

# Hartmut Rosa, *Resonance: A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World*, translated by James C. Wagner (Polity, 2019; orig. German ed., 2016)

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[See table of contents](#)

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**Review: Hartmut Rosa, *Resonance: A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World*, translated by James C. Wagner (Polity, 2019; orig. German ed., 2016).**

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My favorite scholar is my former teacher at Saint Louis University, the American Jesuit Renaissance specialist and cultural historian and pioneering media ecology theorist Walter J. Ong (1912-2003; Ph.D. in English, Harvard University, 1955). Ong's family name is English. His paternal ancestors left East Anglia on the same ship that brought Roger Williams to Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1631 – five years before the founding of Harvard College in 1636.

In my adult life (I turned 80 recently), I have devoted an enormous amount of time and energy to writing about Ong's mature work from the early 1950s onward.

For example, I have written about his account of our contemporary secondary oral culture in my essay "Secondary Orality and Consciousness Today" in the anthology *Media, Consciousness, and Culture: Explorations of Walter Ong's Thought*, edited by Bruce E. Gronbeck, Thomas J. Farrell, and Paul A. Soukup (1991, pp. 194-209).

No doubt the reverberations of our contemporary secondary orality run deep in our psyches – even at the depths of our collective unconscious. No doubt such deep reverberations in our psyches are unsettling – especially at the level of ego-consciousness. Ah, but how do we interpret at the level of ego-consciousness the unsettling currents that we are experiencing at the depths of our collective unconscious?

As a Jesuit priest, Walter Ong stands within Team Catholic and within the orthodox Catholic tradition of thought. However, he does not often explicitly advert to orthodox Catholic thought. Nevertheless, he does interpret our contemporary secondary orality with the typical Christian stance of hope toward the end of his 1967 seminal book about secondary orality, *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History*, the expanded version of Ong's 1964 Terry Lectures at Yale University.

The typical Christian stance of hope occurs in the titles of two recent books by Pope Francis (born in 1936; elected pope in March 2013):

(1) *A Gift of Joy and Hope*, translated from the Italian by Oonagh Stransky (2020);

(2) *A Good Life: 15 Essential Habits for Living with Hope and Joy*, translated from the Italian by Oonagh Stransky (2024).

I reviewed Pope Francis' new 2024 book in my *OEN* article "Pope Francis on a Good Catholic Life" (dated April 25, 2024). Frankly, I am impressed that the aging, and ailing, pope has written two accessible books about hope and joy. In any event, the unsettling currents that we are experiencing at the depths of our collective unconscious have undoubtedly contributed to the rising sense of apocalyptic disturbance at the level of ego-conscious that Erik Bleich and Christopher Star have documented in their article "How 'apocalypse' became a secular as well as religious idea" (dated May 2, 2024) at *The Conversation* online.

However, even when people do not explicitly use apocalyptic imagery, they may experience the unsettling current at the depths of our collective unconscious but express them in other terms at the level of ego-consciousness. For a relevant discussion, see Thomas B. Edsall's column titled "Why Losing Political Power Now Feels Like 'Losing Your Country'" (dated April 24, 2024) in the *New York Times*.

Because many people today tend to see our current climate crisis in apocalyptic terms, I should note here that

Pope Francis' widely read 2015 eco-encyclical *Laudato Si'* manages to convey the typical Christian stance of hope – but combined with a sense of urgency.

Now, I recently learned about Hartmut Rosa's 2019 book *Resonance: A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World*, translated from the German by James C. Wagner.

Hartmut Rosa (born in 1965; Ph.D., Humboldt University of Berlin, 1997; with a dissertation on the political philosophy of Charles Taylor) stands within the Critical Theory tradition of thought in continental European philosophy.

Now, I learned about Rosa's 2019 book from Austen Ivereigh's new 2024 book *First Belong to God: On Retreat with Pope Francis* (Loyola Press) – which I reviewed in my *OEN* article "Austen Ivereigh on Pope Francis' Thought" (dated April 23, 2024). Perhaps Ivereigh's discussion of Rosa's book *Resonance* in his new 2024 book will now prompt Pope Francis to read Rosa's book.

It strikes me that what Rosa refers to as resonance is the perfect antidote to what Pope Francis refers to as the technocratic paradigm in his widely read 2015 eco-encyclical *Laudato Si'* (see numbered paragraphs 101, 109, 111, 112, 122, and 189; the pope's eco-encyclical is available in English and other languages at the Vatican's website). Pope Francis' resounding critique of the technocratic paradigm is related to what the American cultural critic and media ecology theorist Neil Postman refers to as technopoly in his 1992 book *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*.

