

# Transformation of the Speed Problem of Contemporary Clothing-Fashion in the Perspective of Social Acceleration Critical Theory

Yizhou Zhang<sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Humanities, Tongji University, Shanghai, China

<sup>2</sup>School of Culture Communication & Design, Zhejiang University of Finance & Economics Dongfang College, Hangzhou, China

## Email address:

188496172@qq.com

## To cite this article:

Yizhou Zhang. Transformation of the Speed Problem of Contemporary Clothing-Fashion in the Perspective of Social Acceleration Critical Theory. *Social Sciences*. Vol. 12, No. 3, 2023, pp. 76-81. doi: 10.11648/j.ss.20231203.11

**Received:** April 13, 2023; **Accepted:** April 28, 2023; **Published:** May 10, 2023

---

**Abstract:** The main critique of contemporary clothing-fashion from the perspective of speed focuses on fast fashion and treats its antithesis slow fashion as the main way to respond to and solve its problem. But the meaning of speed in contemporary fashion research relies too much on the physical speed level expression, which is obviously far from enough. Hartmut Rosa and Byung-chul Han are two representative theorists in the field of critical theory of social acceleration, and they have completely different views on the diagnosis of the current phenomenon of social acceleration. Hartmut Rosa positions the core of the current social acceleration problem as the "synchronization", while Byung-chul Han interprets the current time crisis from the perspective of "de-continuity". Based on their different diagnoses, the two scholars also give the healing tools of "resonance" and "contemplation" respectively. Their theoretical origins, problem diagnoses, and even proposed solutions are distinct but complementary in content. Based on these theories, this paper tries to further reveal the fast problem of contemporary clothing-fashion as the problem of "islanding" and the slow problem as the new possibility of healing contemporary clothing-fashion based on perception.

**Keywords:** Hartmut Rosa, Byung-Chul Han, Clothing-Fashion, Social Acceleration, Time Crisis

---

## 1. Introduction

The clothing-fashion discussed in this paper refers to a material culture and symbolic system that was born along with the process of Western society from the Middle Ages into capitalist society [1], which is also a complete commercial system for the production, display, sale and recycling of goods, and a social and cultural force that reflects the spirit of the times at all times, and clothing-fashion is chasing a kind of "eternally reborn new" [2] in between all these tensions, Baudelaire found the most apt definition to describe modernity in the characteristics of fashion: "transition", "transience", "accidental." In this sense, "fast" is the natural attribute of fashion. In recent years, the ecological, resource, and labor problems caused by the accelerating fashion industry have become too serious to ignore, and slow fashion has been proposed and widely discussed as a solution to resist this endless acceleration. However, in the context of fashion

research, it is not enough to think about fashion fast and slow, which is often confined to the physical speed of production and consumption in the clothing-fashion industry.

Hartmut Rosa and Byung-chul Han have sensitively captured the "time crisis" from the accelerating symptoms of contemporary society, and diagnosed and answered it based on their different academic backgrounds. They have developed a highly original and academically valuable social critical theory. If anything, Hartmut Rosa's critical theory construct is based on the perspective of modernity, Then Byung-Chul Han, in his "In the Taste of Time," has a strong postmodern color, responding to Hartmut Rosa's social acceleration critical theory, which is distinctly different on the surface but implicitly complementary in connotation. Undoubtedly, the fast and the slow of fashion can be more profoundly revealed and responded to in the thinking of these two thinkers on speed.

## 2. The Basic Issues of the Speed of Contemporary Clothing-Fashion

A search of the WOS database with "fast-fashion" as the keyword and sorted by the number of citations reveals an interesting phenomenon: most of the top 20 or even more cited articles treat fast fashion as a high-speed fashion marketing model [3], industrial supply chain [4] or consumption model [5] represented by ZARA, H&M, GAP and other brands. The vast majority of scholars have criticized fast fashion for its vicious expansion of instrumental rationality and its consequent environmental damage, labor injustice, and waste of resources, and have viewed its future development as negative. However, this critique is not very thorough, and most of the arguments tend to fix the fast fashion industry from a purely technological perspective.

