

Englands Glory,

Or, an Exact

CATALOGUE

OF THE

LORDS

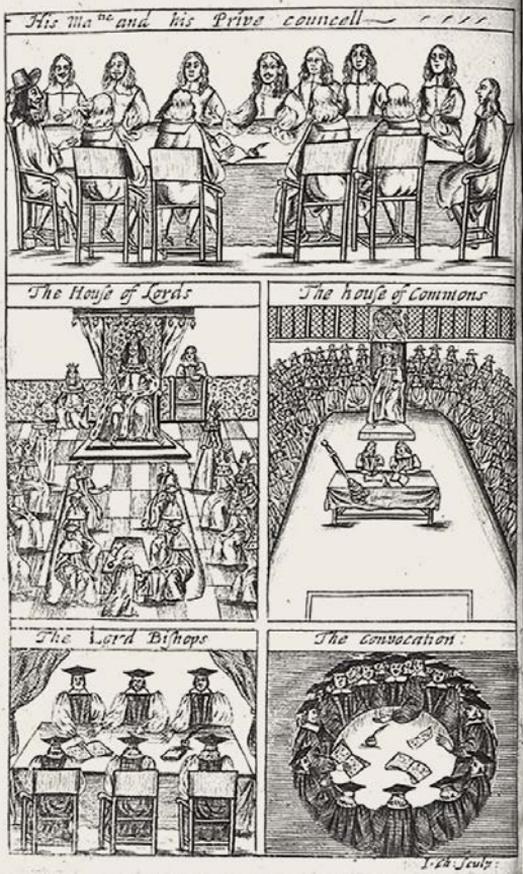
OF HIS

MAJESTIES

Most Honourable
PRIVY COUNCEL.
 WITH
 The Knights of the most Noble Order of Saint
 George, called the Garter, and the
 HOUSE of PEERS.

As also
 A Catalogue of the Lord Bishops, the House of Commons,
 the Dukes, Marquesses, Earles, Viscounts, Barons and Baro-
 nets, &c. made since his Majesties happy Restoration, and
 the times of their severall Creations; Likewise a perfect Liit
 of the Knights of the Bath, and the Preparations and Habits
 that were made for them at the time of their Installment at
 the Coronation; Together with a perfect Catalogue of the
 Lower House of Convocation now sitting at Westminster.

LONDON,
 Printed for Nath. Brooke at the Angel in Cornhill, and Hen. Eversden at the
 Grey-hound in Saint Pauls Church-yard. 1660.



Images from a later example of *Englands Glory, or an Exact Catalogue of the Lords of His Majesties Most Honourable Privy Council*, 1660.

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/hid/advance-pdf/doi/10.1162/hid_a.00727/1900962/hid_a.00727.pdf by guest on 20 September 2021

THE SUPPLY HOUSE: CATALOGUES AND COMMERCE

Matthew Hockenberry

The secret of supply is in its promise of availability. Given the excess of contemporary consumption, it is tempting to think of demand as the most insatiable sort of hunger. After all, it is from this gnawing ache that late capitalism colonizes the world, harvesting resources and exploiting populations in pursuit of the production of the most venial of goods. But supply creates its own demands. Fernand Braudel once argued that supply “makes an appointment with itself.”¹ Rather than emphasize economic preconditioning, however, I would instead direct attention to the promissory purchase this statement suggests. And I would do so because supply, now more than ever, need not be present. Just the *promise* of presence is enough. If, in scrolling through the endless of pages of “the everything store,” one cannot help but wonder about the material reality of the products on sale there, it is because the tangibility of stock on real store shelves matters less than these representations of its (eventual) assembly. Though today’s appointments are more often made through online purchasing platforms operated by companies such as Amazon and Walmart than with more traditional commercial correspondence, the effect is the same. After all, these are not really stores. They are just another kind of catalogue—that is to say a virtual storehouse of and for supply.

¹ Fernand Braudel, *The Wheels of Commerce: Civilisation and Capitalism 15th–18th Century Volume II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 181, referencing Jean-Baptiste Say, *A Treatise on Political Economy* (Philadelphia: Grigg & Elliott, 1834).

Figure 2. Select pages from Die Zeugbücher des Kaisers Maximilian I, 1502.



