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## Slow-Fashion

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Slow Fashion is a movement which has emerged within the fashion industry, mainly during the last decade. It can be understood as a response to, and opposition to, Fast Fashion. In particular, slow fashion seeks to mitigate the harmful social, political, and environmental effects of the fast fashion industry. Furthermore, slow fashion forwards an ethical code for both sustainable design and conscious consumerism.

## Slow Culture

Slow Fashion must be understood within the context of the broader slow movement that it emerged from. The Slow Movement includes various forms of resistance to late capitalist consumer culture, such as Slow Food, Slow Art, Slow Cinema, Slow Counselling, and Slow Education. Against the impatient scrolling and short attention spans fostered by new media culture, Slow Art encourages lengthy reflection time in front of art works. Research by Smith and Smith, in 2001, indicates that the average time spent looking at art by gallery visitors is just seventeen seconds. Beyond the superficial interpretation of artworks of websites and gallery plaques, Slow Art teaches us that the deepest meaning of artworks is only revealed gradually through prolonged contemplation. The progressive educationalist Maurice Holt first suggested the Slow-School movement, in 2001, as an antidote to the over-testing, governmental targets, and overburdened curricula of US comprehensive education. In contrast, the Slow School protects 'the intellectual space for scrutiny, argument, and resolution', so that 'understanding matters more than coverage'. Berg and Seeber published a manifesto-like book called *The Slow Professor* in 2016. This sought to challenge the overproductivity, performance metrics, and the 'publish or perish' culture of which characterises contemporary academic life. However, the preeminent force within the Slow Movement is also its earliest. Slow Food emphasises local produce, farmers' markets, traditional recipes, and *terroir*. In the words of the Italian activist Carlo Petrini, who founded the movement, Slow Food champions the 'sensual pleasure and slow, long-lasting enjoyment' missing from the consumption of fast-food. The *cause célèbre* of Slow Food was the proposal to open a new McDonald's restaurant in the historic Piazza di Spagna, Rome, in 1986. In this picturesque setting, at the bottom of the Spanish Steps, by Bernini's (1627-29) Baroque fountain, the 'golden arches' of a new McDonald's franchise represented both a political and aesthetic affront. According to reports in the *New York Times*, the neighbouring luxury fashion boutiques of Gucci, Bulgari, and Valentino complained that the foul smells and noisy crowds were ruining their brand image. Quickly, these protests grew, uniting conservative defenders of Italy's proud culinary and cultural history with younger anti-globalisation protesters. Beyond noise and air pollution, and unhealthy diets, the establishment of a McDonald's franchise in the 'eternal city' represented nothing less than the Americanisation of Italian culture. The Slow movement, which grew out of these protests, represents both a rearguard defence of regional culture and a global proposal for a richer, more authentic, and simply better way of life.

## The Cult of Speed.

McDonald's has now become the global metonym for the ills of US cultural imperialism. This is in no small part due to the American sociologist George Ritzer's *The McDonaldization of Society*, first published in 1993. Here, Ritzer used the noun McDonaldization to describe the neo imperial expansion of US consumer culture to all parts of the globe. Beyond a critique of McDonalds, it is a critique of American capitalism per se. McDonaldization is the process which the Slow movement opposes. The term 'McJob' is generally understood today as a cultural shorthand for low-paid, low-skill, low-intellect, dead-end employment. McDonaldization also describes the dominance of routinised or mechanised mass production over individual craftsmanship and artisanal skill. It also describes the spread of corporate bureaucracy, managerialism, rationalisation, and efficiency savings. For Ritzer, the effects of McDonaldization are felt throughout culture. Mass production quickly finds its natural audience base in mindless consumers that are happy to sacrifice culture and quality for convenience.

