Obscenity and the Limits of Liberalism

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The question of offense and especially aesthetic offense has haunted my work for a long time; in fact it might be the subtext of everything I’ve written. What I mean is this. It’s been my experience that in writing a book you start out trying to answer one question and end up unable to answer another question, which then of course comes to seem like the real question, generally a far larger one than the more manageable question you started with (which invariably seems trite by the time the book is finished, if it ever actually is). Research projects are impelled into being by both manifest and latent desires: the manifest desire fast loses its mystery, while the latent desire taunts your intelligence and/or self-knowledge, which is one of the reasons it’s so difficult to reread one’s published work, which always seems somehow deficient by the time it hits print. One of the ironies of my own career is being someone with a book about pornography on her vitae—a book generally regarded as more in favor of than opposed to pornography (though personally I’d hesitate to classify it as “pro-porn”—though one whose author remains rather offended by the subject matter whose offensiveness she meant to explicate and thus defang. No doubt one of the things that motivated me to write that book in the first place was wanting to understand why I found pornography offensive at a visceral level while simultaneously feeling vast intellectual and political antipathy toward anyone else with the same response. It remains an unanswered question, though let me
add that I’ve found little in either anti-porn or pro-porn writings that helps illuminate things. Anti-porn theorists tend to be offended at porn because they conflate fantasy with actual violence against women, which I don’t find convincing; pro-porn theorists tend to dismiss offense as simply bourgeois and retrograde—and might I add that much of the recent work in the pro-porn vein strikes me as actually more about fandom than explication, determinedly hip in a way that always sets my teeth a little on edge?

So even after hashing over these conflicts in the aforementioned book, big questions gnaw at me still. Not so much why pornography is offensive: the answer here is that it’s pornography’s job to be offensive, systematically locating social boundaries, and then systematically transgressing them. This can be profoundly pleasurable, at least for some, or so I hear. The question that’s left over has more to do with the subjectivity of offendability, or the phenomenology of offensiveness: what does it mean to be offended, and more to the point, why is this so frequently experienced as unpleasant, even threatening? Why is feeling offended so often connected to anger, as opposed to any of the other available emotions in the human repertoire? Why anger, rather than, say, sadness or confusion?

The lack of attention to such questions in porn studies isn’t entirely surprising, especially when you consider how little has been written on what might be termed “negative aesthetics” generally. Take the issue of ugliness, which is not unrelated to aesthetic offense. The history of aesthetics is comprised of volumes upon volumes on the meaning of beauty, with virtually nothing on the ugly. One reason is that aestheticians aren’t very sure what it is or what characterizes it. Do things classed as ugly share certain properties? Is ugliness a property of the object itself or does it inhere in the response of the perceiving subject? Being offended seems even more difficult to pin down, despite the percentage of our everyday lives spent in service of offense-avoidance, when you think about it: everything from table manners, to where you can have sex, to disposing of bodily waste, and thousands of other daily rituals. Defy or forget these proprieties and you risk social punishment or ostracization. In fact, it’s no exaggeration to say that avoiding the sensation of offense is the central cultural and aesthetic mission of social life as we know it, embodied yet easily offendable creatures that we are.

In the civic realm, the offense-avoidance imperative yields additionally murky and troublesome categories, namely, “obscenity,” the rubric under which potentially offended citizens find temporary solace in
regulatory maneuvers: pornography zoning, movie ratings, decisions around arts funding, and so on. When the offense-avoidance imperative is pitted against the founding principles of our nation such as freedom of expression, offense-avoidance stands a very good chance of winning, regarded as such an unquestionable right that other rights and freedoms can easily be abridged in its service. The exception is when the offense in question can be shown to have some specifiable social purpose: if the offense can double as a “good citizen” beneath its rough exterior, it may stand a fighting chance. Offense in the name of parody has been declared a form of protected speech by no less a body than the Supreme Court, though other forms of aesthetic offense don’t always fare as well. Additionally, offense-curtailment is the goal behind all sorts of new regulations of daily life, namely, the wave of campus and workplace speech codes of the last few of decades.