The supply house at the turn of the twentieth century was an expansive form, describing both physical structures such as the warehouses that stored commercial articles and the companies that had come to manage their material distribution. But this label, I argue, is an equally apt description for the commercial forms through which mail-order companies and distributors such as Sears and Roebuck or Western Electric had come to do business, the most recognizable of which is the commercial catalogue. As an organized listing of a range of products available for purchase, the catalogue is a peculiar genre, one that seems to stem from the most minor mechanisms of mediation. The collection and collation of lists, after all, is a practice that reaches back to the earliest days of writing.² It is the functional, rather than foundational, work of scribes, clerks, and clerks. But as a mode of operation, this ancient heritage coalesced into a particularly stable, commercial form by the end of the nineteenth century. Merging visual representation with textual listing, the mail-order catalogue brought the anticipation of availability to the work of supply. As it did, it crystalized the expectations of capitalism for contemporary consumer culture. This essay surveys some examples of this form around this moment of transformation: as the catalogue form gave way to the catalogue *function*, and the raw stuff of supply transformed into an operative relation—an ontological object defined not by mere material presence, but by the potential for supplying. Not just answerable to demand, but with demands all its own.

Catalogue Forms

Documents resembling the form of the catalogue predate any particular word to designate the kind of curatorial practice they encoded. As a description for a mode of organization, the term appears in English only in the fifteenth century. And while its etymology (from French, Latin, and originally Greek) suggests a relatively

ancient origin, it is one that was rarely associated with any abstract sort of classification. Catalogue, in historical usage prior to the seventeenth century, meant a list, but usually a listing of quite specific—and quite finite—things. Indeed, its most frequent appearance in early English history seems to have been simply as an alternative term for *register*—the latter a document more often formal and officious and the former something more common and cursory. Both were used to collate wide-ranging but otherwise well-defined subjects—lords, martyrs, and popes (fig. 1). But what is particularly striking about the catalogue genre before the modern period—either in those documents explicitly titled as such or those works later recognized—is that it did not much traffic with commerce. While it was capable of enumerating the contents of the storehouse or recording the transactions of the marketplace, this did not make the catalogue a vehicle for exchange in its own right.³ This is all to say that, although this is now their most recognizable use, it was only quite recently that catalogues came to deal in *commodities*. To do so required transforming a record primarily enrolling individual, singular sets of items to a functional apparatus capable of operationalizing more abstractly ordered entities in response to consumer demand. Or more plainly, if the ancient catalogue was a form limited to listing items which already existed in the world, the modern catalogue was capable of specifying things which may yet have not.

There are a number of examples one might use to illustrate this distinction, but Pamela Long directs our attention to the technical manuals and treatises on weaponry found in the German empire of the late fifteenth-century, “particularly in Bavaria, Bohemia, and other areas of southern Germany.” Many were lavishly illustrated, and most were quite specialized. One notable example can be found in the large, hand painted *Zeugbücher* manuscripts created for the emperor Maximilian,

- 2 Liam Cole Young, *List Cultures: Knowledge and Poetics from Mesopotamia to Buzz-Feed* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017).
- 3 See, for example, H. H. Manchester, “History of the Warehouse Since 2200 B.C.,” *Distribution and Warehousing* 21 (1922). For a later account, Dara Orenstein, *Out of Stock: The Warehouse in the History of Capitalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

a set of “spectacular inventory books” to coincide with his reorganization of the imperial army (fig. 2). His reform had reworked the empire’s arsenal and these books collected the contents in itemized lists with suitably “spectacular” illustrations by the locksmith-gunner Bartholomeus Freyslebe. Featuring hand-painted depictions of cannons, stone and iron balls, field guns, and other varied armaments scattered throughout the empire, whatever their practical use was as a record of inventory, these manuscripts had value in preserving the military power and the cultural authority of the prince.⁴

