

The Movies On My Mind: Crumb, directed by Terry Zwigoff:

WHEREOF ONE SHOULD NOT SPEAK:

Underground comic-book artist Robert Crumb emerged as a cult figure during the flower power generation as R. Crumb, founder of ZAP Comix; creator of lid-blown-off-the-id characters like Fritz the Cat, Mr. Natural, and Angelfood McSpade. The reclusive Crumb had previously avoided self-disclosure, keeping interviewers at arms length with wry put-downs that often concealed more than they revealed. Filmmaker Terry Zwigoff was a friend of many years, as well as a publisher of his work. Zwigoff deemed Crumb an unrecognized American genius; had long wanted to tell Crumb's story before it could be debased by some flack from the media culture his work so savagely derides.

By report, Zwigoff finally was able to overcome Crumb's considerable resistance when the artist was moved to pity by the director's near suicidal despair over being creatively blocked. Crumb allowed Zwigoff access to family, friends, his ex-wife and several former lovers over six years of shooting. Personal footage was then interspersed with samples of Crumb's oeuvre, as well as adulation, condemnation and equivocation by critics of various persuasions.

When it was released in 1994, Zwigoff eponymous documentary received virtually universal critical acclaim. The plaudits, I submit, were utterly unmerited: for Crumb is a cold, deeply problematic piece of business, often crudely insensitive when not downright cruel towards its more vulnerable participants, while raising serious questions about the value of the very work it vaunts. Gone is the tender humaneness one admired in Zwigoff's earlier affecting portrait of an obscure eccentric jazzman, Louie Bluie. Crumb is introduced to the background of jaunty old jazz he loves and expertly plays (Zwigoff himself was once a co-performer in Crumb's own jazz band, the Cheap Suit Serenaders). The artist comes across as a simulacrum of one of his own

flaky, feckless characters. On and off the page, his iconoclastic wit is as likely to be directed against himself as bourgeois society. He's a thin, slightly stooped man with dweeb hornrims, nerd hat, toothbrush moustache -- all of which foster the impression of disarming diffidence. One comes to suspect this naive image is disingenuously cultivated. One learns that the artist grew up in a suburban Philadelphia nightmare. His father, now dead, was an ex-marine martinet who beat, bullied, and belittled his family (he possibly broke young Robert's collarbone). The mother appears to have been angst-ridden, virtually ineffective in the face of her husband's depredations. Mention is made of her possible amphetamine abuse. There are five children; two daughters who refused participation (wisely, in this reviewer's opinion); an older brother, Charles; and a younger, Maxon. Max lives in San Francisco. A semi-derelict with no visible means of support, he paints well if weirdly when he isn't lying on a bed of nails, or passing a strip of linen through his bowels by way of yogic purification. With little affect or regret, he tells Crumb and the camera he was once arrested for groping a woman in a record store. Crumb and Zwigoff also visit the family home, where Charles and his mother still live in appalling squalor. Charles rarely leaves his book-strewn room. He's unkempt, heavily tranquilized, yet sardonically lucid. He relates a lifetime of humiliating alienation with unhealing insight, hesitates amidst his painful reminiscences to remark -- "I don't think we should be talking about this..." -- then plunges on, no one to stop him. "At least he's not out taking illegal drugs or making some woman miserable", mutters his dishevelled, apparently no less marginal mother.

All the brothers were exceptionally close, their tightness probably enhanced by their hurtful upbringing as well as their status of derided misfits. The particularly intense bond between Charles and Robert was also charged with rivalry. Charles himself was a talented cartoonist; Robert thinks he may have been the most innately gifted of the three; what one sees of his work

is indeed crazily impressive.

By sheer force of his strange personality Charles compelled Crumb to participate in an idiosyncratic 'toon universe. As Charles' obsession with Treasure Island's Long John Silver escalated, "The Animaltown Comic Club" waxed so bizarre that Robert eventually dropped out. He quit the family altogether in his late 'teens, moved to another state, drew greeting cards for awhile, then became a full-time magazine illustrator. Charles' adolescent maxim -- "How perfectly goddamn delightful it all is to be sure..." hung over his brothers' tormented puberty. It betokened that formidable irony which a sensitive teenage outsider frequently calls upon to defend against scathing social humiliation, but which can also fence off a wary heart from possibilities of intimacy and joy. The same capacity for withering irony enabled Robert to cope with the hurtful rejections by women allegedly experienced throughout his 'teens -- which he refers to at length, and comprise a recurring motif in his drawings. Disguised or otherwise, Crumb's spindly autobiographical hero seems barely post-pubescent. He quails in fear and desire before a huge dominatrix with "shapely, powerful legs". When this beaten down wretch isn't fleeing the wrath of some baleful Maillol-like babe, he's at her feet, or riding on her back. Occasionally he gets to service her sexually, heart in mouth. A very different, hardly humorous persona emerges from the artist's grimly satisfied account of the pleasures he took from the women who idolized him once he became famous; and from his perennial portrayal of women as obscenely degraded objects -- one with a head jammed into a toilet bowl, another a headless recipient of quailing male lust. Such representations pass beyond a meaningful, if repugnant aesthetic into the stuff of solipsistic pornography (Crumb's thick-lipped black stereotypes intimate a similar disturbing scorn, the aim and intention of which is far from clear). About such material, he says with too facile contrition: "Maybe I should be locked up and my

pencils taken away...Sometimes I think it's a mistake...but somehow revealing that truth about myself is somehow helpful." One must inquire: cui bono?.