The concept of slow fashion has been reflecting on the speed of fashion since its inception. It was born in 2007 by Kate Fletcher in "The Ecologist" from a critique of fast fashion [6]. She points out that slow fashion is an approach that distinguishes itself from fast fashion, and highlights that slow does not point to a dualism in opposition to fast, but rather to anti-monolithic standardization, defense of consumers' right to access information, cultural diversity, and identity. However, the discussion of slow remains limited to discussions of business models and design methods, and a very few scholars have begun to extend the meaning of slow beyond feminism [7] or new materialism [8], but its validity remains to be studied.

To sum up, the narrative of fast and slow fashion is more like a self-questioning exercise in fashion itself, with fast fashion throwing up a bunch of headaches while slow fashion as a response is more like a problem-solving basket. Most of the studies on the speed of fashion today understand speed as two different forms of business models, and fast and slow are treated as an a priori physical problem of speed without any in-depth consideration. The theoretical critique of fashion speed and slowness basically stays in the modern (fast) or even pre-modern (slow) perspective, which is seriously disconnected from the reality we live in nowadays, and the speed of fashion needs to be better revealed.

## 3. The Dialogue of Social Accelerating Critical Theory

Hartmut Rosa is an important critical theorist of the Frankfurt School who has studied "media technology and the crisis of time" in several works. The Korean-German theorist Byung-Chul Han has responded to Hartmut Rosa's theory of "social acceleration" and formed a dialogue between the two scholars on the issue of modernity in several works. On this basis, the two scholars have developed different critical paths and proposed different solutions to the changes in the temporal structure of modern society, presenting a paradigm shift from "modern" to "postmodern". [9], their research on "time-speed" provides an excellent theoretical basis for rethinking the speed of clothing-fashion.

Rosa keenly observed the dynamization of the world from the 18th century onwards. With the invention of the steam engine, steamboats, trains and locomotives began to move around the world, not only people, but also goods, materials, resources and even information are moving at a higher speed, the invention of airplanes and rockets pushed this dynamic to a new peak, and the popularity of the Internet accelerated the dynamic information to the limit. That's why Rosa points out that modernization means the dynamicization of the world and that the core of modernization is the acceleration of the world. Modernization means making the world go round, bringing things into motion, transforming and reshaping our physical environment, even as ideas, pictures, images, data, and capital traveling around the world spread instantaneously at the speed of light, with a dramatic increase in flows up and down. Therefore, Hartmut Rosa gives the definition of acceleration on this basis, that is, "the increase in the number of events per unit of time" [10]; however, Byung-Chul Han rejects this diagnosis of Hartmut Rosa, and believes that the postmodern acceleration is only a feeling of exhaustion after the de-narrativization of time. A "universal inability to end and conclude exists. Time rushes forward, because it does not end and conclude anywhere, because it is not held by any temporal gravity." [13]. To prove this point, Byung-Chul Han divides time into theological time, historical time, and modern time. Theological time is also called cyclic time, an idea that originated in ancient Greece, in which acceleration does not produce any meaning, and what has meaning is only its own eternal recurrence. Acceleration produces meaning only in historical time, also known as linear time, because in linear time, time is continuous and linear, and the meaning of acceleration lies in the promise of reason. The third is modern time. Modern time is fragmented, disordered and atomized due to the full involvement of communication media in the concept of time in modern society. Further, he points out that Hartmut Rosa's diagnosis of acceleration is based on historical time, which is not applicable in the context of modern time, and that the mere "increase in the number of events per unit of time" [11] (Hartmut Rosa, 2005/2015) does not produce any meaning. Although their diagnoses of the "time crisis" are fundamentally different, it is clear that they both remain alert to the crisis of time caused by the traditional "technological myth" and are critical of the modern capitalist society that is constantly pursuing economic growth and profit. They both maintain a critical attitude toward modern capitalist society, which is in constant pursuit of economic growth and profit.

