

That Which Will Strike Some as Repellant

By Steven Dube

George Clooney at the Oscars, "Proud to be out of touch."

Reese Witherspoon accepting her award, "You know, I'm just trying to matter, and live a good life and make work that means something to somebody."

The race issues of *Crash*.

The homo-trouble of *Brokeback*.

The explosiveness of *Munich*.

This was not your parents' rollicking extravaganza. This was not even your daughter's rave. Message replaced decadence. Instead of being shameless, as is their talent, everyone in Hollywood looked prideful. Everyone looked super bored. They fake laughed through Jon Stewart's monologue. Cintra Wilson, in her Oscar commentary, noted, "They looked at Stewart as if he just shat on the world's last clean sheet."

But yes, there was one glorious moment. The moment everyone who had paid any attention to the nominees was eagerly awaiting. Three 6 Mafia's performance of "It's Hard Out Here for a Pimp." It featured in the foreground an interpretive dance (with hoes and pimps, and now and then a trick!), while the Three 6 Mafia did their rap. The song ended with the female singer of the chorus in spotlight singing slowly and longingly the word *Pimp*. Then Queen Latifah opened the envelope and laughed. Three 6 Mafia had won! I got on my bed and raised my hands in the air. We had done it. We had scored the winning touchdown. We had brought Oscar gold to the glorious film *Hustle & Flow*.

I began to enthuse about the movie everywhere I went.

Example:

I was down to my green boxers (for St. Patrick's Day) in the locker room when a former roommate I hadn't seen in a while yelled at me, "What's up, Jesus?"

"What's up? Why the Jesus?"

"Well, the beard. So you almost done with grad school?"

"Yeah, a month left."

"You gonna stay in the city when you're done?"

"I don't know, hopefully. Maybe go down South though. You're from Tennessee, right?"

"Yeah, easy enough to remember. I'm the only Asian guy you know from Tennessee."

"You're the only person I know from Tennessee. You're from Memphis, right?"

"No, Nashville."

"Oh I got excited, because of that movie *Hustle & Flow* that's set in Memphis."

"Oh that's a real good movie."

"I was excited. I thought I knew someone from where that movie takes place."

"Yeah, that's a real good movie."

"But Nashville must be very different from Memphis."

"Yeah, a lot more country than rap."

"Yeah, you gotta love that crunk."

Not everyone was as enthusiastic. Annie Proulx, author of the short story, long movie *Brokeback Mountain*, called Three 6 Mafia's performance "atrocious." And atrocious it was! But, to quote Jon Stewart, "If there's any way to reach out to this audience and show the difficulty of being a pimp, it's clearly through interpretive dance."

Jim Emerson, movie critic, in his blog wrote, "I suggested a while ago . . . that 'Hustle & Flow' would have been a much better movie if it had more of a sense of humor about itself and was played for comedy or farce. (The whole thing struck me as a hip-hop 'Waiting for Guffman.') – [and here Emerson lists all the movie's hilarious scenes] those are hilarious scenes. Aren't they?"

Yes, this stuff is funny. But *Hustle & Flow* tempers that with respect for its drama. *Hustle & Flow* is in a long line of Hollywood movies, from *All About Eve* and *Easter Parade* to *Flashdance*, *Ice Castles*, *Rocky*, *Showgirls*, *Bring It On*, and *Coyote Ugly*, about trying to make it in the biz, whatever that business is. It combines an art house aesthetic with pimps and ho's. This leads to great scenes in which moral ambiguity takes a back seat to empathy and, yes, a certain amount of wildness.

Check out this scene: DJay (Terrence Howard), South Memphis pimp, is trying to get successful rapper Skinny Black (Ludacris) to listen to his demo tape. The movie, leading up to this scene, has traced the production of that tape. But how can he when all Skinny wants is some good weed, when Skinny is distracted by a girl on his lap? So DJay has to succeed the only way he knows, by hustling. He makes (with his words!) Skinny feel bad for leaving the South. Now on the defensive, Skinny is willing to bond with DJay. After a long talk Skinny takes out DJay's bag o' weed and says, "Do you stand behind your product, nigga?" Then comes the moment, the glorious moment. The camera cuts to DJay. DJay pauses a second, takes a drag from his cigarette, then slowly turns to Skinny and says, "Is a pig's pussy pork?" 80's mack music (whatever that means) plays and our pimp has (momentarily) made it.

I was waiting in line at a store, listening into the conversation of two young black female attendants.

"I hate that ghetto show."

"I think it's kind of funny."

"I mean out of all the ghettoist people, to give Flava Flav a show."

"I think he's really funny."

"Yeah, well, I didn't like when they were going through the contestants and they asked each one, just how ghetto are you? I mean being ghetto can be cool, but at a certain point it becomes trashy."

"Hey there's a new Simpsons on tonight."

A few minutes later:

"I think Terrence Howard is one of the best actors."

"Why?"

"Well I just think he's so underrated and all. He's just a really classy actor."

And that's exactly it. *Hustle & Flow* puts the class behind the crass.

The lamest and most frequent critique of the movie references the "Pimp" song and says, "Hey, you know it's hard for a ho as well" (cited as a photo caption with Emerson's column). Well, duh. While I personally think that pimping is simply a debased form of management, and nothing worse, it's clearly a controversial issue. *Hustle & Flow* takes its pimp seriously.

Most of the Oscars were all about asking the "important" questions. *Hustle & Flow*, with its "Is a pig's pussy pork?" was asking the right one.

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"Is a pig's pussy pork?"