Carl Honoré's *In Praise of Slow*, published in 2009, is the definitive text of the Slow movement. It issues a rousing ethical challenge to what he calls the contemporary 'cult of speed'. As Honoré argues, contemporary consumer culture has become obsessed with instant gratification. Fast food is expected to be served within minutes, if not immediately. We expect online information and services instantaneously, within a minimum number of 'clicks'. Accordingly, we demand faster and

faster broadband. All aspects of life which previously involved human interactions are increasingly replaced by automated services designed to quicken processes. Taxis, takeaway food, groceries, not to mention fashion, are all now routinely ordered through mobile phone apps with no person-to-person contact. Artificial Intelligence, which is perhaps the ultimate accelerationist technology, now threatens to completely replace human creative labour. AI driven websites offer ten-minute digested versions of classic literature for those without time to read the whole book. The dystopian rise of AI girlfriends suggests that even human relationships, which are inefficient by comparison, are replaceable. Other consequences of the 'cult of speed' cited within Honorés book are road rage, stress related illnesses, technological overstimulation, social animosity, and a global nuclear arms race. The 'cult of speed' reflects and reproduces a psychological condition called 'time-sickness'. First introduced by the American physician Larry Dossey in 1982, this refers to the anxiety caused by the belief that we lack the necessary time to complete our daily tasks. This perception is exacerbated by the growing emphasis on productivity in almost every aspect of contemporary life. Furthermore, the social media sites which were intended to sustain human relationships have actually created psychological disorders and new mechanisms for anonymous abuse. Indeed, as the cultural historian Jonathan Crary's work demonstrates, a connection between technological acceleration and declining public mental health is evident throughout the modern age.

### Fordism and Mass Production

Key twentieth century antecedents of the 'cult of speed' include the principles of 'scientific management', developed by US mechanical engineer Frederick W. Taylor in 1911, and the mass production processes introduced by the US industrialist Henry Ford around the same period. Taylor's work was developed from upon extensive time-motion studies of workers. By scientifically studying their movements, he was able to identify extraneous or inefficient actions. As a result, worker activity was stripped back to the minimum necessary action required to complete a task. Worker efficiency and productivity increased exponentially as a result. Ford's genius was transposing this to the production lines of the motor industry in Detroit. His production mantra for mass production was 'power, accuracy, economy, system, continuity, speed'. However, productivity increased at the same rate as the alienation of the workforce. Workers became specialists at quickly manufacturing one element of a car, but lost general engineering skills. This gradual deskilling meant that work became increasingly repetitive, even robotic, and less rewarding. The Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci introduced the term Fordism to describe the spread of this into a general social phenomenon. A repeated criticism of Fordist or Post-Fordist capitalist culture, especially from Frankfurt School thinkers like Adorno and Horkheimer, is that it produces cultural standardisation. In turn, the consumers of mass culture become standardised themselves through their superficial engagement with the trivial products of the culture industries.

### Fast Fashion

One of the key insights of Post-Fordist critique is that mass production and consumer culture are intimately connected. Fast Fashion is a case in point. Ford famously joked that the signature mass-produced Model T Ford automobile came in "any color the customer wants, as long as it's black". Whilst mass production made cars widely accessible and increasingly affordable, it also created widespread cultural standardisation. It is but a short step from this to the critique of fast fashion. As Elizabeth Wilson remarked, in the opening of her seminal fashion theory text *Adorned in Dreams*, fashion has always been 'capitalism's favourite child'. This is because it encourages an irrational demand for new clothes seasonally, in order to keep pace with the latest styles. In an essay which borrowed Wilson's title, Briggs highlighted how fast fashion companies like Zara cram in twenty seasonal changes into the calendar.

His useful review of literature on the fast fashion sector highlights how it is characterised by hyper-innovation and the rapid turnover of styles. Furthermore, this results from incremental technological acceleration within the textile industry since the eighteenth century. In an article from 2010, Kate Fletcher identified the following criteria of fast fashion: it is cheap and easy to produce, involving low-paid, low-skilled workers; it is made with low quality, cheap materials; it is produced in large quantities; it is brought to market fast. The business model of fast fashion is to produce as cheaply as possible in high volume, with a marginal retail profit, to keep costs competitively low. This business model becomes hugely profitable because of the staggering volume of sales of individual lines and the artificial demand created by marketing. The mass production of style creates a cultural standardisation that disguises conformity for individuality. The affordability of fast fashion masks this

pseudo-individualisation behind the seductive, selfish allure of a bargain. All of this disguises the meagre quality of fast fashion and the dismal reality of its conditions of production.