Still, offense remains a daily problem, and all the codes in the world can’t contain the threat. Potential hazards are everywhere, and increasing daily, since the more regulations are instituted, the lower the thresholds of offendability seem to drop. Consider a recent letter in the business section of the *Sunday New York Times*, addressed to a weekly job advice column called “The Career Couch.” Queries an anonymous complainant: “You often see two colleagues flirting with each other in the office, and their behavior offends you. What can you do?” The answer, according to the *Times*: speak up, complain to the colleagues, and if that doesn’t work, go to the boss. Exactly why these flirtatious colleagues are offensive is never in question: offense is its own justification. It’s hardly news that the ability to avoid causing offense is linked to receiving a regular paycheck; this has been true from day one of wage slavery, but where will it stop? Those of us laboring in the dingy halls of academia have long habituated ourselves to the fine points of offense-avoidance, having been issued regular directives for years warning the more propriety-challenged in our ranks against creating an “offensive environment” by, for instance, telling jokes in class, despite the fact that the offense-potential of jokes is a continually shifting and capricious category, further complicated by variables like class and gender, not to mention variations in individual toleration levels on the part of joke-recipients. My point is this: even though dramas of offendability are played out minute-by-minute throughout the social world, the etiology and psychology of offense are barely if ever discussed. Instead, the response to the potential of offense is invariably new forms of prohibition and censorship, no doubt because these are easier to institute than it is to attempt to plumb the psychodynamics of offense.
There are, it must be said, different varieties of censorship, and different censoring agencies. As we know, Freud’s invention of psychoanalysis was founded on the discovery that certain contents and ideas were prohibited access to consciousness: some censoring agency stood in the way. In Freud’s account, however, this is an unconscious process, whose operations aren’t immediately available to conscious description. Thus psychical censorship isn’t precisely contiguous with social censorship, which is a process undertaken consciously: a social censor knows that he or she intends to enact censorship and can produce a rationale, however unreliable outside observers may take these rationales to be. But before censorship takes a social form, it necessarily takes an interior form. Not psychical censorship, but the intrapsychic experience of being offended, by which I mean a felt response to some sort of content—generally of a sexual, violent, gross, or sacrilegious nature—that registers on a perceiving subject in particularly marked ways: unpleasantly, possibly viscerally. Being offended is a peculiarly liminal state, I’m suggesting, neither entirely conscious nor entirely unconscious, and additionally liminal in that it’s perched uncomfortably in between the psyche and the social. Perhaps this liminality contributes to the difficulty in specifying why it is that being offended is so, well . . . offensive. It also suggests that a phenomenology of offense really has to be the starting point in any social theory of censorship.

WHAT Follows is a roundabout stab at such an account, by way of an admittedly unlikely case study: the 1994 feature documentary Crumb, Terry Zwigoff’s biopic about the notoriously vulgar countercultural cartoonist Robert Crumb. Why this film? Mostly because I found my own aesthetic response to it difficult to account for: something unsettled and appalled me about this film, though also fascinated me. Perhaps a more straightforward reason is that the film is itself, self-consciously, a case study on aesthetic offense, pitting Robert Crumb’s cartoons against his feminist critics; the critics (to the film’s credit), rather than being dismissed or mocked, are offered the opportunity to testify about their various levels of distress at Crumb’s pictorial transgressions. For them, Crumb’s unrestrained id is an antagonist: they’re offended by his blatant sexually aggressive imagery, which they see as propaganda for aggression toward women. Writer Deidre English (interviewed in the film) goes further, charging Crumb with being in a state of “arrested juvenile development” and recommending that he “channel himself into doing better work.”
That those most offended by Crumb’s cartoons are female obviously raises larger questions about the relation between gender and aesthetic offense and why the experience is typically more distressing for women than for men (though certainly not for all women). As we see, the feminist position is explicitly aligned with the enterprise of sublimation and thus, presumably, with whatever forms of authority—psychical or social—mobilize its operations and its censorships. There are many reasons to object to this. But for me, the salience of these objections, and English’s comments in particular, is the imperative to “Grow up.” In other words, childhood is the origin of adult vulgarity. Rather than the usual clichéd island of innocence, for English, and also for filmmaker Zwigoff as we’ll see, it’s childhood that corrupts adulthood rather than the other way around. This is not exactly the conventional line at the moment, and therefore it’s worth some attention.

