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Wakanda: A visual study in structural and surface textile design via the Black Panther Movie

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Introduction

The phenomenon of *The Black Panther*, the movie, the first 2018 release of the Marvel Comics cinematic franchise, has grossed $631 million as of March 25th, 2018 (Rubin, 2018). The movie, branded as a cultural phenomenon, creating a sense of pride among Black people globally, is also a visual feast for textile artists and designers. Throughout the move, the characters are swathed in a variety of textiles created via various structural and surface textile design techniques. The costume design team, led by Ruth E. Carter, not only created a visual menagerie of apparel that harkened back to textile techniques rooted in the various countries on the continent of Africa, but also employed a variety of historical textile techniques and current textile innovations. The purpose of this concept paper is to use Postmodern theory to analyze the costume team's approach to the use of structural and surface textile design techniques in the movie *The Black Panther*.

Postmodern Theory

The Black Panther movie is the story of a fictional country in Africa, vibrantly told costumes created from a collection of historical and current textile techniques, often combined in a singular ensemble. The costumes are postmodern or "an eclectic mixing of aesthetic codes" (Clark, 1976, p.177), used to communicate nobility and innovation in a progressive culture, on a continent often viewed as under-developed or under-privileged. Costumer, Ruth E. Carter, skillfully employed the postmodern concept of Bricolage, which "refers to the integration of incongruous elements in a work of art" (Morgado, 1996, p. 46). The costumes in *The Black Panther* are – art visual and functional and cinematic art. The textiles created and used in *The Black Panther* should not be studied from only a historical textile viewpoint because: "*History* is not simply a record of the past; it is an interpretation of the past, an interpretation of events and their significance-a rationalized, systematic organization of the past" (Morgado, 1996, p.42). Carter's team ingeniously combined historical and cultural references to historical textile techniques with current techniques such as 3D printing. The postmodern combination of textiles is a visual feast.

Ruth E. Carter and Team

As the first African American costume designer, nominated for Academy Awards for 1992's *Malcom X* and 1997's *Amistad (Lang, 2018), Ruth E. Carter created a visual fashion phenomenon that inspired millions of movie goers to done clothing made from actual textiles from the continent of Africa or inspired by the continent. The production of The Black Panther:*

saw her manage a team of over 100 buyers in South Africa, Nigeria and South Korea, plus jewellery makers, mould makers, blacksmiths, fabric painters and tailors on set in Atlanta and in studios in LA, in order to bring the fantasy land of Wakanda to life. (Newbold, 2018)

In a February 2018 interview for *Time Entertainment*, Ruth E. Carter speaks of her inspiration for *The Black Panther*:

> I used ancient African history to come up with some of these ideas. For example, the Dogon tribe is one of the inspirations for the Jabari tribe in Wakanda. They wore these wonderful raffia skirts during the celebration they performed once a year. One of the northeastern inspirations was from the Tuareg, the subsaharan desert dwellers of Africa. In Wakanda, they were the merchant tribe and owned most of the wealth. We upped the ante and gave them a modern spin to create this new world. (Lang, 2018)

In 2019, Ruth E. Carter may be the first African American woman to win an Oscar for costume design. Analyzing the costumes in *The Black Panther* using the tenets of postmodern theory provides a unique theoretical understanding of the intricacies of textile design processes used in the movie that may be over shadowed by costumes themselves.

Homage to the Continent of Africa's Textile Traditions and Present Textile Technologies
The textiles in *The Black Panther*, pay homage to textile traditions from various countries across the continent of Africa. Carter and her team thoroughly researched and traveled to regions throughout to continent (Lang, 2018) to incorporate symbolism, techniques honoring the people and traditions of Africa. For example, the female soldiers, the Dora Milaje: "The rich leather, laced and bound with heavy thread to form a textured second-skin for the Dora Milaje, was painstakingly crafted using a centuries-old technique she discovered while researching" (Newbold, 2018). In contrast, Carter's team also employed present textile design techniques in the costumes. For Queen Ramonda, played by actor Angela Basset: "Her shoulder mantle was made from special fibres forged together in the world's largest 3-D printer in Belgium" (Newbold, 2018).

The presenter, who has a background in textile design will present a taxonomy with visual examples of the structural and surface design textile techniques used in *The Black Panther*. Structural techniques used include, but are not limited to knitting, crocheting, embroidery, bead embroidery, and 3D printing; while surface techniques include batik, screen printing, roller printing. The presentation will also unpack how postmodern theory informs the visual understanding of the design process and how the attention to textile design helped to create the Gestalt of the costumes (parts of the whole) and the Zeitgeist for the fictional land of Wakanda.

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