## 4. Diagnosis of the Problem of Fast Fashion as Social Acceleration and Narrative Crisis

According to Hartmut Rosa, social acceleration is mainly reflected in technological acceleration, Increasing the rates of changing, and Speeding up of our own lives. It's like the increasing speed of communication technology (technological acceleration) that causes a news item to become old news in

less than 10 minutes (acceleration of social change), thus forcing people to do things in their daily lives faster (acceleration of the pace of life). The same is true for the accelerating demand for fast-fashion clothing. The increasing acceleration of communication, textile production and logistics technologies has made it possible for a fashionable new dress to be delivered by courier to the consumer within three days of being noticed on social media, whereas twenty years ago, the newest clothing may could take six months or more from the launch of a magazine or show to appearing in a store. However, this has also led to a significant shortening of the fashion life cycle, which was originally at least one year or longer. At the same time, the shortening of the fashion life cycle continues to stimulate accelerated technological progress, and an unpleasant cycle of accelerated fast fashion has been created.

Hartmut Rosa goes on to point out that the most fundamental driver of this acceleration is the logic of modern society, especially the form of capitalist society, which, as a representative of a modern economic form, can sustain the whole system only through constant acceleration, innovation and growth, so that acceleration is a systemic necessity called dynamic stabilization, in other words, modern society cannot be stable unless it accelerates. Subjectively speaking, we are victims of this system, and our anxiety and fear of falling behind constantly drives us to increase our economic, cultural and social capital in order to compete and avoid being trampled underfoot; on the other hand, we like and enjoy acceleration because it is closely related to our understanding of freedom and happiness. We think we live in a logic that if we increase the scope of how we experience the world, then our quality of life will improve. If fashion is understood as the image of modern, This constant change is in line with what is sought by the most important ideological drivers of modern change, namely, a "consciousness in order to move towards rationality" [14], which is consistent with the psychological logic of the pursuit of money and information.

However, as the acceleration escalates, the cost of dynamizing the world increases, requiring more material, political and psychological energy to maintain its dynamization, but there is always a part of the world that cannot be accelerated infinitely. The so-called "desynchronization". Clothing-fashion maintained strong growth for 18 months from early 2021 to mid-2022 even with the serious outbreaks of the Covid-19, with 21% growth compared to 2020-2021 [15] (McKinsey Industry Report, 2022). The desynchronization between accelerating production, consumption, abandonment and ecology; the desynchronization between increasingly complex and diverse Clothing-fashion needs and political energy inputs -- the myriad of "political mistakes" to be avoided before a line of clothing is launched is extremely energy intensive. The dizzying array of fashion trends and the endless array of fashion images also requires more psychological energy to shape one's image to keep up with them. So the central problem with fast fashion in Hartmut Rosa's critical theory of acceleration is not that it is fast, but that there is a

desynchronization between the acceleration of clothing fashion, especially the need for accelerated economic growth, and the material, political, and psychological energy it invests.

In Byung-Chul Han's diagnosis, today's time crisis is not acceleration; the acceleration of contemporary society is only one of the many symptoms of time dissipation, and he attributes the time crisis to a "bad time," where time lacks an orderly rhythm, and the feeling of accelerated life is actually a feeling of time hurtling without direction. He believes that acceleration only makes sense in historical time, but that time has passed. The modern time that makes us feel the symptom of acceleration is the atomized modern time, which has lost any continuous experience, and man is completely shrunk in space and time, and this time crisis has created a feeling of exhaustion.

