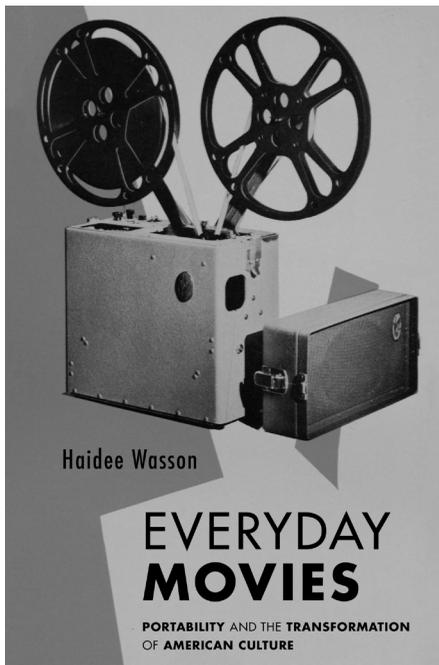


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Review of Haidee Wasson's *Everyday Movies: Portable Film Projectors and the Transformation of American Culture*



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Haidee Wasson's *Everyday Movies* complicates notions that movie theaters were the most popular means of access to the moving image in the United States before the 1950s by emphasizing the widespread and varied uses of portable projectors. By staging this historical pursuit through the theoretical lenses of portability, programmability, and itinerancy, Wasson examines the use of portable projectors in a variety of viewing contexts—private homes, military exercises, and tradeshows—to demonstrate why and how private video screenings became commonplace in Ameri-

can life. *Everyday Movies* thus participates in an emerging discourse that disarticulates seemingly cohesive narratives about cinema's development while tracking its many forms through under-explored social and cultural categories.¹ Wasson invites her readers to consider the tertiary technologies, practices, and protocols around smaller, consumer grade film viewing experiences that have shaped our relationship to screens within and beyond movie theaters and living rooms.

Everyday Movies is broken into four distinct case studies. The first chapter, "Engineering Portability," addresses the technical and industrial dynamics that informed portable projectors' standardization, enabling them to persist despite the purported centrality of Hollywood's cultural and industrial monopoly on film exhibition in the same time period. Here, Wasson persuasively argues portable projectors opened up the possible ways film could evolve because they pulled the creative yoke away from institutions like studios and theaters.² Wasson consults a vast array of archival materials to illuminate engineers' role in displacing Hollywood's apparent control over film production, distribution, and exhibition. In doing so, she successfully positions her historical claim that portability was not inconsistently emphasized across cinema's history; rather, it has been an integral part of the medium's evolution each step of the way.

After establishing a clear account of the technology's development, Wasson turns her sights to portable projectors' use in public amusement spaces in the second chapter. "Spectacular Portability" tracks the pervasive use of small-scale projectors at the 1939 World's Fair to revise the established notion that televisions were the only screens to matter to the American public at the time. For Wasson,

the presence of these projectors at an event like the World's Fair "announced their arrival as an official instrument of industrial showmanship, exhibition, and public relations practices on the grandest and most boldly experimental scales, as well as the smallest and most commonplace."³ This analysis has lasting consequences for how we recollect on-the-ground experiences of the 1939 World's Fair and how we frame the American public's access to, and consumption of, moving images in the interwar era.

In the book's third chapter, "Mobilizing Portability," Wasson charts the relationship between film exhibition and the U.S. military during World War II. She suggests that the "American military complicates established ideas about the progressive nature of experimentation" in terms of both cinema's form and content.⁴ To meet her main argument, Wasson uncovers various examples of how portable projectors were employed for training and tactical purposes. In following the informational and institutional networks that relied on the manufacture and supply of portable projectors to troops, Wasson demonstrates their enduring significance to the way the military framed its missions and aims to itself. She argues for a postwar expansion of not just the "film industry but all manner of industry came to instrumentalize and experiment with film."⁵ The portable 16mm projector's various applications in a military context illustrates on a practical level the ways in which the moving image evolves as a means to meet imperial ends. This chapter moreover marks a development of Haidee Wasson's larger research agenda, building on her co-edited collection with Lee Grieveson, *Cinema's Military Industrial Complex*.⁶