The worst horrors of the fast fashion system were globally exposed on the 24th of April 2013 in Bangladesh. Here, a poorly maintained sweatshop in Dhaka District collapsed, killing 1,134 people and injuring at least 2,000 others. The factory produced orders for Western companies such as Benetton, Bon Marché, Mango, Matalan, Primark, and Walmart. The traumatic events are recounted in detail by Tansy Hoskins in her 2014 book *Stitched-Up: The Anti-Capitalist Book of Fashion*. The sweatshop owner was subsequently imprisoned, but the pressure imposed by the tight deadlines of Western fashion companies was at least partially responsible for this disaster. The lack of due diligence, or even basic ethical responsibility, by Western companies was another factor. Andrew Morgan's harrowing documentary *The True Cost*, released in 2015, details other unintended side-effects of fast fashion, including genetically modified crops, worker suicides, pollution, and excess textile waste buried in landfill sites. Most tragically, it details the hand to mouth existence of garment workers in the global South. Beyond ethics and politics, the insatiable appetite of Western consumers for the latest looks at bargain prices also has aesthetic consequences. A recent Channel 4 documentary called *Inside Missguided*, screened in 2020, clearly demonstrated how corners are cut in the Fast Fashion design process. This begins with the Missguided team scrolling social media for attention-grabbing celebrity looks, before instructing their only in-house designer to replicate these as CAD flats for the production line. The whole process, from selection to retail, was expected to take no more than a week. One doesn't need to be an expert couturier to realise the quality and craftsmanship lost under this model.

A UK government report called *Fixing Fashion*, released in 2019, spotlighted similar social, economic, and environmental problems with the UK Fast Fashion industry. These included exploitative conditions of labour and slave labour wages for the non-western garment producers; the dystopian dark factories of slave labour in UK garment producing cities like Leicester; forced labour in the fashion supply chain, in countries like Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan; and a general lack of compliance by Fast Fashion companies with UK legislation designed to mitigate against such workers' rights abuses. Other research identifies other social costs such as classism or prejudice against fast fashion consumers, or the sexual harassment and gender-based exploitation of the largely female fast fashion workforce. The environmental impacts of fast fashion are equally grim, and now widely reported. The textile industry is a significant contributor to climate change, contributing an annual carbon footprint of 3.3 billion tonnes CO<sub>2</sub>e globally, according to the UK government. The fashion industry also is responsible for water pollution through its waste chemicals and micro-fabrics. According to some damning statistics, the UK spends more on clothes than any other EU country and, accordingly, 300,000 tonnes of clothing is thrown away every year. Research by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation (2021) demonstrates a steady decline in clothing utilisation but an increase in clothing sales. Furthermore, clothing sales are increasing at a noticeably faster rate than GDP (Fig. 1). This data suggests that fashion consumers are becoming wasteful, careless, yet insatiable. Furthermore, the accelerating demand for fast fashion is creating a financial and environmental problem that is compounded, year on year.

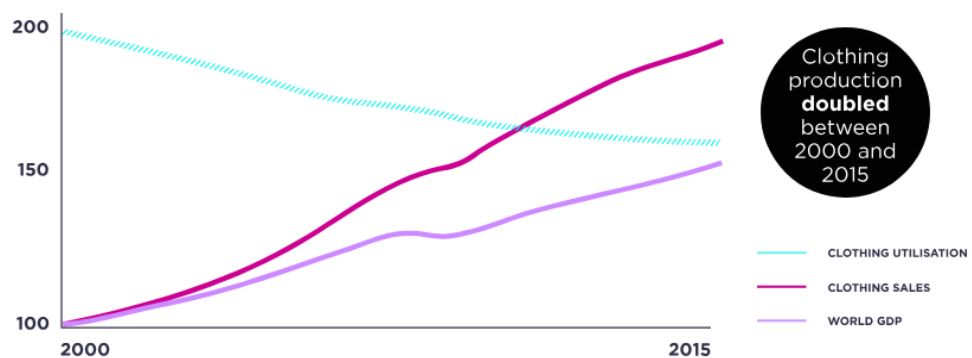


Fig. 1: Ellen MacArthur Foundation (2021: 8).