On the basis of Byung-Chul Han's theory, the acceleration of clothing-fashion is only a symptom of today's time crisis, the core problem of this symptom is the disappearance of fashion continuity. Fast fashion is a kind of de-narrative fragmented fashion, so-called "retro", "fashionable" or "future" style images are crowded and scattered in the current tense, people are aimlessly shuttling back and forth among various styles, fragmented fashion has become lonely islands. We look to fashion to find out the answers of who I am, hoping to find meaning in it, and fragmented fashion means that I have the possibility to experience more "I", meaning more freedom. But paradoxically, after the loss of continuity, this aimless rush through various fragmented fashions does not provide more content and meaning for our atomized life, the tiny me, and we can only "shriveled up to his small body" in the fast clothing-fashion. " [13].

Although there are essential differences in the critical paths of social acceleration between the two scholars, they both soberly recognize that high speed or acceleration is only a specific disease under the time crisis rather than the core problem, Hartmut Rosa is more in the context of modernity and tends to criticize the acceleration of the external objective world, while Byung-Chul Han's thinking is more inclined to a metaphysical value dimension with a strong postmodern color, and they imply a complementarity that cannot be ignored. On this basis, if speed is thrown out as a basic problem of fashion, we can now at least better reveal it as the problem of desynchronization and fragmentation of fashion, and perhaps when considering the complementary nature of desynchronization and fragmentation, we can further reveal the problem of speed of fast fashion as the problem of "islanding" of clothing-fashion. This Isolated fashion Island faces the problem of desynchronization with the objective world on the outside, and is trapped in a kind of nothingness due to the absence of the meaning of the end of continuity.

## 5. Slow Fashion as a Solution to the Problem of Finding "Resonance" and "Aroma"

Hartmut Rosa and Byung-Chul Han not only reveal the

problem, they also reflect on the possibility of recovery, proposing two different paths of "resonance" and "contemplation" respectively. Hartmut Rosa finds that the current situation is that the medium through which we relate to the world has changed from the "soft, flexible, fragrant and workable" medium of the printed book to the "hard, rigid, cold and indifferent" medium of the flickering screen. And even more frightening is the fact that the screen has become the only and absolutely dominant form of media, leading to the homogenization of our experiential world, where we "have no smell, no taste, no gravity, and no sense of touch" [12]. Digital media technology blocks resonance and alienates the essence of the human being in the sense of Merleau-Ponty's perception of the prior. On the other hand, Hartmut Rosa continues the claim of earlier critical theorists that modern society has put our empathic relationship with the world in a particular crisis due to "instrumental rationality". It annihilates the world's voice, doesn't let the world speak, and doesn't let us (or we can't) listen to the world either; and this apparently simultaneously eliminates the preconditions for our existence in the world. More seriously, because this mode of domination is based on purely quantitative calculations, modern society has further developed a "logic of elevation" in which everything is reduced to a numerical value and "the higher the value, the better, and the better it must be". Hartmut Rosa also refers to this logic as the logic of "expanding the scope of action in the world" or "control". The most problematic part of this logic is that it reduces our previously rich and diverse lifestyles and life goals to a single value in the form of a number, and then raises the threshold of the goal higher and higher. This has forced everyone in modern society into a vortex of single values in the form of elevated numbers - a forced inward spiral. The same is true of contemporary clothing-fashion. On the one hand, the medium through which we receive access to clothing-fashion has become singular; in medieval France, clothing-fashion was disseminated through equivalently scaled Barbie dolls, through which consumers could feel the silhouettes, textures and even scents of clothing-fashion. Twenty years ago, the most important channel for buying clothes was through shopping in stores to try on clothes; trying on clothes was a form of union consciousness, and we need to mobilize our perception as a whole in order to determine the appropriateness of my relationship with fashion. When online clothing shopping first appeared people scoffed and actively developed virtual fitting devices, however this was soon found to be completely redundant. The absolute dominance of screens and images dominated our medium with fashion, and deciding whether to buy a fashion no longer required the union consciousness, but relied solely on the eyes, which blocked the resonance between human and clothing. On the other hand, instrumental rationality has made the fashion that has an absolute numerical advantage (exposure, sales, profitability, etc.) the so-called "good" fashion. The design approach of fast fashion companies is based on this reliance on big data, making fashion, which is supposed to present people's exploration of rich and diverse possibilities, single and uninteresting, and

accelerating fashion production, excess and discard. The so-called best and most fashionable clothing can no longer provide any meaning to people except for its numerical economic value.

