

REVIEW OF *POLIS IS THIS* BY HENRY FERRINI AND KEN RIAF
BY
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The documentary film *Polis is This: Charles Olson and the Persistence of Place* is a thoroughly professional and deeply thought portrait of Charles Olson, a poet more than a philosopher who has left a deep imprint on all those who knew him. Thanks to this film Olson will continue to have an imprint on present and succeeding generations. The locale is mainly Gloucester, a New England fishing city that is undergoing commercial and industrial transformations most of which appalled Olson. There are many commentators and readers of Olson's poems. Most of the time the identity of the commentators is not disclosed until sometime after they have made their appearance. Outstanding among these are Charlie Olson, Olson's son, John Malkovich, actor and reciter, John Stilgoe, Harvard professor of Visual and Environmental Studies, Robert Creeley, poet and friend, Jonathan Williams, poet and former Black Mountain College student, Michael Rumaker, writer and former Black Mountain College student, Diane di Prima, poet with a "Beat" past, Peter Anastas, social worker and writer, and many others. Each interviewee casts light on part of Olson's life, thought and personality. Individual scenes are indebted in part to paintings by artists and photographs by photographers who were entranced by the natural and urban scenery of Gloucester. These scenes are juxtaposed with the narrative to illustrate the depth of Olson's vision.

The clean bright light in Gloucester is amply transmitted. Like most cities, the Gloucester ambience has its good and bad days even during those times when it is not beshrouded by bulldozers. While it is true that bulldozers and straight roads, round-about rotaries, and functional buildings have affected the sights, sounds and smells of Gloucester, some of the scenes of civic disruption and destruction exude energy and enterprise of a capitalist and commercial character. Olson's antipathy toward progress leads one to wonder how much does his distaste stem from a romantic poetic dislike of materialism rather than from an abhorrence of usury, which is to say capitalistic charging of interest? Olson may have liked horses and buggies, but he drove a brakeless car in order not to go backwards. I was moved by two shots, one of Botticelli's Venus arising from the sea with appropriate verses by Olson. The second shot (or shots) was of Olson smiling. It may have been one of his better days, but Olson enjoyed reciting his verse without recourse to paper or book. This genial neighborly smile is something that most Olson biographies do not convey. The smile is modest and supplicating, as if to say, this is who I am and I am not at all the bogeyman or anti-this and anti-that some have made me out to be.

There have been many films of outstanding quality that have been made to illustrate the works, personality and life of artists. I think of Robert Snyder's *Michelangelo: Self Portrait*, Ken Burns' *Frank Lloyd Wright*, and Shirley Clarke's *Robert Frost: A Lover's Quarrel With the World*. There are many more people who deserve a similar treatment. Imagine what could be done with William Carlos Williams and Paterson, New Jersey, Hart Crane and Brooklyn, New York, T. S. Eliot and London,

England, James Joyce and Dublin, Ireland, and Ezra Pound and Rapallo, Italy. But it does not stop there. Each of these artists has set off ripples that go widely out into the world and deep inside human minds and hearts. As *Polis is This* is not a lecture or sermon, it leaves the viewer guessing what Polis is, how far is far, what was John White's motive when he helped establish the Dorchester Company, what has the Ice Age to do with Shopping Malls, what can words do to convey a sense of energy and intimacy, and which is greater Time or Space.

Unless I am mistaken many of the signs that were put up around Gloucester containing fragments of Olson's poetry are not there now. Perhaps Henry Ferrini and Ken Riaf wish they were. They complement, even highlight, most of the shots. One can read short passages from the sayings of their favorite sons and even from the thinkers of all times in other cities, think of the Los Angeles Public Library or Eden Park in Atlanta, Georgia. These inscriptions focus the mind, which may be a good thing. At their worse they resemble the bromides and apothegms that financier Roger Babson paid Finnish quarrymen to chisel on the rocks of Gloucester's Dogtown. The film focuses on the ocean and shorefront and not on Gloucester's rocky inner spine, a landscape toward which poet Olson, writer Jonathan Bayliss, and painter Marsden Hartley were drawn.

To Olson the handsome sailor John Merry, who in a drunken state fought a bull to his own death in the meager pastures of Dogtown, was a victim of his own braggadocio and in a mysterious way a spoilsport of the impurtable gods who witnessed the sacrifice. Coming close to a moral judgment with applicability to his own failings, Olson concluded:

A drunkard
Showing himself
in public
is punished by death.

This was one of Olson's favorite epic stories with which he regaled visiting poets Michael McClure, Don Allen and LeRoi Jones (also known as Amiri Baraka).

I would balance this episode with Olson's youthful discovery while sword fishing that he was "estranged from all that was most familiar." His sense of estrangement haunted Olson all his life even while he tried to hide it behind his carnival mask of independent and carefree joviality.

Olson was not a high priest or guru. He had many doubts, bouts of depression; a compulsive dependence on alcohol, and an aggressive desire for sex that did not take into account that sex was a give and take relationship with another. At his best, Olson belongs in the company of Thoreau and Emerson, the one who made the local universal and the other who made the "I" the great "Transparent Eye", but he was a better poet than both, and of Dante and Shakespeare, whom he admired and aspired to equal. He was not a demi-god, but he brought demi-gods down to earth. As did Hesiod. As did the Greeks. It was admirable that on his final visit to a hospital before he died he requested that he be

taken into the ambulance with his face forward instead of backwards, so that he could experience what was going on, and that he quoted the “poor naked wretch” speech from *King Lear*, one of the most searing utterances in all literature.