

The character is confused, but so is the filmmaker

By David Walsh
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Hustle & Flow, written and directed by Craig Brewer

How to treat contemporary American life in an artistic and truthful fashion? This remains a major stumbling block even for the sincere and the semi-sincere.

One can become indignant in a given case—for example, a willfully cynical or ignorant work—or respond “more in sorrow than in anger” in another, when the weakness seems primarily due to inexperience or naïveté, but the inability of American filmmaking to represent life richly and persuasively persists.

Social reality is complex, and the filmmaker who considers it is truly called on to demonstrate some specialized knowledge. Healthy instincts, the ability to convey individually precise impressions, good will, even a certain instinctive rebelliousness—all of these are needed, but they will prove inadequate in the face of the immense contradictions of social life. The artist who takes on these contradictions, but does not master them consciously, is likely to be mastered by them.

Elements in *Hustle & Flow* are lifelike and convincing; other, more important ones, are not. The independent film, written and directed by Craig Brewer, treats a Memphis pimp, DJay (Terrence Dashon Howard), who works out of his Chevrolet, with one prostitute, Nola (Taryn Mannings), and sells drugs in a small way on the side. It occurs to DJay one night that he has now reached the age at which his father died. Is his life over? Is this all it has to offer?

He decides to pursue his adolescent dream of becoming a rap singer. With two collaborators, and his other (pregnant) “girl” (Taraji P. Henson) singing back-up, he produces a demo tape that he hopes to get into the hands of Skinny Black (Ludacris), a local who has made good in the world of hip-hop. Needless to say, nothing works out as planned...but still it all works out, more or less.

Howard is excellent as a man who has been dealt blows by life and deals some nasty ones of his own: for example, he throws Lex (Paula Jai Parker), who works as a stripper, out of his house, along with her infant, when she insultingly upbraids him. He forces Nola to have sex with a storeowner so he can obtain a costly microphone he needs for his recording sessions. His conduct toward “his” women in general combines sweet-talking with the threat of violence.

Howard (*Crash*) makes his soft-spoken but deeply angry character into a human being of some sort—frustrated, at times self-loathing, unconscious and damaged, but not fully destroyed. He remains somewhat true to himself through it all. There is, despite his deplorable occupation and conduct, something a bit courageous about him, something even honorable. It is to the credit of Brewer and Howard that they discover this element and bring it out. Everyone on earth deserves to be treated seriously.

One feels the intense Memphis heat, in the houses, in the cars, in the streets. DJay sweats in his undershirt, the others too, and we believe it. The opening shot, of the pimp slouched in his beat-up car, on a hot, dirty back street in a hot, dirty city, delivering a monologue about man’s fate (“A man ain’t like a dog. Man, they know about death. They got a sense of history”), has promise. It shows something of life. And it even hints at the possibility of socially deprived people thinking about their larger condition. Brewer demonstrates genuine talent.

In general, the shots of rundown, working class Memphis interested me most. (As a rule, the film industry doesn’t even show us what this country *looks* like, apart from a few blocks in mid-Manhattan and patches of southern California.) We hardly see anything lifelike in American films these days. We see mannequins and wax figures, horrible distortions of life. There is something embalmed about the look of most American films.

Unhappily, the rest of *Hustle & Flow* does not, for the most part, live up to the promise of its opening sequence. The spontaneity, the elementary and understandable human confusion, even the reflectiveness largely evaporate as the film settles too often and all too easily for the cliché of the American success story, clumsily glossing over its own contradictions in the process.

In interviews, Brewer, 33, a former playwright and a Memphis resident, seems sincere about his work and hostile to the film establishment. He made his first film, *The Poor & Hungry*, about a Memphis car thief, for \$20,000. After Brewer’s script for *Hustle & Flow* was rejected everywhere in Hollywood, director John Singleton (*Boyz n the Hood*) produced the film with his own money. Brewer told an interviewer, “I fought Hollywood *not* to do a stereotype!... I really wanted to represent these people that I know, the hustlers that’re moving girls from shake joint to shake joint.”

To represent people is a worthy aim, but genuine artistic representation is a demanding business. It means more than taking a photograph or series of photographs, or catching certain phrases or mannerisms, or accurately capturing the way a man or woman acts at a given day or even under given conditions. It means portraying the truth of an entire life, in all its background and interconnections. And it means, as well, seriously depicting the social arena in which a character operates, with all its real possibilities and limitations, not simply the character’s or artist’s fantasies about social life, but real social life. A filmmaker has to know something about a great many things, not simply what a character eats for breakfast or what kind of shirt he wears or what kind of car he drives. Real knowledge! How many have it?

There are elements of the drama in *Hustle & Flow* that ring true: the

look and feel of Memphis's streets and houses, the thuggishness of the rap scene, the depth of the protagonist's crisis and desperation. But there are other elements about which one wonders: Is this necessarily how it is? One thinks: It might have been that way, but perhaps it wasn't. And art, as a great critic once noted, doesn't tolerate semi-victories or semi-success.