Basically, what Rosa refers to as resonance involves the self-conscious cultivation of a paradigm shift to counter what Pope Francis refers to as the technocratic paradigm. Moreover, the self-conscious cultivation of what Rosa refers to as resonance is deeply attuned to the psychodynamics of what Ong refers to as our contemporary secondary orality.

Now, for Prof. Dr. Hartmut Rosa, his 2019 book *Resonance* is a follow up to his 2013 book *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*, translated by Jonathan Trejo-Mathys (Columbia University Press; orig. German ed., 2004). For me, what Rosa refers to as resonance is related to what I refer to as connection consciousness in my article "Eric McLuhan, Marshall McLuhan, Walter Ong, and Connection Consciousness" in the next new issue of the online journal *New Explorations: Studies in Culture and Communication* (2024).

In Rosa's "References" in his book *Resonance* (pp. 504-528), he lists seven works by Charles Taylor (p. 526). According to the "Index" (pp. 529-554 at 552), Rosa discusses Taylor on pages 20, 33-34, 88, 111, 115-117, 126, 133-138, 188, 198, 365, 391-392, and 413.

Now, what Rosa and others refer to as modernity emerged in our Western cultural history after the Gutenberg printing press emerged in Europe in the mid-1450s. Ong discusses the emergence of the Gutenberg printing press in his massively researched 1958 book *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason*. But also see Ong's other 1958 book, *Ramus and Talon Inventory*, his briefly annotated bibliographic listing of more than 750 volumes by Ramus, Talon, other Ramist authors, and anti-Ramus critics that he tracked down in more than 100 libraries in the British Isles and Continental Europe. The French Renaissance logician and educational reformer and Protestant martyr Peter Ramus (1515-1572) was a prolific and influential writer in his day. Ramist logic dominated the curriculum at Cambridge University in East Anglia when John Milton (1608-1674) was a student there. Later in Milton's life, he wrote, in Latin, the lingua franca of the time, a textbook in logic based on Ramus' work. Still later in Milton's life, in 1672, after he had become famous as a poet and pamphleteer, he published his textbook in logic.

In 1982, Ong and Charles J. Ermatinger published an English translation of Milton's *Logic* in volume eight of

Yale's *Complete Prose Works of John Milton: 1666-1682*, edited by Maurice Kelley (pp. 139-407). In Ong's lengthy "Introduction" (pp. 144-207), he revisits the history of the formal study of logic in our Western cultural history. Ong's eloquent "Introduction" is reprinted, slightly shortened, as "Introduction to Milton's *Logic*" in volume four of Ong's *Faith and Contexts*, edited by Thomas J. Farrell and Paul A. Soukup (1999, pp. 111-142). Many graduates of Cambridge University had emigrated to the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Not surprisingly, Ramist logic also dominated the curriculum at the newly founded Harvard College. Harvard's Perry Miller discusses Ramus' work to the best of his ability in his massively researched 1939 book *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (for specific page references to Ramus, see the "Index" [p. 528]). Later, Professor Miller served as the director of Ong's massively researched doctoral dissertation.

For three years (November 1950 to November 1953), Ong was based at a Jesuit residence in Paris. He received the financial assistance of two Guggenheim Fellowships to carry out his extensive library research in the British Isles and continental Europe.

Ong's massively researched 1958 book *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue* is his pioneering study of the print culture that emerged in our Western cultural history after the Gutenberg printing press emerged in Europe in the mid-1450s – as well as his pioneering study of media ecology in our Western cultural history.

Other pioneering studies of print culture in our Western cultural history include the following four books:

(1) Richard D. Altick's *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900* (1957);

(2) Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin's *The Coming of the Book: The Impact of Printing, 1450-1800*, translated by David Gerard; edited by Geoffrey Nowell-Smith and David Wootton (1976; orig. French ed., 1958);

(3) Jurgen Habermas' *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, translated by Thomas Burger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence (1991; orig. German ed., 1962);

(4) Marshall McLuhan's *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (1962; for specific page references to McLuhan's discussion of Ong's publications about Ramus and Ramist logic, see the "Bibliographic Index" [pp. 286-287]) – McLuhan's pioneering study of media ecology in our Western cultural history.