Terry Zwigoff’s *Crumb* isn’t the story of Robert Crumb alone; it’s also the story of Crumb’s two brothers, Charles and Maxim, all three of whom are portrayed in extensive interviews. Zwigoff, who’d known the family for two decades, achieves something remarkably intimate in these scenes. Cartooning was, we learn, something of a childhood mania for all the brothers, who were abnormally close. Additionally all three shared and continue to share similar preoccupations with sex and aggression, although Charles, the eldest, has never actually had sex because he’s too depressed to leave the house. Of the three brothers, Robert is the only one who can actually function in the world. Charles, who has never worked, has lived at home with his deeply strange mother since getting out of high school; he’s heavily medicated and has attempted suicide numerous times, including once by drinking furniture polish. Maxim lives in a Single Room Occupancy and continues to paint (some of his work is stylistically not unlike Robert’s) while practicing various of the more grisly Eastern-inflected bodily disciplines: meditating while sitting on a board of nails and swallowing lengths of cord that make their way through his intestinal tract. Apparently he makes a living by begging; he’s also been arrested for, and readily admits to, molesting women on the street. Robert himself is inclined toward infantilism and various other fetishes; he’s described by various women in a position to know as not “normal” in sexual relations, preferring pornography more than sex with another person and most of all masturbating to his own drawings. Nevertheless, he’s now married with a young daughter, a late concession to conventional heterosexuality.

Still, in the world of the film, Robert might well pass for one of his strange hypersexual cartoon characters. At the same time, if it weren’t
for the cartoons, Robert might well have turned into one of his unfortu-
tunate mentally ill brothers: the film opens with him saying that when
he doesn’t draw he starts getting crazy and suicidal. Which is to say
that the brothers, the cartoons, and Robert share some sort of essential
nature: all seem to spring from the same origin; as the film unfolds,
all the brothers start seeming like incarnations of Robert’s demented
cartoons. They themselves more or less say so: all are alarmingly articu-
late and mordantly funny about their various disorders. Nothing here is
exactly repressed or unknown: the main difference between Robert and
the other two is that for Charles and Maxim, the preoccupations with
sex and aggression have been disabling in ultimately catastrophic ways;
only Robert has been able to escape the brothers’ fates by channeling
these preoccupations into the content of the art. Not so for Charles,
unfortunately: an epilogue informs us that he finally succeeded in com-
mitt ing suicide shortly after production was completed, and the film is
dedicated to him.

The first thing to note about the structure of this film is that it stages
the examination of Crumb’s work in the context of a familiar genre,
the artist biography; the second thing to note is that the current incar-
nation of the artist biography is the family story. The contradiction in
this case is that Crumb’s standing as an “artist” per se is, or should be,
liminal—after all, he’s a cartoonist, a genre with an uncertain footing
in relation to the fine arts, traditionally speaking, though of course its
stock has risen considerably in recent times, particularly in the years
since Crumb was released. There’s greater cultural respect for the car-
toon form now than there’s ever been, no doubt due to the emergence
of culturally ambitious cartoonists such as Art Spiegelman, author of
the Pulitzer Prize–winning Maus, taking on politically and culturally
weighty matters in graphic form, a newly elevated standing to which
this compelling portrait of a tormented cartoonist no doubt contrib-
uted. Crumb’s own cultural status has shifted in the interim too, from
a counterculture to a mainstream figure: he’s now featured regularly in
the New Yorker and other respectable venues.

There are many things to say about the shifting cultural fortunes
of cartooning within the social hierarchy of cultural forms, and I can
say only a few of them here. But if the rise and fall of different genres
and styles is, as literary theorists like to suggest, part of a larger story
about shifting modes and requirements for social subjectivities—the
eighteenth-century invention of the novel was accompanied by a new
focus on interior life and self-examination; modernist fragmentation
mirrored conditions of increasing social anomie, and so on—then the
question we’d obviously want to ask is what the heightened cultural status of cartooning says about the conditions of subjectivity at present. I’d argue that such shifts are what the film *Crumb* both evidences and in turn reproduces, precisely by treating Robert Crumb’s work as the byproduct of an artistic subjectivity, rather than that of a sub-artistic hack or an industrial enterprise. Even now not all genres qualify for entry into the conventions of “auteurdom”: you wouldn’t expect to come across a biography of Danielle Steele, for example, though one of the things that the postmodern breakdown of distinctions between high and low cultural forms means is that fewer and fewer genres and figures don’t qualify.