Perhaps we can find a solution in the resonance theory proposed by Hartmut Rosa, which is based on Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*: for perception to be formed there is an essential prerequisite that the perceiving person and the perceived world must co-exist. Otherwise, perception cannot be formed without the presence of a person but without the world to be perceived. Perception is not only a personal feeling, but also a result of the world. Merleau-Ponty further points out that we ourselves and the world, though different, exist as a whole and inseparable. "As a whole" means, on the one hand, that the human being is a whole, not a combination of organs, and that perception is not a stimulus-response of individual organs, but a grasp of the whole. On the other hand, the world is also a whole full of associations with the I that is in the world. It is as if music does not only stimulate our auditory organs, but also brings out the whole world that drives all our perceptions. This is why Hartmut Rosa makes a very important point: the relationship to the world that makes human existence possible must be a relationship of mutual listening and responding to the world. Hartmut Rosa uses the term "resonance" to refer to this relationship. In particular, Hartmut Rosa emphasizes that "resonance" means two voices responding to each other, so that for resonance to be possible, both (or more) must be able to retain and express their own voices. He is keenly aware of a recurring, persistent, and pervasive anxiety in the relationship between the subject and the world in the midst of this accelerating modernization process. This anxiety comes from a certain fear of becoming "atoms" with no relation to each other in a silent or hostile world [12]. Hartmut Rosa seeks to construct a relationship between the subject and the world that is always present in an increasingly accelerating society: where body and mind, spirit and nature, individual and collective, and individual and society can overcome their differences, relate to each other as each other, and build dynamic and responsive relationships with each other.

Byung-Chul Han also tries to solve the "time crisis" through the level of the senses, if Hartmut Rosa does it through the sense of hearing, his starting point is the sense of smell, as can be seen from the title of his book "Scent of time", in which he believes that the good time corresponding to the bad time is fragrant. This view may come from McLuhan's experiment in "Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man" [16]. In his view, smell seems to breed history, full of narrative images, and smell is the epic narrative sense that linking, weaving, and condensing many temporalities into a picture, a narrative work, so the place that emits fragrance is also self-aggregating. [13] Citing the example of the ancient Chinese who used incense to measure time, he argues that the ancient Chinese incense recorded the slow passage of time in space, a tradition that influenced the ancient understanding of time and its interaction with space [13]. In the digital age, how can people access the "aroma"? His solution is to "contemplate life,"

which is different from a state of inactivity, but a reflection and correction of modern people's excessive devotion to labor and work, obsessed with efficiency, productivity, and profit returns, to oppose the rush and to think in a "leisurely" attitude. He believes that "contemplation of life enhances time itself," thus making it meaningful and giving it to man himself. There is an implicit logic of complementarity between the internal and external methods that Hartmut Rosa advocates to build a "resonate" relationship with the external world and Byung-Chul Han's search for the internal ability to "contemplate".

Fashion is the medium that perfectly fit for us to resonate with the world outwardly and to contemplate life inwardly, however, the current fast clothing-fashion is essentially a monolithic fashion under the cult of data. There is no resonance in a monolithic world. We must develop a truly diverse set of fashion for active life, so that every group can make their voices heard through fashion, turning "isolated-island of fashion" into "group-islands of fashion". At the same time, we also need to realize that fashion is not a rigid image of the body, but a tactile or embodied form of fact, it is about the body's behavior in space, the meaning of clothing is not only in the communication of symbols and aesthetics, much less about the high or low numbers. It is more the production of a certain pattern of physical behavior, in clothing-fashion to explore the experience of "my body in the world". Only in this way can fashion provide us with an associative relationship with the world not only from the sense of smell or hearing, but what Merleau-Ponty called "as a whole", thus overcoming the crisis of fashion caused by the crisis of time.