Long translates *Zeugbücher* as “ordnance book,” which is accurate enough given their purpose. More generally speaking, though, one could choose to translate this simply as “stuff book.” Following this suggestion, one might even translate *Zeugbücher* as *catalogue*. But to describe the ordnance so is to contend with the ways in which they are not the same sort of thing as the commercial form offered up in the nineteenth century by retailers like Montgomery Ward or Sears and Roebuck. The ordnance was an index of military artifacts rather than a collection of commodities. Each arm in the armory has, after all, its own circumstances, being, and history. This is in line with some other early catalogues, which listed titles of manuscripts, works of art, or other similarly *artifactual* objects. But the naming of the ordnance as *Zeugbücher* is suggestive. While *Zeug* can be translated as “stuff,” it is also used to mean tool, equipment, or means. It can connote, in other words, a purposeful thing. While the *Zeugbücher* is a book of artifacts, we can recognize that its interest in these items’ function gives it some claim to being a more general book of objects—readied, the Emperor hoped, for operation. Still, its contents are not easily interchangeable, and the objects it readied are not the abstract forms we associate with contemporary consumption.⁵

Igor Kopytoff writes that the commodity and the singular are

opposites.⁶ And while over the next few centuries there were plenty of lists and catalogues similarly limited to indexing more singular subjects, the idea of a catalogue as a tool for supplying *commodities*—that is, as a functional document for supplying supposedly identical instantiations of some interchangeably manufactured (and interchangeably exchangeable) object—didn’t arrive until sometime around the nineteenth century, in a revised form that emerged as a product of commodity society itself.⁷ Here, the promise of replicating what was printed in its pages allowed the form to stretch to scales previously unimaginable.

Catalogue Functions

The first clear evidence of the commercial catalogue appeared in 1498, in an industry that was itself shifting from singular collection to commercial production. When Aldus Manutius of Venice (whose Aldine Press would develop an antecedent of the mass-market paperback) provided readers with a listing of all the published works he had available, he was not simply detailing the fixed form of his library but offering the commercial expectation of future availability for filling others (fig. 3).⁸ When his grandson revived this practice in the 1580s, he did so by including the listing as part of the texts themselves. Across the ocean, Benjamin Franklin is often credited (among competing claimants) as the first catalogue publisher in the Americas, with a list of nearly six hundred books in 1744. Not all early American efforts were so commendable. While catalogues for slave auctions were limited to specific descriptions of enslaved persons, they also had the effect altering the distinction between subject and object, a “massifying” practice capable of producing human beings as “commodities” simply by virtue of their inclusion in the list.⁹

The printing house and the auction block were not the only sites where the catalogue became a tool of early capitalism. While Linnean

taxonomy may have developed a comprehensive program for cataloguing the world’s flora and fauna in the first half of the eighteenth century, a similar ontological impulse toward classification had already taken commercial form a century before. Indeed, listings for the sale of seeds had appeared as early as 1667, when William Lucas, an English gardener, distributed price lists of his nursery’s availability. Though not the first seed list, or even the first garden catalogue, it was one of the first to operationalize these items for a more clearly commercial purpose.¹⁰ Indeed, the emergence of the commercial catalogue in domains like bookselling and gardening was not accidental (fig. 4). This was not the armory, with its unique and artifactual arms, but something closer to the reproducible objects that would come to define manufacture in commodity society. Still, their consumers didn’t yet require material identity in the modern sense. Perhaps as a consequence, they were rarely visual affairs. While seed catalogues in the 1800s featured hand-carved woodcuts identifying end results, in both agriculture and printing what was being supplied rested on ideas of functional interchangeability removed from the objects themselves. Despite this limitation, by the end of the eighteenth century, catalogues had begun to encompass increasingly diverse categories of consumption.

As the population of the United States expanded rapidly in the decades following the Civil War, a document that had been a minor form of commerce for the country soon became a major one. While companies such as Orvis and Tiffany’s had offered detailed descriptions of their stock as early as the 1840s and 50s, it was in the 1880s that retailers such as Sears and Montgomery Ward developed extensive operations that were conducted almost entirely by mail order.¹¹ Leveraging his experience as a traveling salesman to publish a single sheet of 163 items, Ward had proceeded to grow this initial list to eight pages in only two years. By 1884, his catalogue contained 240