The artist biography is a genre that doesn’t receive much critical attention, certainly not from film theorists; in fact even art historical treatments are rare. The first such treatment, published in 1934, is still one of the only historical surveys of print biographies; though brief, it spans ancient to modern times. The author was Ernst Kris, an art historian–psychoanalyst and follower of Freud, though Kris broke from Freud in taking the figure of the artist as a social construct, a cultural image produced precisely through the sorts of biographical texts that comprised his survey. Kris was something of a proto-structuralist: his approach was to break these biographies down into constitutive narrative units, or “primitive cells,” and the basic narrative unit to be analyzed was what he called “the artist anecdote.” Through these anecdotes, which he collected and typologized, he believed it was possible to understand how the figure of the artist was being socially constructed in any given period. But it’s also tempting to read Kris in reverse, to read these artist biographies for the descriptions they provide of the specific social requirements of the artist-hero figure at different points in history. Though Kris himself doesn’t make the point, it’s clear that artist biographies are written—and rewritten—to suit the requirements and norms of an age: Picasso used to be iconically life affirming and lusty; then he was a misogynist; no doubt soon he’ll be queer.

What, then, comprises the current biographical formulae, the current required artist traits? In *Crumb*, although there’s no voice-over performing explanation and exposition, a narrative is written nonetheless through the montage, the *mise-en-scène*, and the direction of the scenes. And where Crumb is directed, for much of the film, is back to his childhood, directed there literally in pilgrimages to the family domicile as well as though journeys of introspection and childhood reminiscence. But where else would he go, we contemporaries would doubtless ask. So habituated are we to this biographical formula that it seems entirely
inevitable, though it’s worth remembering that in other periods the biographical cells would have been entirely different. The classical conception of the role of the artist emphasized the continuities between generations, and so did the classical biographical cells; modernist formulae emphasized the breaking of ranks and oedipal conflicts. In our time, some form of familial or childhood trauma necessarily occupies the normative biographic cell; something is being “worked out” in the art, according to the typical artist anecdote.

At least the Crumb biopic leads us to this inference, given how many scenes portray the subject not just as a misanthropic social and sexual misfit, but as an artist whose work is an extension of the family scene. By juxtaposing “biographical units” of the tragic misfit brothers and their collective childhood cartoons with Crumb’s adult cartoons—the visual similarities are unmistakable—any disjunction between family pathology and Crumb’s subsequent career all but vanishes. Montage sequences and audio bridges tie the brothers’ sexual preoccupations to Robert’s oeuvre, focused largely on bizarre forms of sex and aggression carried out by a depressed band of perverse, lascivious, and highly physically endowed cartoon characters. The fact that Maxim has been convicted of real sex offenses—he likes to waylay women on the street and yank down their shorts, a compulsion he describes in alarming detail—retroactively transforms Robert’s Mr. Natural into a fourth Crumb brother.

The film has an engaging lightness of tone even when telling this tragic tale. I’m not quarreling with the depiction—it’s hard to dispute that something very bad happened to these three brothers along the way, possibly at the hands of a tyrannical authoritarian father—“the old man,” the brothers call him—along with their pill-head, enema-wielding mother; some kind of horrific collective trauma that shaped and ordered Crumb’s subsequent artwork. It also seems indisputable, on the evidence of the film, that the artist’s childhood and the subsequent art are in continuity, though of course we’re offered no competing ways of understanding Crumb’s trajectory. To be sure, positing continuities between art and self aren’t the preoccupation of our age alone: the madness of the artist and the suffering artist are familiar Romantic tropes. What seems recent is the way that biography has become so transparent, virtually identical with the artwork itself. Transformation, sublimation, what used to be called aufhebung—all eliminated. What remains is the landscape of trauma.

If, as Kris speculated, each era selects a new set of heroic characteristics for its artists to embody, if certain types of personalities rise in prominence due to the specificities and requirements of the moment,
it’s clear that the residues of childhood trauma have particular cultural resonance in our particular moment. You have only to track the meteoric rise of the abuse memoir in literary culture, its ubiquity as a talk-show topic and a cinematic theme: society has declared a state of emergency on the issue. The figure of the traumatized child has some sort of emotional hook for us, one that past generations were far less hooked by. The concept of abuse colors our perception of the world and now hovers uncomfortably over all adult–child relations.

