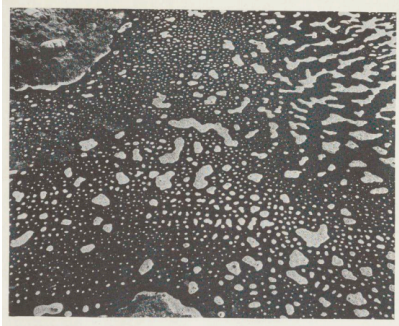


**On Viewing *Portrait of a Young Man*
By Bruce Posner**

Portrait of a Young Man (1925-1931) by Henwar Rodakiewicz 16mm b/w film. 16 fps 54 minutes. New music by Judith Rosenberg.



Illus. 1. *Tide Pool – Point Lobos*, 1938 photograph, by Edward Weston

Minutes into Henwar’ Rodakiewicz’s 16mm *Portrait of a Young Man*, the viewer is awash in lush black and white, contrasty moving images of surf and tidal waves crashing about the screen. The water so visceral and the sunlight so strong you can almost feel the splash of the waves. For the next hour, the rush of constant movements within the film frame brushes aside all expectations of a conventional movie-going experience, especially if you watch the film in silence as the filmmaker had intended.¹ The silent meditation of images—water, machines, smoke, fire, leaves and clouds—places the viewer at the center of a whirlwind of incessant movement, akin to watching still photographs come alive. The effect is mesmerizing and enlightening.

Rodakiewicz, then a young man in his mid-twenties, spent six years between 1925 and 1931 studying and filming nuances of movement seen while watching the “things that he loved”² in Bermuda, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, and British Columbia.

“Locations relevant only to what happened to be seen there. For almost entire period, no plan for continuity of a structured film. Motivation entirely to capture keen experiences no matter what the subject matter. A constant winnowing for the significant detail. Eventually thought occurred that the footage revealed the person.”³

To complete the film, he had to consider what the collection of images meant to him and how to arrange them in a form that had no obvious precedent in motion picture history beyond a few experimental movies shot by art photographers Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand in 1920-21 and Ralph Steiner in 1929-1930. Rodakiewicz purposely narrowed his options of what to do with the “things that he loved” that he had filmed.

¹ “Rodakiewicz considered adding sound to the film but decided that musical accompaniment would only be saying the same thing twice.”

Harry Dartford. *Henwar Rodakiewicz - The Film Maker*. Thesis. Fall 1951. University of California at Los Angeles. “Henwar Rodakiewicz” files. Anthology Film Archives (AFA). New York.

² Henwar Rodakiewicz to Paul Strand. Correspondence. 21 November 1931. Taos, New Mexico. Naomi Rosenblum (NR) collection.

³ Henwar Rodakiewicz. “Notes provided by artist.” 6 April 1969, The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) Film Library. New York.

“It was an integrated collection of the many things that appealed to me as visually expressing thoughts and feelings going on within me.”⁴

“The job of editing this material was done purely on a basis of feeling for the proper continuity.”⁵

The deeper he contemplated the footage, the more he realized that in creative work:

“We all see things in many ways—all at once sometimes. It is only by sifting, eliminating, uncovering that we discover the naked truth. And though a thing may have a number of truths—we can express it but one at a time—for as we do it, we express but one truth about ourselves.”⁶

How would he manage to do this?

Imagine in motion photographer Edward Weston’s 1938 still picture *Tide Pool* (Illus. 1). It presents a view akin to *Portrait of a Young Man* that shows ocean foam on a beach. The highlights and shadows of the black and white composition create many patterns that tantalize the eye to move around the frame. One seeks pleasure from the study of such random movements frozen by the photographer.

In Rodakiewicz’s film, sparkly water shots are taken from a similar perspective as Weston’s but with the added benefit of reproducing the actual movements of the water, foam and reflections. The tide comes in and out of the frame in multi-directional flows; the sunlight glints off the water; bubbles create shifting oblong and circular white shapes. All are pitched against varying grades of black of the sea itself changing underneath the sandy beach. All move in concert with one another vying for the viewer’s attention in real time.