## Slow Fashion

As stated, Slow Fashion is both reaction and opposition to all aspects of the Fast Fashion industry. In her book *Slow-Fashion*, Safia Minney describes the movement as a holistic reappraisal of the fashion

industry, which involves 'joined-up thinking and a long-term partnership between suppliers and consumers to produce truly sustainable and socially responsible products'. She embodied these changes by founding the Fair-Trade fashion label The People Tree, which sold products made from eco-friendly materials produced by artisans from the global South, all of whom were paid a living wage. Kate Fletcher, another leading theorist of Slow Fashion, is even more polemical. In her opinion, Slow Fashion 'represents a blatant discontinuity with the practices of today's sector; a break from the values and goals of fast (growth-based) fashion. It is a vision of the fashion sector built from a different starting point'. One definition of Slow Fashion then is an industry that re-emphasises the ethical practice abandoned by fast fashion's relentless pursuit of turnover and profit. Post-Growth Fashion, which is related if not synonymous with Slow Fashion, is Fletcher's description of a reversal of priorities for the fashion industry; one which emphasises on quality over quantity. Here, 'growth' signifies the tendency of capitalism to constantly expand, seeking new markets to monopolise, and new sources of value extraction, until all human and planetary resources are exhausted. Post-Growth fashion builds from the ruins of an overstretched system toward a richer, human society. Whilst ameliorating the worst effects of the Fast Fashion system, it also invites consideration of its harmful effects. Instead of sweatshops, mass production, cost-cutting, and identikit global franchises, Post-Growth fashion champions localism, recycling, craft or second-hand markets, maker communities, and a bond of mutual respect between all actors in the fashion supply chain, including animals.

### Fashion Revolution

Campaigning hard to find fast fashion's reverse gear are the activist organisation Fashion Revolution. Formed in 2013, in the wake of the Rana Plaza disaster, Fashion Revolution have now expanded their operations to seventy-five countries. Via this network, they have become leaders in the fight for a more ethical fashion industry. Their Fashion Transparency Index is a giant database tracking the practices and supply chains of leading high street brands. Updated annually, the public nature of this database has shamed many unethical brands into reform. Fashion Revolution Week, held annually in April, a consciousness raising programme of global educational events and activism. However, the most emotionally affecting demonstration of supply chain transparency came with Fashion Revolution's influential 'Who Made My Clothes?' campaign. This encouraged the otherwise anonymous garment workers of sweatshops like Rana Plaza to share selfies on Fashion Revolution's website and social media proudly holding signs which, in various languages, read "I made your clothes". Supporting this work is a Fashion Revolution zine series that teaches consumers about the environmental consequences of their fashion consumption. The first zine in the series, released in 2017, was called Money, Fashion, Power, and detailed the excess profit and human costs of fast fashion. Other zines in the series have emphasised the craftsmanship lost during mass production and also the environmental impact. The second zine, also released in 2017, was titled Loved Clothes Last. This emphasised upcycling, recycling, thrifting, mending, as well as simply cherishing the clothes that we currently own. This emphasis on sustainability and circularity, rather than the seasonal pursuit of the latest trends, is a defining feature of Slow Fashion.

### Circularity

A year before Fashion Revolution released Loved Clothes Last, fashion theorist Kate Fletcher released a book exploring similar territory called Craft of Use. Fletcher's book is noticeably different from the majority of academic texts, consisting mainly of individual accounts of the social, sentimental, or psychological significance of cherished items of clothing. The result is a refreshingly human exploration of fashion, the intimacy of which resists the disposability of fast fashion culture and the dry austerity of much academic writing. That said, the work is underpinned by serious sociological and philosophical concepts. Her titular reference is to the distinction raised by the revolutionary philosopher Karl Marx between use-value and exchange-value. Within the Marxist lexicon, use-value describes the usefulness of any given commodity to an individual, whereas exchange-value describes the monetary value that same commodity is given at market. The contemporary fashion industry, like capitalism generally, overemphasises exchange-value in both its discourses and business models. The consequence is not only a market flooded with generic, even 'useless', new fashions, alongside a deafness to the human, relational elements which underpin the fashion system. By re-emphasising use-value, Fletcher's work reinscribes the circularity which is an essential stepping stone towards sustainable fashion.

