

July 26, 2014

To Whom It May Concern:

It is a distinct pleasure to have this opportunity to write a letter in enthusiastic support of “President of Beauty: The Life & Times of Lester Young,” a project of The Center for Independent Documentary, in collaboration with filmmaker Henry Ferrini. I was honored to have been involved in a previous documentary film directed by Ferrini, *Polis Is This: Charles Olson & The Persistence of Place*, a brilliant work that is one of the best films on an American literary figure that I’m aware of. My involvement included an appearance in the film, the filming of one of my seminars at The Graduate Center, CUNY, and accompanying Ferrini and poet Anne Waldman during the interview process with the late Amiri Baraka.

All of Ferrini’s work is characterized by multiple and intersecting commitments: first, to the historical record and the spirit of his subject, and then to the context of the places his subjects either lived in, interacted with, or influenced. In the case of *Lowell Blues*, a visual poem on the city of Lowell rooted in the writing of Jack Kerouac, Ferrini’s aim was to bring Lowell to life for its own inhabitants, and one of his goals was to see that the film became part of the Lowell Public School curriculum, which he succeeded in doing.

*Poem in Action*, based on the life and works of Gloucester based poet Vincent Ferrini, depicts the extraordinary story of someone rooted in a place but whose larger vision and historical import hadn’t been truly documented. By using archival footage from labor unrest of the 1930s and factory work in Vincent Ferrini’s hometown of Lynn, filmmaker Henry Ferrini places the poet at a crucial personal and national historical juncture. By depicting poet Ferrini’s self-education through the Lynn Public Library, the film not only represents but embodies the actuality and reality of the struggle for education, a narrative that has too often been turned into a commonplace cliché.

Finally, *Polis Is This* manages to represent the very complex work and life of major literary figure Charles Olson, while remaining tied — visually, emotionally, and historically — to deeply rooted sources that Ferrini knows on an intimate level. The

feat here is that this film provides a perfect introduction to Olson and yet projects a vision that even those most familiar with Olson can still learn from.

I would say that this is one of Ferrini's great strengths as a historian of art, culture, and politics; he has the knack of combining visual information that has an immediate emotional impact with a profound sense of his subjects and an ethical imperative to record the essence of artistic intent in a public context. His films are made carefully, with no filler. Each frame is selected with great care in relation to the whole, and in relation to the sense of drawing upon a vast archive of image and information. Here, again, the uniqueness of Ferrini's work is apparent: his films have deep intellectual and conceptual content but they are also made to be viewed, to be grasped immediately by a wide range of audiences, and this is what sets him apart from so many documentarians of cultural figures.

I have been watching clips of "President of Beauty" with a mounting sense of anticipation and excitement. Ferrini has thought long and hard about his subject, Lester Young, and for many, many years. He has also studied Young with passion and objectivity, always keeping in mind the enormity of Young's human and aesthetic accomplishment in the light of the cauldron of racial madness that has characterized the history of the United States. Young was, over and above everything else, a very great artist. But he was also profoundly aware of his own history and absolutely candid about his awareness.

The respect and reverence that Ferrini has for his subject and the history of African-American music is evident in the rapport he has with major figures who appear in the film, from Harry Belafonte and B.B. King to Lee Konitz, Sonny Rollins, and Amiri Baraka. The fact that Ferrini has had access to such legendary figures as have already gathered in early stages of this film speaks well to the future success of his endeavor. In many ways, the film is also a race against time: many musicians he would have wanted to interview have passed on, but Ferrini was unable to interview them due to a lack of funding.

I have absolutely no doubt that this will be a great and important film, one that can speak to many people and many audiences. I also think that the film will provide new opportunities to speak about race and the importance of art as a means of survival, not only in the African American community and the African diaspora, but amongst all people seeking just representation of their historical consciousness and spirit.

As a recipient of two NEA Awards (one individual for my work as a translator and the other institutional, for my work with *Lost & Found: The CUNY Poetics Document Initiative*), "President of Beauty" seems poised at exactly the place I would hope the NEA puts its support. This is a film that should be viewed widely, in festivals, theaters, on PBS, in educational and community settings. The film evokes pride in humanity, in the actual suffering and travail that great art emerges from. Ferrini is deeply aware of this and his frame evokes this historical and emotional consciousness in ways that can teach us new things about our own history and our own potential to not just listen and look but actually hear.

I urge you to give this proposal long and careful scrutiny. It is most deserving of support and I recommend "President of Beauty" and Henry Ferrini as its director wholeheartedly and without reservation. Please feel free to contact me should you have any further questions about my letter of support or the applicant.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ammiel Alcalay". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

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