The fourth chapter of *Everyday Movies* documents the mass production and distribution of film projectors throughout the 1950s. This history provides "a view to the conditions in which film projection became a normalized, recognized expression of an electronic, mediated ecosystem" with enduring effects for public education and private entertainment in the United States.⁷ This chapter is a sustained discussion of how America's mainstream media consumption shares an inextricable link to portable projectors at midcentury. Here is where the stakes of Wasson's argument are most clearly drawn. "Numbering in the millions and significant for over a half a century," she argues, "[portable projectors] reveal a highly devel-

oped, mature film ecology that upends some of our most basic ideas about what cinema has been and where movies have happened."⁸ I would argue Wasson's history provides more than simple, satisfactory answers to the questions of what and where; *Everyday Movies* carefully studies how portable projectors have been subjugated to other exhibition formats in the historical record and why we should now dust them off for proper reevaluation.

Together, these chapters situate the importance of portable projectors and their capacities as playback devices and institutional furniture within film and media history. Across *Everyday Movies*, Wasson examines a wealth of archival materials, ranging from literature produced by the engineers who developed portable projectors to promotional videos screened by automotive companies at car shows. Given the breadth and depth of materials presented by Wasson, the starkly defined boundaries between chapters makes the book itself highly portable into a variety of projects and syllabi. That is, not only does *Everyday Movies* offer a novel argument that augments our broader understanding of moving image exhibition across the 20th century, but it also contains and catalogs archival records and documentation for other scholars to consider in their own research and teaching.

The only qualm I had with *Everyday Movies* is how the introduction and epilogue balance against other parts of the book. While the introduction thoroughly outlines the scope and directives of *Everyday Movies*, it is quite long and many of its points become redundant once you cut into the main chapters. Perhaps Wasson's biggest accomplishment was the way she circled back to her primary argument with enough regularity that each chapter can be a metonymic representation of the book's whole; nonetheless, this accomplishment does take away from the overall effectiveness of the introduction. When it comes to the epilogue, its brevity—in terms of both length and content—felt jarring compared to the expansive analysis Wasson offers elsewhere. As a result, the main chapters work as standalone pieces of scholarship that extend *Everyday Movies'* broader historical project into classrooms and publications of scholars whose work overlaps with, and diverges from, film history.

Despite maintaining a closed timeline between the 1920s and 1950s, *Everyday Movies*

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presents a remarkably useful set of tools for understanding the state of America's current media landscape. As Wasson astutely observes, the expanded media history afforded by her research "demonstrates that everyday screens currently residing in our pockets descend precisely from this lineage of 20th century film technologies that effectively normalized the place of small, accessible moving images in our everyday and institutional

lives."⁹ By favoring structural and quotidian outcomes for portable projectors over minoritarian and subcultural small-gauge viewing activities, *Everyday Movies* leaves itself open for scholars to engage with the intellectual capacities of its historical narrative and the discursive implications of its coherently structured theoretical lenses.

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Notes

1 Haidee Wasson, *Everyday Movies* (University of California Press, 2020), 30. See Charles R. Acland, "Curtains, Carts, and the Mobile Screen," *Screen* 50, no. 1 (Spring 2008), 148-166; Andrea Kelley, *Soundies: Jukebox Films and the Shift to Small Screen Culture* (Rutgers University Press, 2018); and Ariel Rogers, *On the Screen: Displaying the Moving Image, 1926-1942* (New York University Press, 2019).

2 Wasson, *Everyday Movies*, 68.

3 Wasson, *Everyday Movies*, 107.

4 Wasson, *Everyday Movies*, 141.

5 Wasson, *Everyday Movies*, 142.

6 Haidee Wasson and Lee Grieveson, *Cinema's Military Industrial Complex* (University of California Press, 2018)

7 Wasson, *Everyday Movies*, 146.

8 Wasson, *Everyday Movies*, 175.

9 Wasson, *Everyday Movies*, 3.