

Crumb (1994)

Words fail me... Pictures aren't much better."

Background:

Director Terry Zwigoff (*Ghost World*, *Bad Santa*) filmed his friend Robert Crumb over a period of six years. (A careful scrutiny of the film will reveal the time period for most of the sequences.) Zwigoff's long relationship with Robert, which includes having once played in Crumb's band, the Cheap Suit Serenaders, certainly afforded him rare access to his friend's reclusive, fascinating family. Disdainful of the "objective" school of documentary represented by Frederick Wiseman, Zwigoff aligns his work with the more expressionistic non-fiction films of Errol Morris (*The Thin Blue Line*, *The Fog of War*) and Michael Moore (*Roger and Me*, *Bowling for Columbine*, *Fahrenheit 9/11*). Thus, he readily acknowledges the pre-arranged compositions such as Crumb sketching on a city bench in front of a billboard of an alluring woman and the discontinuous reaction shots employed throughout his film.

Cinematic Qualities:

The key technique in organizing a film shot over six years is, of course, *editing*. In addition to cross-cutting to link conversations at different times and in different places, Zwigoff employs a number of striking montage sequences displaying Crumb's art. Perhaps the one purely "beautiful" moment in the film occurs near the end, when Robert plays a soulful piano rag to accompany the animation of his stunning drawings, "A Short History of America." The editing of non-chronological sequences also provides a narrative structure to the film.

Beginning with the concluding shot in the opening credits, *Crumb* contains a number of arresting visual compositions, unusual in a documentary film. These deliberately artistic shots may serve to reinforce the intimacy between filmmaker and his subject.

Finally, there are the "performances" of the various figures to appear before the camera. Although Robert and the others (e.g., Diane Hanson, the "career pornographer") seem completely unabashed, their gestures and speech patterns often invite interpretation. What are we to make, for instance, of Robert's constant, compulsive laughter?

Questions for Discussion:

1. Although filmed more than twenty years later, *Crumb* has been called "perhaps the best film made about the 1960s" (Richard Corliss). How does the documentary portrait of Crumb in middle age manage to reflect the spirit of the Sixties?
2. One section of the film contains a lengthy debate over the sexual politics and misogyny of Crumb's comics. More than one woman cartoonist refers to Crumb's drawings as "pornography"; Robert Hughes, a prestigious historian and critic calls them "art." The artist himself acknowledges, "I have this hostility towards women, I admit it," although his tone is glib, possibly ironic. At another

point he says, "Maybe I should be locked up and my pencils taken away from me." How do you respond to Crumb's work.

3. How does the viewer's knowledge of Crumb's family affect his or her response to the artist and his work?
4. *Crumb* subtly comments on the myth of the American Dream, a staple of "Hollywood bullshit" filmmaking throughout the industry's history: the idea that individual talent, effort, and endurance will be rewarded. In portraying a hero of the Underground, a "nerd Messiah" in John Powers' phrase, does the film subvert or sustain the American myth of success?
5. Compare the portrait of Robert's relations with his wife Aline and children, Jesse and Sophie (whose drawings are used in Zwigoff's *Ghost World*) with the descriptions the three brothers give of their own family life growing up.

"How perfectly goddamned delightful it all is, to be sure."

--Charles Crumb