To contain his creation, Rodakiewicz felt that a musical analogy might best suit the footage and decided upon producing the film as a visual symphony in three movements. Within the movements, he would develop new methods of moving image montage to present his expressive abstractions.

Each moment of the film is a building block. The individual shots are placed next to one another as in any other film, but here each image reverberates meaning through the duration of time and the direction of on-screen movements within the shot. A shot of one set of ocean waves may be matched in counter-shot with another set of waves, perhaps entering the frame from the same direction or from an opposite or coterminous direction.

Unity and contrast between shots and sequences of shots in Rodakiewicz’s film coalesce around a complicated geometry of horizontal, vertical, diagonal and other harder-to-describe directional movements of objects pictured. For example, in the First Movement one of the most elaborate geometry of motions depicted are the forms of white smoke curlicues baroquely twisting while rising vertically up the frame (Illus. 2).

⁴ Henwar Rodakiewicz to Harry Dartford. Correspondence. 4 August 1951. “Henwar Rodakiewicz” files, AFA.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Henwar Rodakiewicz to Ned Scott. Correspondence. 7 November 1932. Buzzards Bay, Mass. Ned Scott Archive. Online. 12 December 2016.

<http://thenedscottarchive.com/the-man/associates/henwar-rodakiewicz/2-the-man/Associates/7-a-letter-from-henwar-rodakiewicz.html>



Illus. 2

Some movements can be seen as “normal” motion, recorded at 16 fps,⁷ and these normal shots are counterbalanced by a shot of the same content taken in slow motion at 64 fps.⁸ The resultant contrast of normal and slow motion studies reboot the perceptual flow of time.

The duration of shots on-screen also plays a critical factor. Rodkiewicz permits time for the eye to explore the frame, subject, movements and the push-pull of still versus moving imagery. These subliminal methods of montage are manifest in two ways: a.) A single type of action, such as waves, water, smoke and clouds rolling across the frame shown over and over again for an extended periods of time; and b.) Nearly motionless graphic patterns, such as the eleven backlit palm fronds displayed in sequences one after the other for an extended period of time in the Second Movement for 3 minutes 20 seconds (Illus. 3.1, 3.2).



Illus. 3.1



Illus. 3.2

With the combination of different shots, different directional movements, and different recording-projection speeds, he expands film montage beyond its regular movie-making parlance. The overall experience of witnessing these incongruent sensations pushes beyond an observation of reality and moves viewership into the realm of pure cinema expressionism.

Rodakiewicz excels as a film editor by showing explosions of motion. Early in the First Movement, he edits whirling machine parts, rapidly fractured into a mechanized visual cacophony. We know they are machines but as photographed against a black void in high contrast the images become abstract (Illus. 4.1). Immediately this is replaced by flighty blurs across the screen, orbs of light made by a machine that appear much more natural (Illus. 4.2). Through a series of four shots, all high contrast close-ups of sunlight sparkling on moving water, the film frame comes alive as a body of water with currents running in lateral directions (Illus. 4.3-4.6). The shots change from extreme close up to what almost seems like a wide shot that shows circular ripple patterns emanating outward from the center of the screen into the center of which burst small planet-like forms of bright white against the deep black of the rest of the frame (Illus. 4.7). This shifts so as the black is lightened to reveal rippling water patterns moving across a sandy shore

⁷ Frames-per-second.

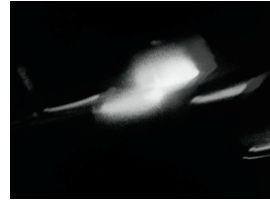
⁸ “Basic shooting @ 16fps, low motion segments @ 64 fps.”

Henwar Rodakiewicz. op. cit. MoMA Film Study Collection. New York.

bottom (Illus. 4.8). A sudden change back to a representational “real” image where the planet-like sparkling reflections disappear to show interlacing water patterns in sunlight (Illus. 4.9). All of this transpires in nine individual “still” shots that last a duration of two minutes in projection.