pages with thousands of articles, almost all of which were illustrated with a woodcut. As this new kind of mail-order company proliferated throughout the Midwest, advertisements for catalogues reached from the centers of American industry to the conquered territories at the country's periphery. Indeed, by the beginning of the twentieth century "catalogues, circulars, and form letters" became as much a part of marketing as the traveling salesman had been.¹² What had begun with "occasional articles...ordered from the small retail shops by notes delivered [through] messengers," grew right along with the nation's railroads and telegraph lines.¹³ By 1905, catalogues were so prolific that the publisher George Oglivie could say that there was not "a district in the entire United States that can not be considered available for mail-order sales." Sending out catalogues and samples, sometimes unsolicited, "catalogue houses" built up lists of prospects maintained through the regular delivery of special offer "circulars" (fig. 5).¹⁴ Not only did this allow them to reach an unprecedented number of customers, companies could now inculcate desire for otherwise unseen articles—painting products, the businessman Frank Lomas wrote, in the "highest colors."¹⁵ No longer mere list, this was a form fashioned by a spectacular array of specifications, part numbers, and halftones—with an imaginative potential that stood in contrast to their content's material unavailability.¹⁶

The unavailability of these products was not just some novel way of capturing the consumer imagination. One of the outcomes of the "American system" of interchangeable manufacture was that manufactured goods were better able to be marketed apart from the moment of their actual production.¹⁷ With all manner of catalogues and pamphlets waiting to put these unassembled objects in the ready hands of a captivated country, the question was: what exactly was represented in their pages? Things or objects? Artifacts or commodities? These freshly printed

stuff books may have claimed to be books of tools, but the secret of their supply was that they were not really selling things, just the form of them. These were tools that were not yet tools. They are present-at-hand only by promising that they now stand at-the-ready.

In his work on the railroads, Richard White suggests the shareholder's report as one of great "fictional genres" of nineteenth-century capitalism.¹⁸ But surely the catalogue offers an equally imaginative entrant. While the idea of the "part" may have arisen from the ideology of interchangeable manufacture, it could only be sold in the pages of the commercial catalogues distributed throughout the period.¹⁹ Alain Pottage and Brad Sherman have argued that the critical thing about these sorts of industrial productions was that—despite the pretense of their producers—they "were never technically or materially identical." They owed their status as replicas almost entirely to the emergence of a new "consumer aesthetic." And while publications such as pamphlets of patent bridges may have detailed designs *intended* for replication, only the catalogue promised that its contents could be repeated *exactly* (fig. 6). An object's appearance in a catalogue—its inked assembly there—was enough to signify that it derived from the modern mode of (mass)manufacture. The aura of the original passed to the copy primarily "by means of pictures," after all, and it was in the catalogue's pages that those pictures now appeared. While notions of interchangeable manufacture may have had the considerable effect of "encouraging" artifacts to be seen "as if" they were copies, it was only through the catalogue that this effect could be completed (fig. 7).²⁰

Commercial figures have long served as a means of misrepresenting the provenance of products and the conditions in which they are produced. As mechanisms of modern manufacture, parts (and part numbers) provided a mode of description for narrating a catalogue's contents. But inside its pages,

- 12 W. A. Waterbury, "Selling by Mail," in *The Business Man's Library: Book on Selling* (Chicago: The System Company, 1905), 86-90.
- 13 H.T. Kept in *The Business Man's Library: Book on Buying* (Chicago: The System Company, 1905), 103.
- 14 Jason J. Starr, "How the Small Mail Order Man Sells," in *The Business Man's Library: Book on Selling* (Chicago: The System Company, 1905), 101-103.
- 15 Frank Lomas, "How the Country Merchant Meets the Competition of the Catalogue House" in *The Business Man's Library: Book on Selling* (Chicago: The System Company, 1907), 105-106, 108.
- 16 For more comprehensive histories of the mail-order catalogue companies, see: Boris Emmet and John E. Jeuck, *Catalogues and Counters: A History of Sears, Roebuck and Company* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950); Orange A. Smalley and Frederick D. Sturdivant, *The Credit Merchants: A History of Spiegel, Inc.* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973); Robert Ramsey, *Effective Direct Advertising: The Principles and Practice of Producing Direct Advertising for Distribution by Mail or Otherwise* (New York: Appleton, 1921); Nat Ross, "A History of Direct Marketing" (New York: Direct Marketing Association, 1991); *Direct Marketing Association Fact Book* (New York: Direct Marketing Association, 1982); Edward Nathan, *Direct Marketing: Strategy, Planning, Execution* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2000); and Lawrence Romain, *A Guide to American Trade Catalogs 1744-1900* (New York: Dover, 1960).
- 17 Recalling David Hounshell's classic *From the American System to Mass Production, 1800-1932* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).
- 18 See Richard White, *Railroaded: The Transcontinentals and the Making of Modern America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012).
- 19 On the ideology of interchangeability, see again Hounshell, as well as Merritt Roe Smith, "Eli Whitney and the American System of Manufacturing," in *Technology in America: A History of Individuals and Ideas*, ed. Carroll W. Pursell Jr. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 45-11.
- 20 Alain Pottage and Brad Sherman, *Figures of Invention: A History of Modern Patent Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 34-35.