The subplots are schematic, largely unconvincing: DJay enlists his old friend Key (Anthony Anderson) as his record producer. Key has a church-going, respectable job-holding wife (Elise Neal). She disapproves of her husband working with DJay. They clash and then, all too smoothly, reconcile. The relationship feels contrived, something out of a recipe book. And extraneous. In describing the narrative, one prefers to leave it out. The story of Key's white assistant, Shelby, also has the feel of something added on unnecessarily.

At heart, there is a false element in the film, the social element. Brewer has made a film about the American Dream, and at the wrong moment in history. "Everybody gotta have a dream" is the film's foolish tagline, without apparent irony. Everything is driven by the desire for individual success.

At one point in the recording process, DJay bribes a neighbor with dope to turn off his CD player because it can be picked up by the microphones in the impromptu sound studio. We never see him again. But I want to know about the neighbor. What becomes of him? If DJay becomes a hip-hop star, what becomes of that man and everyone else in the poverty-stricken neighborhood? Do their lives improve? Does the filmmaker care?

Here is yet one more film, like *Good Will Hunting*, *8 Mile* and a dozen others whose names I've forgotten, in which a working class character achieves success and leaves everyone else behind in the dust.

Of course, such fantasies (and even occasional realities) about finding an individual way out of drudgery and poverty exist—billions are wasted on lotteries and at casinos!—but are they entirely beyond criticism? In fact, Brewer does not see all that much further than his lead character and a great many Americans. He wants his film "to be reflective of *The Commitments*, *Footloose*, *Flashdance*, and *Rocky*." It's possible to conceive of a more elevated ambition.

The social element is undeveloped, uncritically approached, and that largely shapes the piece. The narrative shifts into gear once DJay sets his sights on the recording career. As soon as that happens, at least until the final confrontation with Skinny Black, the more interesting elements of the piece fall by the wayside. "Everybody gotta have a dream." No, everybody has to see things for what they are, without manipulated dreams.

What does Brewer think of DJay's lyrics? "It's hard out there for a pimp," "Beat that bitch," and so on. The repetitiveness, the backwardness, the endless posturing of rap music. It's tedious, although sometimes catchy. DJay's anger is real, but he hasn't got a clue about the source of his misery, much less what to do about it.

The film has been criticized for its treatment of women. And the treatment is not all that savory, a combination of exploitation and sentimentality. The only character who really gets his due is DJay, the others are largely ornaments, except for the repugnant Skinny Black.

The critics worry that Brewer depicts the women more or less happily accepting their situation. A legitimate concern, but there is an even more general one, that no one will raise. How is it possible to make a film in such a neighborhood and convey no anger at the overall social conditions? As always these days, the spirit of protest is

entirely absent here. It is taken for granted that the only way out of poverty is a recording contract.

Memphis, Tennessee, with a population of approximately 650,000 people, is among the 10 poorest cities in the United States. It ranks 8th, for example, tied with Atlanta, among metropolitan areas with high poverty rates. Some 24 percent of the population lives in what is officially described as "poverty," in fact, at little more than a subsistence level. In 2003, 35 percent of children in Memphis lived in poverty at some time during the year. More than half the city's households in 1999 lived on incomes under \$35,000; 23 percent of the households under \$15,000. Why is no one furious about that? Entire neighborhoods are being "mistreated," an entire class of people. That is accepted, "that's life" in America.

It will be argued that Brewer is merely reflecting the state of mind of DJay and others like him, that such types have no rebellion in them, except the reckless and ultimately futile verbal bruising they offer in rap. Yes, of course, but that is precisely the point. First, Brewer appears fascinated by lumpen characters who have hardly a trace of social conscience or concern; and, second, in any event, it's his responsibility as an artist to see more than his own creations, to criticize their limitations and delusions.

The problem throughout is that Brewer fails to clarify his own attitude toward the events. He seems both repulsed and attracted by the violence and aggression, by his character's misdeeds, by the lifestyle he depicts. Ambiguity exists in life, but that's not the issue here. Ambivalence in the artist's mind about elementary matters is not a reflection of objectively existing ambiguity, but simply of the artist's failure to draw definite and precise conclusions about his subject matter, in short, intellectual laziness. Also, in this case, a tendency to pander to some of the less worthy emotions and expectations of the audience is also at work.

One is not asking the director to indict his character or anyone else, but to expose by dramatic means the latter's disastrously unconscious state, his utter vulnerability to the lure of the American Dream. A difficulty, however, is that Brewer seems to be vulnerable to the same lure. While castigating Hollywood studio executives for their cowardice and lack of foresight, in interviews he presents his own life and budding film career (including a \$9 million distribution deal for *Hustle*) as a vindication of the notion that perseverance and resourcefulness will win out in the end. So what are we left with?

Is the film critical of conditions (in Memphis, in America, in the sex trade, in the recording industry) or accepting; angry or complacent; a cautionary tale or does it set out a path for its audience to follow? The answers are unclear, and the resulting confusion fatally weakens the film. Again, ambiguity exists in life, but the director has to bring to bear something more than the disorder of his immediate life and surroundings, no matter how accurate certain of the perceptions may be. Even confusion must be worked through and taken to a higher level.

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