

# Contextualizing the Apparatus: Film in the Turn-of-the-Century Sears, Roebuck & Co.'s *Consumers Guide*

*William Uricchio*

## THE SEARS, ROEBUCK & CO. 1898 CONSUMERS GUIDE

Published by America and Canada's largest mail order company, the 10.8 x 8.5 inches (27.4 x 21.6 cm), 1120-page catalog was filled with illustrations, descriptions, and testimonials regarding every possible commodity, including motion-picture-related items. Several million copies per year found their way to farms and small towns across the continent. The *Consumers Guide* offered projectors and films for sale, itemizing the medium's technological requirements, its business models, and programming possibilities for the general public. It provides a highly detailed documentation of what the turn-of-the-century public could be expected to know about the film medium shortly after its birth.

| 97

## THEORETICAL FRAMING

A catalog can be an apparatus of sorts, as a causal agent and source of documentation and evidence. The 1898 Sears *Consumers Guide* helped to position the medium of film in the imagination of millions of readers, locating it as a technology, business opportunity, and source of information and entertainment. From a 21st-century perspective, it offers evidence regarding the intricate relationship of technology and text, of the material conditions facing those who would use the medium, and of the period's cross-media endeavors. The *Consumers Guide* is an apparatus for understanding the horizon of expectations that greeted the new medium of motion pictures.



## CONTEXTUALIZING THE APPARATUS: FILM IN THE TURN-OF-THE-CENTURY SEARS, ROEBUCK & CO.'S *CONSUMERS GUIDE*

In 1898, “the cheapest supply house on earth” offered its readers 1,120 pages filled with virtually any product capable of bearing a price tag.<sup>1</sup> The Amazon.com of its day, Sears, Roebuck & Company’s semi-annual *Consumers Guide* provided an infinitely detailed compendium of American material culture, advertising its goods with descriptions, illustrations, commentaries, testimonials, and of course prices. From plows, bicycles, stoves, tools, barn doors, clothes, and by 1908 even automobiles and DIY house kits, to electric belts (curing debility brought on by “the dissipations and indiscretions of youth”) and Peruvian Wine of Coca (“if you wish to accomplish double the amount of work”) ... every conceivable commodity, no matter how large or small, found a place in the catalog.

| 99

Perhaps not surprisingly then, the 1898 spring *Consumers Guide* No. 107 included an extensive media section called the “Department of Special Public Entertainment Outfits and Supplies.” Among its offerings was a motion picture projector called the Optigraph, and with it dozens of films including the ANNABELLE SERPENTINE DANCE, THE BLACK DIAMOND EXPRESS, THE CORBET (SIC) AND COURTNEY FIGHT, and KISS SCENE starring John Rice and May Irwin. Twenty-five dollars bought the projector alone and up to \$154 would buy the projector, a calcium light system, ten films, advertising posters, and 1,000 tickets.<sup>2</sup> According to a historian writing in the *Journal of the Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers*, the Optigraph, during its heyday, probably outsold all other makes of projectors combined.<sup>3</sup>

Charles Musser mentions Sears in his discussion of the Chicago film scene, telling us that the company had close ties with William Selig; that its Optigraph film projectors were manufactured by the Chicago-based Enterprise Optical Company (patent still pending in 1898); and that it was sued by Edison for its film sales in April of 1900.<sup>4</sup> Curiously, Alvah Roebuck was the

principal owner of the Enterprise Optical Company, having sold his interest in Sears, Roebuck & Company to Richard Warren Sears in 1895 for roughly \$20,000.

In this chapter, I would like to consider the appearance of film in these catalogs in a particular light.<sup>5</sup> The Sears *Consumers Guides*—and with them, Montgomery Ward & Co.’s *Catalogue of Magic Lanterns, Stereopticons and Moving Picture Machines* (1898)—offer important insights into the cultural position of film as a medium, and perhaps a corrective to some of our assumptions regarding film’s earliest years.<sup>6</sup> Were films the wonder of the 19th century, sending unsophisticated audiences scurrying for cover in an endlessly replayed “train effect”? Did the new medium’s performative and business models evolve slowly and organically, or did it enter the world pre-packaged? What was the nature of the last new medium of the 19th century’s “newness”? What did the many millions of people in small towns and farms who had not yet experienced film actually know about it?