This makes it particularly interesting that the criticism leveled by one of Crumb’s most cogent (and offended) feminist critics is that “he’s in a state of arrested juvenile development.” Far from disagreeing with her, the filmmakers embrace this view of Crumb’s work themselves; in fact, it’s what confirms Crumb’s status as an artist. The backdrop of trauma is what gives the work its authenticity: the fact that the work offends is a sign of its artistic merit. In another sequence juxtaposed with denunciations by feminist critics, noted art critic Robert Hughes compares Crumb to great artists of the past, like Goya, who employ disturbingly violent imagery. Thus certified by Hughes, there can be no doubt that Crumb is a qualified subject for the artist biography treatment we’re watching—a treatment that in turn authenticates his standing as a real artist.

For Freud too, as for Crumb’s feminist critics, the real artist was something of a schooled primitive: “a man who turns away from reality because he cannot come to terms with the renunciation of instinctual satisfaction . . . and who allows his erotic and ambitious wishes full play in the life of fantasy . . . but who because of his special gifts [is able to] mold his fantasies into truths of a new kind.” Yet for Freud, direct encounters with “the full play of fantasy,” or the unmediated primitive, are impossible desires for the modern socialized subject, an impossibility that accounts for why the theme of the primitive resonates throughout his own work as well. No doubt the postmodern theorist will want to insert a proviso into the discussion reminding us that the category of the primitive is itself an invention of modernity and its obsession with development, which was exactly why it became such a source of fascination for so many adjacent turn-of-the-twentieth-century inventions, from psychoanalysis, to modernist aesthetics, to anthropology, all of which compulsively circle around this fateful dialectic. Despite all the sophisticated indictments of the colonial mentality in subsequent years, they haven’t managed to eliminate developmental metaphors, which are deeply embedded in how we see and perceive the world. It may just be impossible to think without them.
The effects of these impossible-to-eliminate categories on visual perception is a theme that anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss ponders quite eloquently in his travelogue-memoir *Triste Tropique* (from which I crib my own essay’s title), complaining: “I am subject to a double infirmity: all that I perceive offends me, and I constantly reproach myself for not seeing as much as I should.”4 The context is the aesthetic offense Lévi-Strauss suffers when witnessing spectacles of uneven development during his anthropological forays, that is, the conglomeration of the vanishing primitive and the encroaching modern in the same place. He doesn’t mind spanking new suburbs or bricked-over cities: he’s not simply or romantically anti-development. But he wants it to be all or nothing, savage or suburb; the conjunctions of the two stymies him, inducing a refusal—or, as he fears, a failure—to see what’s actually there, even as it’s disappearing under development’s wrecking ball. But there’s nothing to do about it: to be a modern means that the simultaneous presence of different levels of development simply offends, and this is, according to Lévi-Strauss, the foundation of modern perception.

If the primitive is a category invented by moderns, so too is regression a category invented by adults. This problem of uneven development is also, as we know, the founding problem of psychoanalysis, though not one so easily cured either. Freud’s entire account of the perceptual system, which he begins outlining in *Interpretation of Dreams*, rests on the premise of uneven development: not only is regular nightly regression in the form of dreams a firmly entrenched aspect of normal subjectivity, but normal waking perception itself is founded on a regressive foundation, because attention is always put into motion by something prior, something from the past. In other words, attention is a state that revives something for the perceiving subject; it revisits something already there. There are no new perceptions in this account—there can’t be: all we have are the shadows and traces of long-lost objects and desires. An experience of humiliation, to take a random example (except that by this logic there are no random examples), is a form of attention in which a pathway to an old source of emotion is traversed, and “as soon as the memory of it is touched, it springs into life once again and shows itself cathected with excitation.”5 Paying attention isn’t a choice—nor is being offended—they’re dictated to us by the past. Thus the most intense forms of attention—anger, love, aesthetic offense—are constructed like memorials, and for that reason they have higher degrees of psychical intensity, often described with metaphors of distance and proximity: they seem “closer.” For Freud, as for Lévi-Strauss, the dialectic between progression and regression, the simultaneous
presence of relics and the new, and the various journeys this entails—
dreams, anthropological voyages, or those undertaken on the psycho-
analyst’s couch—are the fundaments of modern perception.