Now, in Rosa's 2019 book *Resonance*, he refers once to McLuhan's 1962 book *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (p. 466n.14). However, in the text of Rosa's Chapter III: "Appropriating World and Experiencing World" (pp. 83-109), he does not refer to McLuhan by name (p. 90). But in Rosa's text, he does say, "This raises the question, of interest to cultural history as well as to sensory physiology and phenomenology of the body, of how human relationships to the world and to our own biographies have changed now that *screens* have become the primary medium through which we relate to the world" (p. 90; his italics). Rosa then says that "the printed book" was "in many respects undoubtedly became a central factor in how we experience [the] world and how [the] world is disclosed to us" (p. 90). "Reading thus represents a specific and specifically modern mode of relating to the world alongside other such modes – e.g., work, communication, play, love, artistic activity" (p. 90).

"Now there are no strong reasons to simply assume a priori that the transition from printed paper to flickering screen as a material basis for processing symbols has fundamentally altered this mode of relating to the world (or human beings' relationships to the world as a whole), even though the haptic quality of the medium has changed, inasmuch as this segment of the world (the screen) now confronts us as hard, rigid, cold, and indifferent in comparison to soft, flexible, fragrant, workable paper. Far more significant, it seems to me, is the fact that in late modernity, the screen has come to replace much more than just the book; it has become the uniform medium of nearly all forms of nearly *all* forms of relating to the world" (pp. 90-91; his italics).

Now, in the opening of Rosa's 2019 book *Resonance*, he says, "If acceleration is the problem, then resonance may well be the solution. This is the most concise formulation of the central thesis of this book, and it signals two important fundamental insights. First, the solution is not *deceleration*. . . . Second, if deceleration is not the solution, this also means that the problem must be defined more precisely. Modern societies [in the Western world] are characterized by systematic changes in temporal structures for which *acceleration* may serve as a blanket term. I defined acceleration in my previous book, *Social Acceleration*, as *growth in quantity per unit of time*, which makes clear that we are dealing here with comprehensive processes of increase" (p. 1; his italics).

Rosa then goes on to discuss “the three great crises of the present day: [1] the environmental crisis, [2] the crisis of democracy, and [3] the psychological crisis (as manifested, for example, in ever-growing rates of burnout). The first indicates a disturbance in the relationship between human beings and our non-human environment or nature; the second a disturbance in our relationship to the social world; and the third a pathological disorder in our subjective relation to the self” (p. 2). Comprehensive, eh?

The most efficient way for me to provide you with an overview of Rosa’s 2019 book *Resonance* is to describe its four major parts:

Part One: “The Basic Elements of Human Relationships to the World” (pp. 45-192).

Part Two: “Spheres and Axes of Resonance” (pp. 193-304).

Part Three: “Fear of the Muting of the World: A Reconstruction of Modernity in Terms of Resonance Theory” (pp. 305-378).

Part Four: “A Critical Theory of Our Relationship to the World” (pp. 379-443).

Ah, but “Fear of the Muting of the World” clearly presupposes a time when the world was not muted, figuratively speaking. Ah, but how could we characterize this preceding time when the world was not muted? Well, we could presuppose that this preceding time was a time when what Rosa refers to as resonance prevailed. However, we could also borrow the main title of Ong’s 1967 seminal book *The Presence of the Word*, mentioned above (but also discussed below), to characterize the preceding time when “Fear of the Muting of the World” was not prevalent. In the “Index” of Rosa’s 2019 book *Resonance* (pp. 529-554), the main term “mute relationships” has many sub-entries (p. 543).

Now, Ong, at times, uses the term hypervisualism to characterize the degree of visualism that emerged historically as a byproduct of the print culture that emerged in our Western cultural heritage after the Gutenberg printing press emerged in Europe in the mid-1450s – over against the visualism that emerged historically as a byproduct of manuscript culture centuries earlier in our Western culture history after phonetic alphabetic writing systems emerged in ancient Hebrew manuscript culture and in ancient Greek manuscript culture.

For a relevant discussion of ancient Hebrew manuscript culture, see James L. Kugel’s book *The Great Shift: Encountering God in Biblical Times* (2017).

For a relevant discussion of ancient Greek manuscript culture, see Eric A. Havelock’s landmark book *Preface to Plato* (1963) – a book that Ong never tired of touting.

Ong’s review of Havelock’s 1963 book is reprinted in *An Ong Reader: Challenges for further Inquiry*, edited by Thomas J. Farrell and Paul A. Soukup (2002, pp. 309-312).

In any event, in Rosa’s Chapter V: “Resonance and Alienation as Basic Categories of a Theory of Our Relationship to the World” (pp. 145-192), he says, “Following its Latin etymology, resonance is first and foremost an acoustic phenomenon – ‘re-sonare’ meaning *to resound*” (p. 165).