100 |

“Importance” in this case emerges from the fact that these catalogs enjoyed extensive reach throughout the American public, occupying a significant place in its imagination. By 1907, some nine million free<sup>7</sup> catalogs were delivered each season to a population that was still predominantly rural.<sup>8</sup> One business historian went so far as to claim that for much of rural America, “the Sears catalogue and the bible were the only two pieces of literature in the home.”<sup>9</sup> It is, I think, fair to assert that no other representation of the nascent film medium reached as large nor as diverse a public.<sup>10</sup> And certainly, outside of the trade press, no descriptions of the medium, its physical components, and economic models were more “thick,” to invoke Clifford Geertz’s usage.<sup>11</sup> Although film historians have attended carefully to urban experiences of film, these catalogs established a horizon of highly detailed expectations that penetrated every nook and cranny of the land. Their depictions of the moving picture—as technology, entertainment, business opportunity, and textual system—therefore have special weight at a moment when the medium was taking form in the popular imagination.

In these early years before the nickelodeon, the term “moving picture” referred to an ensemble; to the interworkings of technology and text; to an experiential gestalt that included mechanics, views, and showmanship. Indeed, throughout the medium’s first decades, discussions regarding what we would today call the text—the film—were often commingled with descriptions of its material underpinnings, from complaints about scratches on the celluloid and concerns about sprocket hole damage to comments on the stability of the projected image and illumination levels. Technology, particularly at this early moment in the medium’s history, was inseparable from text.

## OF TECHNOLOGIES AND CATALOGS

Technologies, alas, are mute. Of course, technological artifacts reveal a great deal about their manufacturers' engineering and tooling capacities, about assumptions regarding power sources and work routines, and to some extent about intended uses. But challenges abound, particularly when considering historical technologies, as scholars such as David Nye and Carolyn Marvin have eloquently demonstrated.<sup>12</sup> While articulate in terms of industrial lineage, material capacities, and even aesthetic resonance, technologies are generally silent regarding their envisioned uses, their grammars, and their conceptual fit within a larger *Zeitgeist*. Only armed with such things as instructional manuals, discussions in the press, regulatory guidelines, or information teased out of what we would today call production studies can we understand how a particular historical technology was conceived and what it "meant." If we are to have a reasonable chance of comprehending the horizon of expectations within which a historical technology was inscribed—rather than simply imposing our contemporary assumptions on the malleable past or being content with the silent presence of the technological artifact—then we have to work for it.

| 101

No news here, as students of the text know all too well. At least for those for whom a historical understanding of the text matters, context helps to delimit interpretive frames and sharpen critical insight. And so it is too with the technological artifact. As I have tried to show in some earlier publications, for example, understanding the project of early cinema benefits considerably from understanding expectations in the late 19th century regarding a moving image medium that we would today recognize as being closer to television than film.<sup>13</sup> In order to understand the expectations inscribed within the technological apparatus—expectations sometimes evident in its name and its intended modes of deployment—one must look beyond the artifact itself. Context matters.

In the case of Sears, Roebuck & Co.'s catalogs—and in particular the 1898 *Consumers Guide* at the center of this chapter—the location of the film apparatus among technologies for the domestic production and consumption of the printed word, recorded sound, telegraphy and telephony, still photography, lantern slides, and more, positions the motion picture within a particular set of media expectations as well as notions of domesticity and profit. My contention is that by understanding its everyday accessibility, cultural status, and place within a burgeoning culture of participatory media production, the audio-visual context of the motion picture's technological apparatus can help us to refine our understanding of film's cultural position at the dawn of the 20th century. There are, of course, many ways to do this, and in the pages ahead, I will draw on the *Consumers Guide* to pin down the medium's cultural status in its formative years using the following three questions: 1) How was

film positioned within the media technologies that people already knew? 2) How was the moving picture explained and demystified to those who had never seen it before? And 3) How were film performances integrated into larger multi-media ensembles?