Figure 5. Sears and Roebuck "Consumer's Guide" for 1894 (cover).
 Figure 6. "East Indian Suspension Bridge," a patent bridge for 1894.
 Figure 7. Sears and Roebuck "Consumer's Guide" for 1894 (interior).



the aesthetic of the form not only implied a relation of material identity, it abstracted away the mundane realities that identity entailed. The result was a virtual assembly of supply directed not only to consumers but to industry. Standing in for particular chains of production, these supply catalogues served to mask the particularities of those chains. It was a fiction, but one that proved necessary for the disjoint geographies that gave birth to the modern supply chain. And it is in this way that the regularity of catalogue publication worked to push the confines of emerging twentieth-century industries beyond a single firm's operational bounds—not simply expanding the market but providing the very protocols for interaction within it. Functioning as nothing less than—distributors suggested—a *supply house*, catalogues now offered a sure point of connection to what had been a distant and uncertain source of supply.

This was nowhere more obvious than in the large national distributors that emerged in the electrical industry of the early twentieth century. The Western Electric Company, for example, may have been in the business of buying for the captive market of the Bell System, but it sold products too. As an electrical supplier it offered its *Supply Year Book* alongside smaller catalogues, booklets, and instructional guides tailored to nearly every kind of concern. While its early advertisements directed readers to “drop a post card” in exchange for a corresponding booklet and catalogue (from which “parcel post” could bring them a product “just like this”), the 1916 edition of their *Year Book* could detail clear instructions to “telephone our nearest house” or inquiry by “mail order”:²¹

You will note that we have placed opposite each article, when possible, a list number. When ordering material by mail, kindly order by the list number and give a description of the article required. You are requested to specify the routing over which you prefer shipments to be made. In the absence of

specific instructions, we shall use our best judgment in selecting the route, but we are not responsible for extra drayage expenses at destination.²²

As the Western Electric Company and firms like it became universal emblems of availability, industry notices suggested businesses “make your order book—your store house.” After all, what better way to “supply your needs” than to have “everything under one cover.” Though the contents required, as later catalogues would put more plainly, “some assembly,” the result was nevertheless “an electrical supply room within easy call.” Behind a thick paper door was the Western Electric Distribution House, a “source of supply” ready to serve as “your own reserve (fig. 8).”²³

Merchants had always bought and sold, but the wares they had offered remained mere stock. The kind of “consumer’s guides” published by firms like Sears and Roebuck or the expansive volumes published by distributors like Western Electric were not just lists of stock but, they argued, “supply houses.” As such, they contained the source from which a product could be produced—not a form for ordering objects, but the very function for fashioning them. And through this catalogue function, the future of consumption would come to exchange finite listings of pre-constituted constructions for technological endpoints to immaterial, procedural objects. Here there could be no excess or lack. After all, for contemporary consumers there is no difference if an item on the Amazon store shelf is already assembled, or if it arrives “just in time.” Like pictures in the catalogue, the conditions of global supply rest only on the promise of eventual assembly. And this is an appointment that the supply house has always claimed to keep.

8

- 21 Western Electric, “Parcel Post Will Bring You an Inter-phone Just Like This,” NMAH, NW Ayer Collection, 1913.
- 22 Western Electric, *Supply Year Book* (New York: Western Electric Company, 1916).
- 23 See Western Electric’s “Everything From the Bottom of the Hole—To the Top of the Pole,” “Locked!” and “Make Your Order Book Your Store House,” NMAH, Trade Literature Collection, 1924. A later example along these lines is 1929’s “Some Lamp Storerooms You Didn’t Know You Had.”

Figure 8. Western Electric, “Open This Door to Your Biggest Stockroom,” 1924.

Downloaded from <http://direct.mit.edu/uhf/article-pdf/doi/10.1162/uhf.a.00727/1900962/uhf.a.00727.pdf> by guest on 20 September 2021