We return now from these side trips and peregrinations to our
current case study. Crumb offers some interesting updates on the old
motifs. To begin with, it draws heavily on the currently popular theme
of childhood trauma as an absent cause. In these case, it’s positioned
as causal in the formation of the creative drive—not just an origin, but
also a reparation. The question we might want to ask in this context is
whether the motif of childhood trauma, so insistently present in our
culture at the moment—in culture, in the humanities and social sci-
ences—is the reappearance of the primitive in a new guise, our genera-
tion’s update on the theme? Functionally speaking, childhood trauma
and an older notion of the primitive play similar roles, preserving and
retaining uneven levels of development within the same temporality—
or in our case, within the same subjectivity. Trauma becomes an arti-
fact to be preserved and memorialized, and this is especially so to the
degree it provides the unconscious wellsprings for artistic production,
just as geographic versions of primitivism did for early-twentieth-cen-
tury modernists. If the primitive locales were once located in colonial
outposts, exterior rather than subjective and interiorized, let’s recall
that the interior–exterior distinction was never entirely so rock solid
either: the so-called heart of darkness was always one of modernism’s
big themes.

Needless to say, trauma narratives aren’t new when it comes to cul-
tural production; human suffering has a long history. What seems differ-
et at the moment is the attenuation of the old literary and visual codes
through which those themes were deployed, the decline of transfor-
mation and sublimation as necessary steps in cultural production. For
Freud, sublimation was the cultural and aesthetic *solution* to traumas of
the past, though sublimation is a concept with a somewhat tangled sta-
tus in psychoanalytic thought. The basic theory, as is well known, posits
that socially and psychically unacceptable goals—sexual or aggressive,
primitive wishing and desiring—are transformed into acceptable goals
or “higher purposes.” But sublimation supposedly also involves a second
process, the neutralization of the contents of those goals or injuries, to
the point that they become unrecognizable, losing their reference to
the original material. In the old model, aesthetic experience is a sort
of encoding-decoding operation, occasioned by the meeting of two dis-
tinct subjectivities—author and reader, artist and viewer—with the aes-
thetic forming a sort of bridge from one unconscious to another. The
disguised, sublimated material brought to bear by the artist or writer resonates unconsciously with the disguised, sublimated instincts of the reader or viewer, producing frisson and pleasure. This is what comprises “aesthetic experience”—a re-encounter with split-off, dangerously primitive materials and wishes. What we’re encountering are our own deepest renounced selves.

Interestingly, in Freud’s account of sublimation, to be overly absorbed with sexual themes, in the manner of the Crumb brothers, is a symptom of “compulsive brooding, in a distorted and unfree form.” In contrast, the creativity of sublimation is the escape route, from both sexual repression and a neurotic compulsive thinking about sexual themes. Whether this is merely Freud’s Victorianism speaking or a prescription for our own current sexual malaise is something we sexually enlightened postmoderns can certainly argue about. Another question to ask is whether it’s facile (or overly optimistic) to conflate sexual explicitness with increased freedom, as sexual progressives would have it. As Crumb powerfully demonstrates, there’s far less freedom in Crumb’s work than strict adherence to old familial rules, which allow for these three beset brothers nothing but sexual brooding. It’s clear to anyone with eyes to see that freedom is not exactly what’s on display here.

Voicing this observation gives me no pleasure; I fear it pushes me toward the fuddy-duddy camp. To compound the problem, like Crumb’s feminist critics, I admit to finding the Crumb family sensibility offensive, though I’m not sure it’s precisely feminist offense I’m experiencing. To be honest, what I found myself most offended by while viewing the film, oddly enough, wasn’t Robert Crumb’s cartoons, but his laugh, which is disturbing and often wildly inappropriate. Robert giggles while Charles is talking about his suicide attempt, chortles while Max is talking about molesting women, and sniggers at just about every point in which the emotional content is pain and tragedy. The camerawork in the film is brilliant, always panning quickly to Crumb at such moments, which is to say the camera itself provides the “biographical anecdotes” in these instances, so attentive to the cartoonist’s distorted affect that Crumb soon begins to seem like a continuation of his lewd cartoon characters, and they of him. He begins to seem like a caricature of himself.

The regulation of behavior is the fundamental project of development, no doubt true whether we mean the development from primitive to modern, or from child to adult. According to psychologists, children progress from using the whole body as an apparatus for expression into the refinements of language, thought and speech, which are the modern subject’s tools for mastering the world and making contact
with the environment. Laughter is a more primitive form of expression, a residue left over from infancy and childhood when the entire body was used to signal pleasure and displeasure. In other words, you might call laughter a sanctioned form of regression, and very much a shared regression, a shared pleasure. Laughter is a profoundly social act; it solicits identification—people often start to laugh at another person’s laughter without even knowing what they’re laughing at.