## DEFINING THE TURN-OF-THE-CENTURY MEDIASCAPE

102 | The motion picture entered the world already positioned within a set of media practices such as photography, the Zoetrope, and the magic lantern. But the Sears *Consumers Guide* of 1898 testifies to a far more fine-grained positioning of the medium within the commercial mediascape of the late 19th century. The Department of Special Public Entertainment Outfits and Supplies included within its holdings Graphophone Talking Machines (\$25 “It talks, it laughs, it plays, it sings!”); the Universal Graphophone (\$50 ... a recording and playback device complete with rewritable cylinders); “coin-in-the-slot” machines (“The Automatic Money-Maker” outfitted for pennies or nickels); an extensive supply of recorded songs and speeches; professional-grade magic lanterns and slides (with special lectures on the Klondike and Cuba); the Stereopticon; the Optigraph motion picture projector and films; light and gas-making systems; and posters, tickets, and various bits of ancillary technology.

Sears’s sample posters suggest that sound, slide, lecture, and moving picture technologies together constituted “high class entertainment” and could best be deployed together for “a most wonderful combination of fun and amusement.” The “mammoth” 18x24 inch sample poster for “Alaska and the Klondike Gold Fields” promised a full-blown program including a lecture illustrated with 50 magnificent views; musical selections, vocals, and speeches on the Graphophone; and moving picture images of “the large cities, railway trains going at full speed, bicycle parades, comic scenes, fancy dances, etc.” The idea of the entertainment program was not only alive and well, it was pre-formatted and mass-marketed to the public by Sears.

More interesting is the larger cluster of media forms within which the Department of Special Public Entertainment Outfits and Supplies itself was situated. Among them were clocks, optical goods such as eye-glasses, microscopes, binoculars and telescopes, drawing equipment, cameras and photographic supplies, telegraphs and telephones, musical instruments, music boxes and perforated disks, organ rolls, sheet music, books (over 57 pages of titles!), stationary and writing materials, albums, games, artist materials, and typewriters. In all, nearly 180 consecutive pages chart the contours of what might broadly be considered the period’s media constellation. From a contemporary perspective, this cluster is striking in several regards, besides the

prescient inclusion of games. First, the items for sale enable both the “reading” and “writing”—the production and consumption—of word, sound, and image. Second, they demonstrate conceptual contiguity with *analog* production and playback systems and *binary* or *digital* systems such as the telegraph, organ rolls, and perforated music disks. All are simply ways of storing and playing back information. Third, given the tropes of the day, even clocks, telephones, and telescopes have a media resonance, potentially positioning film within broader notions of futuristic media evident in such terms as the *telectroscope* and *telephonoscope*.<sup>14</sup> Finally, a point to which we shall return, they demonstrate that multi-media experiences involving recorded sound, still and moving images, and performance enjoyed a taken-for-grantedness in the period and are not just creations of the late 20th century.

## DEMISTIFYING THE MEDIA

| 103

In 1898, the Sears catalog’s Department of Special Public Entertainment Outfits and Supplies opened with the following claim:

It has been demonstrated to us that the **public entertainment business** is a very profitable field and **an opportunity for making big money** with a very small amount invested, but it seems that there has been but a very limited amount of energy expended in this direction owing to the lack of knowledge as to what is required [...]. **(W)e have made a special effort** and are glad to be able to inform our patrons that we have made everything connected with the work so simple that anyone can understand it.<sup>15</sup>