The Ellen MacArthur Foundation is one of the leading charitable think tanks pushing for reform in the fashion sector. Specifically, they want to create a circular economy which minimises the

unsustainable excess of current capitalist modes of production. However, the idea of the circular economy is not unique to the Ellen MacArthur Foundation. An influential model was developed in Braungart and McDonough's book *Cradle to Cradle*, first published in 2002. Developed from observations of the natural world, cradle to cradle is an eco-design concept which opposes the extractive wastefulness of the capitalist mode of production. As Braungart and McDonough demonstrate, materials are rarely wasted in nature. As they argue, 'nature doesn't have a design problem. People do'. Invariably, ecosystems naturally self-regulate and reproduce themselves. Upon death, most life forms are transformed into fuel for new life forms. The cradle to grave model, underpinning much Western design since the industrial revolution, is extractive, linear, and unsustainable. It also reflects the desire to dominate, rather than cooperate, with nature that has marked the Anthropocene and all its various discontents. Instead, the cradle to cradle model is circular; the end of a product life-cycle simply represents the birth of a new creative process. It has five underpinning principles: circularity, clean air and climate protection, water and soil stewardship, social fairness. The distinctions between the cradle to cradle and cradle to grave are also the differences between slow and fast fashion, and are best illustrated via examples.

## Conscious Fashion

The outcry following Rana Plaza resulted in numerous public declarations of renewed ethics from many leading fashion brands. Many of these amount to little more than corporate greenwashing. A case in point would be the global fast fashion brand H&M, who launched a 'Conscious Collection' in 2020. The adverts for this range depicted young, metropolitan women, dressed in floral maxi-dresses, dancing gleefully in city eco-allotments. These bucolic scenes of urban bohemia sit uncomfortably with the numerous ethical accusations levelled against H&M in recent years. In a litany of horrors, the brand has been accused of using sweatshops which employ child labour and routinely abuse their female workforce. Also, being one of the foremost polluters in fashion because of their large production volumes. In particular, critics highlight how H&M manufacture pollutes the oceans with the cheap and toxic textile dyes they use, and the microfibres from the low-quality textiles which make their garments.

However, many fashion brands are genuinely 'conscious' and transparent. Widely considered as a pioneer of sustainable fashion, Stella McCartney has just launched the SOS Capsule collection. Consisting of bags and footwear made from vegan, regenerative, and recycled fibres, the titular SOS is both a declaration of the climate emergency fuelled by fast fashion and a statement of intent to reverse it. In a similar spirit, fashion brand Mother of Pearl released a moving film called *Fashion Reimagined* in 2022, which details their journey towards creating a fully sustainable collection. The brand led a sustainable strand of London Fashion Week in 2019. Another notable sustainable designer is Phoebe English. Her *Nothing New* collections, made from 2020 to 2021, were made entirely from natural dyes and waste fabric from local factories. In Europe, the footwear brand Veja make all their ranges using Fair Trade factories. They have also partnered with the job reintegration brand *Atelier Sans Frontières* who help the socially excluded, including ex-convicts, develop industry facing skills during work placements with the brand. Truly conscious fashion also is sensitive to the harmful relationship between the human and animal worlds. With this in mind, purchasers of knitwear from the New Zealand brand *Sheep Inc.* are not only given details of the sheep who provided the wool for their clothing but also given digital tracking information so consumers can monitor the animal's wellbeing. Similarly, the multinational trainer brand *Adidas* recently partnered with the marine conservation organisation *Parley for the Ocean* and the anti-whaling activists *Sea Shepherd* to create a concept shoe made from recycled plastic fishing nets.

The website of the Californian outdoor recreation company *Patagonia* looks more like an eco-activist campaign than a retail space. It profiles, amongst various sustainable lifestyle articles, their *Responsibili-Tee*. This is made from recycled plastic bottles and fabric scraps, and its label details the supply chain and the net environmental benefits of this mode of manufacture. The website also includes educational articles explaining D.I.Y. clothing repair techniques. This emphasis on reuse builds from their influential advertising campaign from 2011 which featured a *Patagonia* fleece underneath the insistent slogan "Do Not Buy This Jacket". This was released as a critical intervention within the mass consumer frenzy of the international 'Black Friday' sales. It might seem counterintuitive for a brand to discourage people from buying their products. Yet, by articulating a sincere political ideology and committed ethical programme, this brand has succeeded in building a fiercely committed consumer base. This proves that sustainability and ethics are not mutually exclusive to commercial success. Furthermore, the politics of *Patagonia* have imbued their aesthetically ascetic, even mundane, clothing lines with symbolic power and identity politics,

transforming them into veritable objects of desire. In different ways, each of the projects listed above define, in order to establish and solidify, new forms of counter-hegemonic community. This is the embodiment of the slow fashion ethos.

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