In Rosa’s Chapter V, he also sets forth in a box the following stipulations regarding resonance (but I do not know how to reproduce here the directional arrows he uses in the terms he hyphenates):

“Resonance is a kind of relationship to the world, formed through af-fect and e-motion, intrinsic interest, and perceived self-efficacy, in which subject and world are mutually affected and transformed. [For all practical purposes, this kind of resonant relationship involves what Ong refers to as the world-as-event sense of life.]

“Resonance is not an echo, but a responsive relationship, requiring that both sides speak *with their own voice*. This is only possible where strong evaluations are affected. Resonance implies an aspect of constitutive inaccessibility.

“Resonant relationships require that both subject and world be sufficiently ‘closed’ or self-consistent so as to each speak in their own voice, while also remaining open enough to be affected or reached by each other. “Resonance is not an emotional state, but a mode of relation that is neutral with respect to emotional content. This is why we can love sad stories”” (p. 174).

The title of Rosa’s Chapter V should also lead us to expect him to set forth in another box his stipulations regarding alienation:

“Alienation denoted a specific form of relationship to the world in which subject and world confront each other with indifference or hostility (repulsion) and thus without any inner connection. Alienation can therefore also be defined as a *relation of relationlessness* (Rahel Jaeggi).

“Alienation thus indicates a state in which the world cannot be ‘adaptively transformed’ and so always appears cold, rigid, repulsive, and non-responsive. *Resonance* therefore constitutes the ‘other’ of alienation – its antithesis.

“Depression or burnout refers to a state in which all axes of resonance have become mute or deaf. A person may ‘have’ a family, work, social clubs, religion, etc., but these no longer ‘speak’ to them. The subject is no longer capable of being touched or affected and lacks any sense of self-efficacy. World and subject thus both appear lifeless, dead, empty” (p. 184; his italics).

Now, in Rosa’s Chapter XV: “Late Modern Crises of Resonance and the Contours of a Post-Growth Society” (pp. 425-), he says, “Successful life is *definable* as a resonant relation to the world” (p. 441; his italics). He also says, “At the least, an accommodating reorientation of the everyday practices of social actors ‘from the bottom up’ is also required” as against “a single *top-down* reform” (p. 441; his italics). Well, good luck with that. In Ivereigh’s new 2024 book *First Belong to God*, mentioned above, he uses imagery related to Rosa’s bottom up imagery in his commentary on the passage from Matthew 13:31-34: “Jesus likens the kingdom to a mustard seed that vanishes in the soil or a spoonful of yeast that disappears in the bread mix. . . . The kingdom is a *catalyzing* power; it acts from below and from within, spreading tenderness, expanding by sharing and including” (pp. 82-83; his italics). Whatever else may be said about the kingdom, it is not portrayed in the four canonical gospels as involving “a single top-down reform.”

I cannot imagine what Rosa refers to as “a single top-down reform” would look like. In essence, I do not disagree with him that “At the least, an accommodating reorientation of the everyday practices of social actors ‘from the bottom up’ is also required.”

In general, I do not disagree with Rosa’s diagnosis of the problems in Western culture today. In general, I do not disagree with his prescription of resonance as the to-be-desired way for us in Western culture today to reorient ourselves and our way of living.

Similarly, in essence, I do not disagree with Pope Francis’ diagnosis of Western culture today in his widely read 2015 eco-encyclical *Laudato Si’*. In essence, I do not disagree with his to-be-desired vision of life in his 2015 eco-encyclical. Rosa’s to-be-desired vision of life and Pope Francis’ to-be-desired vision of life may not be incompatible with one another, but may be complementary.

Perhaps Ivereigh’s comment that “[t]he kingdom is a *catalyzing* power; it acts from below and from within, spreading tenderness, expanding by sharing and including” is an accurate description of the subjective

experience that the historical Jesus had himself and that he used his parable to characterize this to-be-desired vision of new life renewing one's personal subjective old life at the level of ego-consciousness. To these to-be-desired visions of new life renewing a person's life at the level of ego-consciousness, I now want to add the vision of how a person can renew his or her life at the level of ego-consciousness by learning how to access the optimal forms of the archetypes of maturity in our collective unconscious that Robert L. Moore (1942-2016; Ph.D., University of Chicago, 1975) articulated.