Although the pages that follow would tend to invoke home entertainment as a goal for the various media, greater weight was put on commercial use. More to the point, the Sears 1898 *Consumers Guide* educated its mass reading public in the economic logic of the new media, suggesting income expectations, benchmarks, and sharing fees. A headline declared boldly: “\$20.00 to \$25.00 or more can be made every evening with the Optigraph Moving-Picture Machine, Only \$25.00.” The “coin-in-the-slot” Graphophone was described as a “great money maker for stores, saloons, railroad depots, offices and any other public places,” even considering the 25 percent payment that is customarily paid to the location’s proprietor. And *real* money was apparently to be found in illustrated lectures, where the *Consumers Guide* rhetorically asked “Do you want to make big money with little effort?” replying “Make \$5,000 to \$10,000 within a year” with “no previous experience necessary” and “no ability as a public speaker required.” While conceding that John Stoddard’s \$1,500 per evening

lectures (“on far less interesting topics”) might be exceptional, the reader is reminded of the drawing power of the Cuban question and the Klondike, and is offered examples of Sears customers regularly pulling in \$12 to \$75 every evening. Considering that the complete Sears Klondike Illustrated Lecture Set cost \$48.75, the logic seems irresistible. The closing page of the Department of Special Public Entertainment Outfits and Supplies’ section included over thirty signed testimonials detailing the mechanics of easy money and thanking Sears for their quality products. These claims are in addition to the featured testimony of experts such as George Kleine and Professor Henry Leo (also invoked in the Montgomery Ward catalog of 1898!).<sup>16</sup>

104 |

In addition to explaining the economic operations of the motion picture and its sister media, the *Consumers Guide* explicated the mechanics of film exhibition practice. Lamp holders, rheostats, chemicals such as chlorate of potash and black oxide of magnesium, and carbons in addition to the various models, prices, and characteristics of projectors all offered a material sense of the medium. The *Consumers Guide* repeatedly reminds readers that these technologies are simple, that everything has been made very plain, and that if any advice is needed, Sears’s experts stand ready to help. Particularly for those readers who had yet to experience moving pictures, the detailed descriptions of optics, mechanics, illumination sources, problems like flickering and noise that Sears’s products so assiduously avoided, and a detailed description of what a projected film looked like must have demystified the process to a considerable extent. The availability of abundant information in the farthest recesses of the US and Canada regarding the supply and pricing of films, techniques for constructing a successful show, the economics of exhibition, and the experiences of other customers combine to challenge the naïveté so often associated with “country bumpkins” when confronted with the moving picture and celebrated in *UNCLE JOSH AT THE MOVIE SHOW* (Edison, 1902).

## CROSS MEDIA CULTURE

The motion picture, as already suggested, entered the world as part of a larger multi-media ensemble. Its texts, too, often acquired their meanings in tandem with other media, and in the process played a role in constructing a coherent culture. Viewed from an early 21st-century perspective where the logics of transmedia and convergence seem obvious, the *Consumers Guide* reminds us that these practices have a deep and largely unexplored history.<sup>17</sup> Consider the case of the sinking of the USS Maine on February 15, 1898 in Havana Harbor and the furor to initiate a war with Spain later that year. The prominence of this event and its inscription within a nationalist narrative are evident throughout

the 1898 *Consumers Guide*, where the drumbeat of war takes the form of a multi-media wrap. Lecture Outfit Nr. 21476 (“The Destruction of the Maine and the Cuban War”) offers 50 slides and a lecture peppered with descriptors such as the “cruelty” of the Spanish, the “suffering” of the Cubans, their “struggle for liberty,” and the “punishment” inflicted by the US. The *Consumers Guide*’s music department offered “Patriotic songs in sheet form. The songs of ’98. Four stirring new patriotic songs with words appropriate for the existing conditions” in addition to standard patriotic songs. The book department did its bit as well, with Murat Halstead’s *The Story of Cuba: Her Struggles for Liberty*; the anonymously authored *The American Navy. Cuba and Hawaii*, described as “Pictures of United States Battleships; Pictures of Struggling, Bleeding Cuba”; and *Poems of American Patriotism From 1776 to 1898* (“the greater part of this book is naturally at this time devoted to the verse that is helping us to ‘make the history’ of the War with Spain”). Inside the 1898 *Consumers Guide*’s front cover, a red-white-and-blue Uncle Sam carries a Sears, Roebuck & Co. embellished mail pouch and stands in front of crossed US and Cuban flags. With the sun rising over the Cuban flag and illuminating Lady Liberty, we learn that “In Cuba’s dawn of liberty, Uncle Sam is not too busy to deliver US 15,000 letters per day” to Sears... a message eerily resonant with the post-9/11 campaign to demonstrate one’s patriotism by shopping.