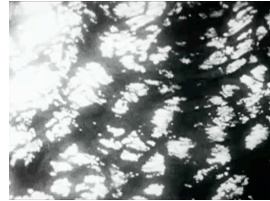
Illus. 4.1



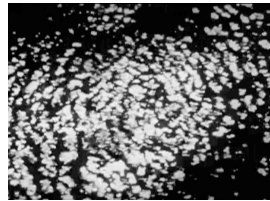
Illus. 4.2



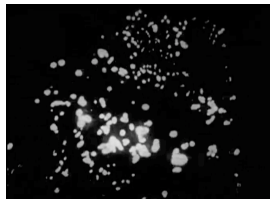
Illus. 4.3



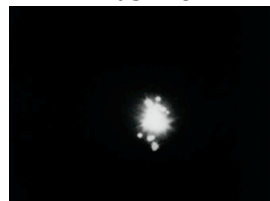
Illus. 4.4



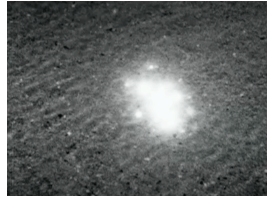
Illus. 4.5



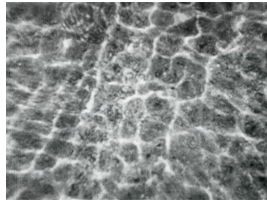
Illus. 4.6



Illus. 4.7



Illus. 4.8



Illus. 4.9

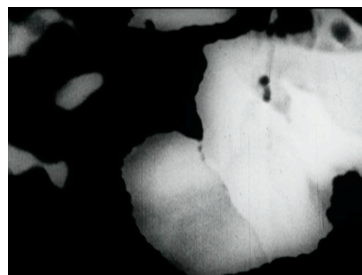
The transposition of the real world into one of abstract fantasy is most pronounced in the Third Movement where Rodakiewicz's mastery of cinematography and editing combine in a visionary sequence of extreme beauty. He shows us several normal-looking wide shots of aspen trees being blown by the wind. Then he moves in to several dramatic close-ups of clumps of four or five leaves photographed so that leaves and branches are somewhat in shadow and the sky behind is clear. The veins in each leaf show as distinct dark lines (Illus. 5.1). This is followed by a dramatic reversal of polarity, wherein the same leaves, now flipped both in their screen position from left-to-right and most noteworthy in their overall exposure is made so that the dark shadows of the previous shot are now shown as light highlights and the sky behind darkened to black (Illus. 5.2). A closer shot of one large leaf follows, flipped right-to-left, with the shape of the leaf and veins filling the entire screen to form a stark gestalt of black-white. Amazingly the next two shots are presented in a stark negative so that darkened silhouette of leaves and stem are seen as a high contrast white, and the sky is a reversed deep black. The last shot in this sequence (Illus. 5.3) concludes the eerie transformation by being photographed out-of-focus in stark relief to the previous images of leaves that were all seen crystal clear sharp in reproduction.



Illus. 5.1



Illus. 5.2



Illus. 5.3

At a running time of fifty-four minutes when projected silent at 16 FPS, *Portrait of a Young Man* is a demanding film by any standard. That other high caliber modern artists of the time, such as painter Georgia O’Keeffe and photographers Paul Strand⁹ and Alfred Stieglitz, admired the film’s meditative power should come as no surprise. The intertwined artistic and personal relationships between O’Keeffe, Stieglitz and Strand played a significant role in helping Rodakiewicz bring the film into its final form.

Rodakiewicz pursued Paul Strand, a fellow practitioner who understood the special distinctions separating still and moving pictures. In him Rodakiewicz could confide, “one must possess two eyes—one moving, the other still.”¹⁰ And Strand saw in Rodakiewicz “an exceptional fellow in every way... feel he is essentially a movie photographer, one of the few who see and feel things in that form.”¹¹

O’Keeffe and Rodakiewicz became acquainted through his then wife Marie Garland¹² at their H& R Ranch in Alcalade, New Mexico. O’Keeffe would visit from time to time in the early 1930s, and there the three spent a good deal of time together. Rodakiewicz often turned to O’Keeffe for professional guidance. He reminisced to O’Keeffe in 1975.

