

**Everyday movies: portability and the transformation of
American Culture [book review]**

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Everyday Movies: Portability and the Transformation of American Culture

HAIDEE WASSON, 2021

Oakland, CA, University of California Press

pp. xii + 274, illus., \$29.95 (paper)

I teach a module at Sheffield Hallam University called Researching for the Media. I use it to introduce students to archival approaches to media history. Together, we look at an object—a book, a film reel, a video camera—and consider what we can discover by studying it. My aim is to underpin media history with a material reality, using the objects as a springboard to uncover wider narratives about people, places, and ideas. It is a form of ‘hands on’ research and can allow for the reframing of understanding about media history and the development and evolution of the media industries. Having just read Haidee Wasson’s *Everyday Movies*, I now realise I have one more object in my repertoire with which to convey media history and, as Wasson makes it clear, it is perhaps one of the most important, overlooked, and transformational objects of twentieth century media culture: the portable film projector. Just as I use media objects as a means to research and understand history with my students, Wasson uses the portable film projector to wholesale reevaluate the scholarly perspective of the moving image and its place within wider society and culture.

Everyday Movies is a gamechanger in film and media studies in the way it moves the scholarly gaze away from film and cinema towards a focus on the portable projector. In doing so, it brings to light the ways in which most people throughout a large part of the twentieth century interacted and consumed films in a multiplicity of locations and formats outside of the dominant cinema space. As Wasson states, ‘by 1959, for every single commercial movie theatre in the United States there were 408 small portable projectors in operation [...] by 1969 portable, self-operated machines out-numbered theatrical screens by a ratio of more

than 875:1' (p. 4). Far from the twentieth century being dominated by the feature film and the cinematic auditorium, it was in fact a century in which the portable projector was all pervasive. From personal home use to its use in educational settings, to commercial advertising and exhibitions, through to war time use, the portable film projector was how most people on an everyday basis interacted with moving images in some form. The portable projector's prevalence, with hundreds of thousands of devices manufactured and sold every year between the 1940s and 1960s, made it, in Wasson's words, 'a technological infrastructure that for almost fifty years provided a primary interface between film viewers and projected images' (p. 4).

The book comprises an introduction, four chapters, and an epilogue, and is underpinned by extensive archival research. The work Wasson has conducted in compiling this history is staggering, with *Everyday Movies* warranting several re-reads for the wealth and richness of information it contains. The book also contains many photographs to illustrate the history being conveyed. It builds upon new and emerging literature on the prominence and evolution of non-theatrical film in America in the post-World War Two years, including Martin L. Johnson's recent book *Main Street Movies: The History of Local Film in the United States* (2018). The introduction sets the terms of the debate, arguing for the recentring of the portable film projector as a key means by which to understand, discuss, and research the history of the moving image in twentieth century America. But more fundamentally, the introduction sets out why such an approach is necessary: 'This new technological infrastructure multiplied the locations where films could be seen and shown, making not just film viewing but film programming a basic element of cultural life' (p. 6). In making this argument, one wonders if a whole new sub-discipline is needed into the prevalence and uses of the portable film projector. If new cinema history is focused on the cinema auditorium as a

key social and cultural hub of the twentieth century, it is so at the expense of one of the key media objects of that time period.

Chapter One focuses on the early history of the projector, up to the 1920s, including its origins and roots. As Wasson states, ‘the machines and movies that constituted cinema’s earliest attractions had no single home and no dedicated architectural element integral to them’ (p. 42). The chapter considers how it was that the cinema space became the dominant site for consuming moving images. Debates about the portable projector, including issues of engineering and technological advancement, are revealed through a history of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers (SMPE) and its centrality to innovations in portability.

Chapter Two focuses on the projector in the 1930s and its use in exhibitions and by American business, doing so through a sustained case study of the 1939 World’s Fair. The chapter shows how the World’s Fair experimented with notions of film exhibition. While ‘traditional’ film was a big component of the fair, the greater presence were the ‘oppositional’ films produced by cultures of portable projection. From rear-projection to multiscreen installations, to artwork, to illuminations, the uses of portable projectors and the moving images they produced was varied. The chapter goes on to consider the centrality of the portable film projector to advertising, as well as the role of powerful motor companies in the development and use of the technology. As Wasson notes, ‘auto companies utilized film in multifaceted ways: screen magazines, training films, worker education, publicity, exhibitions, and advertising’ (p. 91).

Chapter Three considers the importance of the American military’s use of portable projectors, designing and implementing an array of new technological advances, including smaller devices and greater quality of image projection. At the same time, the chapter considers the importance of the portable projector to the military, beyond the screening of ‘morale’ films: ‘Some 75 percent of film and photography use was strictly of a strategic

nature. In other words, the majority of film activity served applied military functions' (p. 111). Most interestingly, the chapter reflects on the pedagogical use of the portable film projector by the military, particularly as an interactive learning tool: 'Films themselves were sometimes structured as question-answer modules; whole scenes might be designed as problems to solve rather than movies to watch or information to be presented' (p. 123).

Chapter Four focuses on the rapid spread of the portable film projector from the 1950s onward and its role as part of a wider global media ecology. As Wasson argues, 'these machines were often framed as emblems of active media engagement. Widespread discourses tirelessly associated these devices with community discussion, debate, cultural programming, individual agency, and connectivity' (p. 145). The chapter considers the cultural prevalence of the portable film projector, particularly within learning environments, hospitals, homes, shops, and beyond. By the mid-twentieth century, the portable projector was ubiquitous throughout American society and was marketed as being both affordable and convenient. Indeed, this allowed the portable film projector to transform, 'the home-viewing scenario and aligned it with a domestic, suburban ideal' (p. 163).

Everyday Movies is much more than 'just' a history of the portable film projector. It brings to light an overlooked cultural, social, and political history of the moving image in the twentieth century and the way in which moving images were exhibited, consumed, and even created. Wasson shows that film began life as a medium touted for its portability, but was then imprisoned in the static architecture of the cinema. By taking an object—the portable film projector—Wasson reveals a history of the media that has largely been left unconsidered to date. As Wasson argues, the rapid growth of the portable film projector by the 1950s forces us, 'to radically reframe how we understand "cinema" as an infrastructure, an apparatus, and a cultural activity' (p. 153), with the portable film projector, and its 'small cinema', serving, 'as the most common, accessible, and majoritarian mode for film viewing' (p. 154). So if,

like me, you want to find novel ways of introducing your students to material histories of media, then you might just want to roll that portable projector out of storage, dust it off, and consider just what it can tell us about the development of film in the past century.

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