Interviews with Crumb's lovers underscore he's hardly the Milquetoast of his strips. By all accounts he seems to be living out a conviction that romance is a fiction, and women are essentially drawn to masculine nastiness, arrogance and power. A former girl friend speaks mordantly about the cool manipulator who lives beneath the helpless facade. Another, who edits magazines like LEG SHOW and BIG BUTT, claims Crumb's sensibility at base is as aggressively pornographic as hers. She admires him for it. His second wife, Aline Kominsky, a cartoonist who disconcertingly resembles one of Crumb's Valkyries, is seen allaying his doubts about drafting the repulsive headless lady story (to characterize this strip as sexist would be like saying Hitler had a thing about Jews). She would seem to afford him similar latitude away from the drawing board in an open marriage. Crumb says their daughter, Sophie, is the only person he has ever loved. His inveterate cynicism softens during their scenes; but he comes most authentically -- and perversely -- alive during a photo-shoot for LEG SHOW, hopping on the backs of scantily clad strapping models; happily tucking his head beneath their shoes.

Crumb has been praised for depicting its hero's triumph over the most adverse psychological circumstances to gain a place in the sun. But caution is urged on the score of lauding Crumb's progress as a testament to the dignity of the human spirit. His ability to transcend the burden of his origins seems to have been a matter of luckier genetics, and a talent which -- unlike his brothers' -- could be communicated to others. His crucial determination to put distance between himself and his family allowed him to develop it further.

Professional success brought Crumb an emotional stability of sorts, but also enabled him to wax unadmirably manipulative in pursuing a dubious sexual agenda. Success also may have

helped him become more confident in discovering lovers, friends, and colleagues who could support his maverick, at times off-putting views; who could create grounds for him to remain his own ornery self -- more socialized, but in many ways not so very much different from the embittered, embattled outsider of his youth. If he is no monster today, neither is he a Helen Keller.

Of course, an artist never owes his public any assurances of being a nice guy. The merit of the art is the matter, whether its creator be saint or scoundrel. Judged accordingly, the images Crumb displays are often unabashedly scatological, heavily inflected by private narcissistic preoccupations. They do little to back the fulsome claims of the ordinarily astute critic Robert Hughes, and a pixillated art dealer (who can hardly be objective) that Crumb is another Brueghel or Daumier, appreciated abroad but somehow overlooked upon his native ground.

Crumb's larger output, including the work shown at the 1990 "High and Low" exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art, sustains the impression of proficient draftsmanship in the service of timely satire; and of a substantial, but hardly immense talent. This flourished amidst the Sixties counterculture, precisely at the right place and time. Whether it will endure past our day is moot. Perhaps Crumb will evolve further in angry self-imposed exile: The film ends upon his quitting the "jive bullshit" of a country he deems culturally bankrupt, to relocate in rural France. He lives there today. As to the state of Zwiggoff's cinematic art, Crumb is reasonably well constructed, but possesses neither the complexity nor depth of *Hoop Dreams*, 1994's other highly praised documentary. It lacks the latter's dignity, balance, essential respect for its characters of whatever stripe. It is centrally informed by a mean confessional spirit typical of the age, a Geraldo faux-honesty which cuts brutally to the bone, its premises tainted with specious titillation.

A major cause for Crumb's peculiar irresponsibility probably resides in Zwigoff's diminished objectivity. He had long known and identified with Crumb before undertaking the movie. One conjectures that during filmmaking the director fell under the influence of the blatant indiscretion and lack of censorship Crumb had previously reserved for his work. Entering the documentary mode may well have engendered an eerie resonance between both men, towards a more lacerating exposure than either had ever intended of Crumb's troubled early family relationships, subsequent conflicts and resentments. Primum non nocere, goes the old medical aphorism -- first, do no harm. Zwigoff would have done well to bear it in mind. How must Jesse, Crumb's son from his earlier marriage -- or Crumb's present wife -- or his mother, however marginal her relatedness -- or Maxon, on his bed of nails -- have received Crumb's declaration of loving his daughter, and her alone? What were the injuries to Charles' perturbed spirit, knowing that his private psychic hell had been dragged into the light over his weak objections? (He committed suicide in 1993, before the film's release.)

For that matter, how may Crumb's own sensibilities been abraded by a late recognition that his cherished privacy had been so horrendously invaded, albeit with his consent? Is it possible this hurtful recognition played some part in his departure to an obscure French village, not long after the film was made?

In the end, Crumb's slight virtues are overbalanced by its terrible, terribly ill- considered traumatic revelations. One is moved to paraphrase Wittgenstein: Whereof one should not speak, one must remain silent.