

FILM REVIEW: MONTANA AFTERNOONS

by Les Benedict

HOT AFTERNOONS HAVE BEEN IN MONTANA
Video/DVD from: Imagery Film, Ltd.,
91 Bedford Street, New York, NY 10014. 15 minutes.

MOST PEOPLE WHO HAVE GAZED OUT on open prairies or peaceful mountain meadows have wondered who passed by in previous years, centuries or eons, and under what circumstances. In the West, Indians generally spring to mind most readily. This predilection to ponder the past—and to relate it to the future—was brilliantly explored in an epic poem, “Hot Afternoons Have Been in Montana”—the winner of the prestigious *Nation* Poetry Prize in 1925. Written by a young man from Baltimore, Eli Siegel (1902–1978), the poem was lauded by critics, including William Carlos Williams, who raved...*that single poem, out of a thousand others written in the past quarter century, secures our place in the cultural world.* Siegel went on to become a noted and loved American educator, poet and critic, and the founder of the philosophy of Aesthetic Realism, which teaches that “The world, art, and self explain each other: each is the aesthetic oneness of opposites.”

Now, to celebrate its eightieth anniversary, “Hot Afternoons Have Been in Montana” has been made into a delightful short film of the same title. Directed by Ken Kimmelman, the piece is a collage of word and image that shows how a hot afternoon in Montana is related to the whole world—people, places, things, and events—past and present. The film has already won four awards.

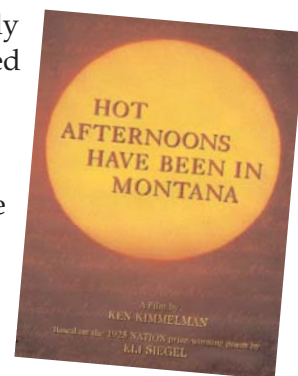
Kimmelman is an Emmy award-winning filmmaker who has produced social issue films about racism, apartheid, and homelessness, plus children’s films for *Sesame Street*.

Adding an extra dollop of charm to *HOT AFTERNOONS* is the fact that the poet himself, Eli Siegel,

is the narrator. Siegel certainly knows how he intended the words to be emphasized and presented. While the poem is nominally about Montana, the imagery does not single out any one locale, and a number of the scenes are certainly in Big Sky country. As a directorial choice, Kimmelman intentionally made sure that images of people, places, and things were not chronologically later than the poem’s published date of 1925, which adds immensely to the film’s nostalgic charm.

In the first moments of the film the imagery may seem a bit simplistic, but once the underlying rhythm of the poem kicks in it becomes evident that the images are carefully chosen and subtle—they fit perfectly and powerfully complement Siegel’s vision of our relationship to the whole world. Just a teaser from the middle of the poem:

*Was not Montana here in the Middle Ages,
when old Rome was at its oldest, when
Aristotle wrote,
In Greece, Greece by the Aegean, with the
Mediterranean near?
Indians killed each other here,
With the moon over them.*



LES BENEDICT earned a degree in film from Montana State University–Bozeman. He wrote, directed, photographed, and edited educational films, documentaries, and TV commercials for fifteen years in the U.S. and in Africa.