| 105

These examples and more like them amplify the point made earlier with Sears’s promotional poster for *Alaska and the Klondike Gold Fields* regarding multi-media entertainments. Sears’s media buyers certainly thought in terms of multiple distribution channels. But at a moment when Pathé, Edison, and the Lumière brothers all produced motion pictures, photographic, and sound technologies and texts, the notion of synchronizing content *across* media platforms—of thinking in terms of cross- and even transmedia strategies—seemed natural. That a recently declared war would generate a multi-media surround of patriotic expressions is less surprising as a tactic than for the speed with which it occurred, underscoring the sinking of the Maine as more of an excuse and less as a cause. In any event, the *Consumers Guide* offers invaluable evidence into the coordination of messages across media platforms and, as noted, serves as a reminder that our study of individual media forms in isolation from others can blind us to these important cultural dynamics.

## CONCLUSION

The turn-of-the-century saw a number of changes for Sears, including the end of its patent medicine business and the temporary termination of its film sales due to Edison’s copyright challenge (1900). By 1902 (*Consumers Guide* No.

112<sup>18</sup>), the Optigraph (sans films) was located in a new Moving Picture Department and literally inscribed as the leading medium in a media ensemble: “Of all forms of public entertainment, there is one that leads. All others follow.” This speaks to the medium’s contradictory cultural position by the early 20th century, having triumphed over other amusements while being hamstrung by legal battles as Edison sought to monopolize the sector. Penny-operated peanut vending machines were available, and more pages were consumed with various projector lighting systems, suggesting the continued development of the medium despite Edison’s interference. And buyers of projectors were assured that they would “have no fear of harassing litigation” due to recent court decisions. But when it came to the films themselves, the *Consumers Guide* heeded Edison’s threats, failing to mention even one title. Rather than frighten potential buyers, the 1902 *Consumers Guide* claimed that shortage of space precluded listing its 300 films, and asked its readers to apply for a free listing of its titles as well as monthly updates.

106 |

The sheer pervasiveness of the Sears, Roebuck & Co.’s catalogs in the American scene during these early years of the moving picture makes them fundamental to our understanding of the medium, and I have but scratched their surface here. Unlike books and writing materials; records, sheet music, and musical instruments; photography and telegraphy... all of which brought along well-established uses, the moving picture like other “new media” had to create its value, its meaning, for the larger public. Books, for example, offered instruction, self-improvement, cultural betterment, entertainment, wisdom, and sacred knowledge; but what about the Optigraph and its films? As noted, business potentials predominated the American scene, followed by domestic entertainment; but terms like “instruction,” “education,” and “culture” that would appear frequently in the subsequent nickelodeon period, when the industry sought to dampen public fears of the medium, were notable for their absence.<sup>19</sup> The *Consumers Guides’* elaborate exegesis of moving picture technologies, techniques, business models, and easy profits as well as their inscription of the industry’s larger patent and copyright battles rendered them media primers for a mass and widely distributed public, many of whom had not yet seen a projected film. And just as importantly, the catalogs both demystified the medium and insisted upon the linkage of technology with text. The *Consumers Guide* reminded its readers that, even during those moments when the text was temporarily absent, technology remained deeply relevant to the textual experience as its enabling condition.