And on other occasions they stop laughing. Solicitations to laughter can also invoke self-rebuke, the punishment of the ego. After all, social development is secured by a variety of brutal enforcement techniques—spankings, shame, and humiliation, to name just a few—which become internalized in the socialization process. With successful socialization, defying social proprieties and restrictions provokes painful self-reproach: we no longer need parents and society to punish our transgressions, since we do it ourselves. Such are the consequences of development.

I was interested to observe in myself that Crumb’s laugh provoked profound discomfort, so much so that I can only imagine it somehow activated this self-reproachful trigger. Like his feminist critics, the supposed humor of his antics failed to convince me; something aggressive and disturbing registered instead, something for which the laugh seems to be a bribe, a subterfuge. The inappropriate laugh is like a behavioral condensation of Crumb’s visual aesthetic, both founded on the reversal of affect. And Crumb’s “adult” cartoons do quite brilliantly condense these uneven developments: they’re a perfect formal device, childish impulses and adult sexuality co-existing within every frame. Still, I too, like Crumb’s critics, wish he would “grow up” and leave regression behind, would stop memorializing those painful relics, whose traces in this thwarted and unevenly developed grown-up are so unsettling—exactly because they’re so recognizable to anyone who was once a child. What refuge is there from this recognition? Aesthetic offense at least removes one from the distressing scene of identification and protects against the self-reproaches such identifications might incite.

But it wasn’t only Crumb’s laugh that unsettled me, frankly, it was his very physiognomy; in fact the physiognomy of the whole family is unsettling. In the early childhood photos the family looks fairly conventional in appearance, but as they get older, the three sons get uglier and uglier, with distorted features and odd, inappropriate affect. It’s as though they’ve all become self-caricatures, as if their bodies had provided a pliant medium upon which to record some particularly grotesque story, a story that language alone was insufficiently plastic to express.
Caricature is a peculiar genre. Historically it’s been a form in which artists employ techniques of distortion to show the true essence of a person behind the thin pretense of social convention. As Ernst Kris observes, it made a surprisingly late appearance on the aesthetic scene, only fully surfacing in the sixteenth century, despite the fact that all of the technical skills required were certainly available far earlier. Some new degree of social permissibility must have been the preconditions for its emergence, he speculates, the lifting of some previous form of self-censorship in psychical and social aggression. Kris views caricature as a mixture of regression and aggression: it’s a deliberate distortion of the features of a person for the purposes of mockery, thus as much of a psychological mechanism as a mode of art. As he puts it, “The caricaturist seeks for the perfect deformity, he shows how the soul of the man would express itself in his body if only matter were sufficiently pliable to nature’s intentions.”

When it comes to the Crumb brothers, it appears that their bodies were indeed sufficiently pliable to advertise the damage to their souls, at least according to the aesthetic evidence on display. The Crumb oeuvre too, clearly encumbered by the same familial phantasmatic (a term that psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche uses to describe the core structuring action, the mise-en-scène, that shapes and orders any individual psychical life), also deploys caricature as its medium of mockery, soliciting our laughter. But how funny are these encumbrances—is this a joke we want to be in on? One of the reasons I find it so difficult to take an unambiguous position on obscenity—to champion it as a form of free expression and take pleasure in its license (which at some intellectual level I do also applaud)—is the suspicion that, as in the case of the Crumb aesthetic, there’s always more to the story, some subterfuge about origins. Obscenity isn’t just a matter of the obscene content, after all; it’s also a particular sort of form: a repetition, the compulsive return to a scene. Something’s being revisited, memorialized, though most of the time we don’t know what. This seems to be the lesson of Crumb: the pleasures of the obscene are also a kind of misdirection, an inducement not to look at what can’t be named.

If “freedom of expression” is the progressive’s slogan in debates about obscenity, it would be an excessively optimistic slogan to employ here: there’s nothing particularly “free” about Crumb’s work, not if we mean freedom in the largest sense of the word, in the social and psychical senses. And shouldn’t that be what we’re striving for? If those of us who study obscenity are so busy championing it that we forget to notice what’s offensive about it, we’re missing the point, I think.
Notes