“PORTRAIT OF A YOUNG MAN (a picture without sound)... which you may remember was the first film I ever made... many years ago, in the later twenties, when you were at the Ranch in Alcalde, you urged me to take it East and show it to Stieglitz. I did so, and we three saw it first together way up high in the Shelton Hotel, and then at An American Place, with lots of VIP’s that he invited, Steichen, etc.”¹³

Prior to the film’s completion, evidence of her efforts to shepherd the film to fruition are voiced in several letters to Stieglitz, such as one dated May 1931.

“[He] has such beautiful material—If he could put it together so that the large unit would be as fine as much of the details—by that I mean single shots—it would be good stuff—You would certainly do wonderful things with it—Of course he is young—but even the young should be able to do it—Too bad he can’t be with you some—he has such fine material.”¹⁴

And following the New York City screening at An American Place in March-April 1932, Stieglitz congratulated O’Keeffe in that “it was you who really started Henwar to take his work seriously not merely to play at it.”¹⁵

Rodakiewicz meant to inspire others to make deeply felt artistic statements on film, and his is a testament to the power of keen observations carefully arranged. Rodakiewicz made this clear in his essay, “Something more than scenic,” published in *Movie Makers* after *Portrait of a Young Man* was selected as one of the “ten best for 1932” by the magazine’s editorial board.

“Time and perseverance are essential for, in building up a reel of the out of doors that has individual meaning and is more than a scenic, all shots require much thought and study, not

⁹ Rodakiewicz would collaborate with Strand in Mexico on *Redes (The Wave)* in 1933.

¹⁰ Henwar Rodakiewicz to Paul Strand. Correspondence. 21 November 1931. Santa Fe, New Mexico. NR collection. p. 3, verso.

¹¹ Paul Strand to Ned Scott. Correspondence. October 1933. Mexico. University of Louisville Kentucky Photographic Archives.

¹² Marie Garland info

¹³ Henwar Rodakiewicz to Georgia O’Keeffe. Correspondence. 25 November 1975. In *Georgia O’Keeffe. A Private Friendship. Part I: Walking the Sun Prairie Land*. Nancy Hopkin Reily. Sunstone Press. Santa Fe. 2007. p. f. 37.

¹⁴ Georgia O’Keeffe to Alfred Stieglitz. Correspondence. 6 June 1931. In *My Faraway One. Selected Letters of Georgia O’Keeffe and Alfred Stieglitz. Volume I, 1915-1933*, Sarah Greenough, ed. Yale University Press. New Haven. 2011. p. 574. f. 307.

¹⁵ Alfred Stieglitz to Georgia O’Keeffe. Correspondence. 18 November 1933. [New York City]. In *My Faraway One. Selected Letters of Georgia O’Keeffe and Alfred Stieglitz. Volume I, 1915-1933*, Sarah Greenough, ed. Yale University Press. New Haven. 2011. p. 725

to mention flashes of intuition. It may be but a few minutes before understanding is clear, or it may take days and months, but the goal, when attained, is worth the effort in the satisfaction of the urge to create and in the joy it may bring to others.”¹⁶

“...joy after all, that is the primary reason for doing it at all.”¹⁷

We now know there are many other filmmakers who followed similar paths towards meditation in personal filmmaking, to name a few: Oskar Fischinger, Joseph Cornell, Harry Smith, Jim Davis, Jordan Belson, Gregory Markopoulos, Stan Brakhage, Bruce Conner, Andy Warhol, Robert Gardner and Peter Hutton. All have their reasons for approaching film through unorthodox and mysterious ways, and this type of cinema goes under the rubric of experimental, personal or even avant-garde practice. Hence Rodakiewicz is not alone in pursuit of a pure cinema dependent upon the creation of idiosyncratic rhythms, shapes and forms to convey music-like equivalents, and *Portrait of a Young Man* is a landmark accomplishment in a new form of seeing.

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¹⁶ Henwar Rodakiewicz. “Something more than scenic.” *Movie Makers*. Vol. VII, No. 6. (June 1932). p. 262.

¹⁷ Henwar Rodakiewicz to Paul Strand. Correspondence. 1 January 1932. Santa Fe. NR Collection. p. 4.