## 6. Conclusion

In the modern society where instrumental rationality reigns supreme, clothing-fashion has been accelerated into an "isolated-island" due to the singularity of the medium, the involution of the logic of numerical ascension, and the end of narrative, which has been accelerated constantly and thus has been severely desynchronized with the rest of the outward world, and has been broken into atoms and lost its meaning. This is a clear departure from the promise of a gradual self-consciousness toward rationality that fashion held at the beginning of modern society and even now. Yet both Hartmut Rosa and Byung-Chul Han believe that mere slowing down does not solve the problem and even obscures the real problem, "there is no essential difference between slow food and fast food." [13], the real problem is that what is ongoing, long lasting and slow faces disappearance or distance from life due to disengagement from consumption, and true slow clothing-fashion needs to resist the "isolated-island" caused by the time crisis of modernity and post-modernity through resonance and contemplation, so that individual memories, emotions and thoughts can be reconnected and fragmented pieces of experience organized into a coherent, The fragmented experience is organized into a coherent and continuous body of experience, which re-enriches the

individual's rough and thin sense of time under the fast time [17].

## Fund Project

A study on the speed of contemporary clothing-fashion in the context of acceleration critical theory, Project No. Y202250241. This article is one of the project results of the general research project of Zhejiang Provincial Education Department, "A study on the speed of contemporary clothing-fashion in the context of acceleration critical theory".

## References

- [1] Kawamura Y, Fashion-Ology [M], Berg Publishers, 2004.
- [2] Benjamin, Paris, Capital of the 19th Century [M], Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2006.
- [3] He Lingling. Analysis of the current situation, trends and development strategies of "fast fashion" in China and abroad [J]. Market Research, 2015.
- [4] Wang Jing. Fast fashion [J]. Clothing Guide, 2013.
- [5] Yang Guang. Research on financial competitiveness of fast fashion apparel companies [D]. Donghua University, 2016.
- [6] Lynda Grose, Kate Fletcher, Fashion and Sustainability: Design for Change [M], Laurence King Publishing, 2012.
- [7] Hazel Clark, "Slow+Fashion-Women's Wisdom, Fashion Practice" [J], Fashion Practice, 2019.
- [8] Kate Goldworthy, "The Speedcycle: a design-led framework for fast and slow circular fashion lifecycles" [J], The Design Journal, 2017.
- [9] Lian Shuixing, Lu Zhengjiao, Deng Dan. Media technology and time crisis as a problem of "modernity": the different perspectives of Rosa and Byung-Chul Han [J]. 2021.
- [10] Hartmut Rosa, Beschleunigung: die Veränderung der Zeitstrukturen in der Moderne [M], Beijing: Peking University Press, 2005.
- [11] Hartmut Rosa, Beschleunigung und Entfremdung: Entwurf einer Kritischen Theorie spätmoderner Zeitlichkeit [M], Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2013.
- [12] Hartmut Rosa, Unverfügbarkeit [M], Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2022.
- [13] Byung-Chul Han, Scent of time: A philosophical essay about the art of lingering [M]. Chongqing University Press, 2017.
- [14] Lars Svendsen, Fashion: A Philosophy [M]. Beijing University Press, 2010.
- [15] McKinsey Industry Report, The State of Fashion 2023: Holding onto growth as global clouds gather, 2022.
- [16] KevMarshall McLuhan, Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man [M]. Yilin Press, 2019.
- [17] Daqiao Wang.. Slow experience and the problematic transformation of contemporary aesthetics [J]. Literary and Artistic Controversy, 2020.

## Biography

**Yizhou Zhang** (1989-), male, Huaibei, Anhui Province, Doctoral study in Aesthetics at Tongji University. Lecturer of fashion design in School of Culture Communication & Design, Zhejiang University of Finance & Economics, research interests: aesthetics; speed fashion; fashion design.