

*Polis is This: Charles Olson and the Persistence of Place*, a film by Henry Ferrini & Ken Riaf (2007).

The technique of the cinema and the technique of American poetry developed together. Ezra Pound as much as Sergei Eisenstein proposed a theory and practice of montage. Both were interested in displacing the structure of phonetic writing with the *image*; both sought a medium that would, by analogy, behave like Chinese written characters. The logic of the alphabet was the logic neither of speech nor of sight, but its own unearthly—and for earthly creatures, misleading—form. In a crucial early essay, responding to Pound and Eisenstein, “The Human Universe” (1950) Olson wrote: “We have lived long in a generalizing time, at least since 450 B.C. And it has had its effects on the best of men, on the best of things. Logos, or discourse, for example, in that time, so worked its abstractions into our concept and us of language that language’s other function, speech, seems to in need of restoration that several of us go back to hieroglyphs or ideograms to right the balance.”

*Polis is This* opens with a close-up of an eye, itself a glyph, and turning into the glyph of what it sees—the surf, the New England coast from the air, the map of Gloucester Harbor, the Harbor itself, and Our Lady of Good Voyages, the Virgin not with the baby but a schooner in her arms. The rhythm of the film depends upon glyphic images, often almost unrecognizably abstracted by the camera—a fish’s tail, fish nets, lights in water, patterns of gulls in the sky, remarkable footage of Olson’s back in a tweed overcoat. “Polis is this” and, in another line that is repeated in the film, “Polis is eyes.” It is a cinematic proposition, and Henry Ferrini and Ken Riaf make the most of it. Although the film belongs to the general type of the PBS hour-long biopic on writers and artists, and will serve that use better than most, it is a cinematic poem in its own right—a celebration not only of Olson but also of Gloucester, Massachusetts.

The film explicitly poses the question of methodology in a startling form: how does one live one’s life so it is itself art? The poem, the film, whatever the trace may be, is not insignificant. It is, however, incidental to that from which the trace comes: comprehending whatever one immediately confronts out one’s front door—Gloucester Harbor in Olson’s case—and what lies immediately beyond it, in relation to as much of history, geology, archaeology, cosmology (scientific *and* mythological) as one can manage. “Life,” Olson says somewhere, “is preoccupation with life.”

Unfortunately, there is little footage of Olson, and the sound quality in some of it is poor. A somewhat unsteadily photographed reading of “Maximus, to Gloucester, Letter 27 [withheld],” which is the source of the film’s title, however, is central:

I have this sense,  
That I am one  
With my skin

Plus this — Plus this:

That forever the geography

Which lean in

On me I compel

Backwards I compel Gloucester

To yield, to

Change

Polis

Is this

From the opening shots the film tracks the way the geography leaned in on the filmmakers and Olson, and leans in on the citizens of Gloucester, requiring constantly a return of the energy-information flow, shaping the on-going city as the complex of occasions that, Olson says, an American is.

When I saw the premier of *Polis is This* at the Cape Anne Historical society (June 2007), it was introduced by readings of several of Olson's poems by students from the Gloucester high school. It seemed right. The film is no more about Olson than the on-going presence of the *Maximus Poems* in Gloucester, which becomes for Maximus and potentially for its citizens the cosmological axis. After the showing, I walked over to 28 Fort Square, where Olson lived his entire time Gloucester. There was an elderly man sitting by the house, looking out to the Harbor. He had owned the house since the 1950s and had been Olson's landlord. He did not tell me any good stories, which I hoped for, but we chatted for a few minutes, and I went on my way, as if I were in the movie.

Ferrini and Riaf weave together footage of Olson, interviews with a dozen or more poets and several Gloucester people, well-chosen footage of Gloucester, and an excellent sound track by Stephan Wolpe and Willi Alexander. Passages from Olson's work are read by John Malkovich and make many of the central methodological themes of Olson's work clear. His readings provide a coherence in terms of which it is possible to understand Pete Seeger's reminiscences about Olson and Woody Guthrie, Anne Waldman's discussion of Olson as shaman, Jonathan Williams' account of studying with Olson at Black Mountain College, and Robert Creeley's comparison of Olson's poetry and Larry Csonka's running in Superbowl VII. It is perhaps a mark of the film's success that the Csonka footage makes a convincing statement about the moving image of the poet and the moving image of the running back. It might seem a stretch, but it works and brings the film to a solid conclusion.

—Albany, NY, July 10, 2007