seller."

Bacal claims his videos have increased business "a thousand-fold" and inspired him to share at least a part of the technique with other realtors through a soon-to-be-released app called Roofshoot, which lets agents shoot and edit their own property dramas on an iPhone. "Un film de Century 21" is only a matter of time.