Granted, with Douglas Gillette as his co-author, Moore articulated his vision primarily for men in a series of five books:

- (1) *King, Warrior, Magician, Lover: Rediscovering the Archetypes of the Mature Masculine* (1990);
- (2) *The King [Archetype] Within: Accessing the King in the Male Psyche* (1992a; revised and expanded second edition, 2007);
- (3) *The Warrior [Archetype] Within: Accessing the Knight in the Male Psyche* (1992b);
- (4) *The Magician [Archetype] Within: Accessing the Shaman in the Male Psyche* (1993a);
- (5) *The Lover [Archetype] Within: Accessing the Lover in the Male Psyche* (1993b).

Even though Moore did not write a book about women, he maintained that four similarly named archetypes of feminine maturity are also present in the female psyche – as a matter of fact, he maintained that both sets of archetypes of maturity are present in all human psyches.

In addition, Moore maintained that each archetype of maturity includes what he referred to as two “shadow” forms and one optimal form. Thus, for Moore, the optimal form of human development would involve learning how to access all eight optimal forms of the eight archetypes of maturity in the human psyche.

Now, subsequently, in Rosa's Chapter XV, he also says that “the theory presented here aims at a *critique of relations of resonance*, meaning a critical analysis of culturally and institutionally established relationships to the world with a view to their resonant quality. Resonance is thus meant to offer a standard for successful life, one that makes it possible to measure quality of life not indirectly, by the growth of material prosperity, opportunities, and resources, but directly, by the quality of our relationships to the world. A good life, then, is one that is rich in resonant experiences and has at its disposal stable axes of resonance” (pp. 450-451).

Now, Ong published the essay “World as View and World as Event” in the *American Anthropologist* (August 1969). It is reprinted in volume three of Ong's *Faith and Contexts*, edited by Thomas J. Farrell and Paul A. Soukup (1995, pp. 69-90).

In it, Ong delineates what he refers to as (1) the world-as-event sense of life in primary oral cultures (i.e., cultures not impacted by phonetic alphabetic writing systems) and (2) the world-as-view sense of life in cultures impacted by phonetic alphabetic writing systems (such as the ancient Hebrew and ancient Greek cultures and all subsequent Western cultures).

Ong also discusses the world-as-event sense of life in his 1967 seminal book *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History* (pp. 111-138), mentioned above. In it, Ong links the world-as-event sense of life to what he refers to as auditory synthesis in the human sensorium. The world-as-view sense of life is linked to visual synthesis in the human sensorium. (For specific page references to Ong's discussion of the human sensorium, see the “Index” entry on sensorium [p. 356].)

In effect, Ong perceptively explores auditory synthesis versus visual synthesis in his discussion of the aural-to-visual shift in cognitive processing in our Western cultural history in his massively researched 1958 book *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason* (for specific page references to the aural-to-visual shift, see the “Index” [p. 396]), mentioned above. Ong acknowledges that he is drawing on the “discerning and profound treatment of the visual-aural opposition” in the French Protestant philosopher

Louis Lavelle's 1942 book *La parole et l'écriture* (Ong, 1958, p. 338n.54).

I discuss Ong's philosophical thought in his massively researched 1958 book *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue* in my somewhat lengthy *OEN* article "Walter J. Ong's Philosophical Thought" (dated September 20, 2020).

For further discussion of the sensorium, see David Howes' short new 2024 book *Sensorium: Contextualizing the Senses and Cognition in History and Across Cultures*.

Now, the American anthropologist David M. Smith explores Ong's account of the world-as-event sense of life in his 1997 essay "World as Event: Aspects of Chipewyan Ontology" that is reprinted in the 2012 anthology *Of Ong and Media Ecology*, edited by Thomas J. Farrell and Paul A. Soukup (pp. 117-141).

I have discussed Ong's account of the world-as-event sense of life and the world-as-view sense of life in my essay "Walter Ong and Harold Bloom can help us understand the Hebrew Bible" in *Explorations in Media Ecology* (2012).

Now, within the context of Ong's account of the world-as-event sense of life and the world-as-view sense of life, the conscious cultivation today of what Rosa refers to as resonance would involve the emergence of a new sense of life that we can refer to as the world-as-resonance sense of life.

Now, if I were to imagine that Hartmut Rosa might undertake to examine Ong's mature work from the early 1950s onward, I would urge him to examine more works by Ong than just the ones that I have highlighted here. More specifically, I would urge Rosa to consult the bibliography of Ong's 400 or so distinct publications (not counting translations or reprintings as distinct publications) listed by Thomas M. Walsh in "Walter J. Ong, S.J.: A Bibliography 1929-2006" in the 2011 anthology *Language, Culture, and Identity: The Legacy of Walter J. Ong, S.J.*, edited by Sara van den Berg and Thomas M. Walsh (pp. 185-245).

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