Valentino: Cultural appropriation or reconstruction of identity?

The renowned fashion brand Valentino’s spring/summer 2016 collection, inspired by “wild, tribal Africa,” contributes to the ongoing scholarly debate about the effects of critical regionalism and global cultural identity. The runway looks featured Masai-style beadwork, batik prinks, Zulu mask embellishments, and terracotta accessories, in attempt to interpret and reconstruct certain regionalist devices pertaining to styles cultures and communities in regions of rural Africa. While many choose to criticize and label this as “cultural appropriation” that misinterprets and devalues a particular civilization, it is representative of contemporary regionalist tendencies and serves to dismiss homogenizing globalist forces.

Ideally, regionalism is an ideology that identifies the normative expressions of a subnational entity and opposes the homogenization imposed by globalism. The term ‘critical regionalism’ can be ambiguously defined as a reaction to modernization in attempt to preserve a cultural history and regional identity. In his work, Placing Resistance: A Critique of Critical Regionalism, Keith Eggener asserts that the proponents of critical regionalism are “opposed to the domination of hegemonic power and reactionary populism, rampant globalization and superficial nationalism.” The affirmation that Valentino’s collection is, in fact, an article of regionalism suggests that it is capable of ameliorating the identity crisis that plagues metropolitan areas worldwide. This crisis can only be solved by first answering the question of ‘how to become modern and return to sources; how to revive an old dormant civilization and take part in universal civilization,’”. The existence of fashion as a global market is undoubtedly
a modern innovation. In a world where technology facilitates international conversations, it is unsurprising that fashion has become a cultural form. Clothing is a necessity and a form of communication that does not require linguistic translation to comprehend.

The SS16 ad campaign was photographed in Amboseli National Park in Kenya, where the models—clothed in Valentino’s westernized interpretations of the respective regional culture, posed with the Maasai people. This inclusion of the “authentic” alongside the “reinterpreted” serves to acknowledge the inconsistencies and artistic license employed to create the inspired garments. A majority of the dresses in the collection are heavily embellished with colored beads, sewn in intricate, geometric patterns. This detailing is derived from the Maasai tradition, reflecting the collection’s desire to incorporate regional forms with a modern interpretation of the motifs. Maria Grazia Chiuri, co-designer for the Valentino brand, verbalized the intentions of the collection in an interview with Women’s Wear Daily; “We really believe that cross-cultural understanding improves our cultures…and with fashion it is possible to open eyes, to learn something.” The garments seek not to mimic the regional style, but instead, to emulate the agricultural, autochthonous cultural forms that the regional people have inherited and maintained. The designers’ incorporation of elements like feather trimmings and nude fabrics serve to associate pastoral tradition with rural African culture, despite the fact that the Masai wear red garments and have no historical references to feather embellishments. These features are not genuine facsimiles of Masai culture, but rather they respond to exterior notions of tribal Africa and resound with the city-dwelling customer’s desire to comprehend rural civilization.

The incorporation of non-regional elements within a project attributed to a certain region should not discredit its critical regionalist value. The original definition of critical regionalism is not valid within a modern context. The lens of contemporary critical regionalism must be altered—in
some cases—to include attributes that have been imposed upon a certain culture because of man’s proclivity to stereotype. While these attributes may not have historical roots, they can be valuable when identifying the associated region and give the region modern relevancy without disrupting its pastoral traditions. Any garment from Valentino SS16 could be displayed on a hanger, without context, and immediately identified as African-inspired. The concept of clothing styled after regionalist nuances, in this case the regions of rural Africa, injects homogenized, iron and steel cityscapes with cultural identity. Globalization is too far progressed in contemporary urban cities—New York, London, Chicago—to revive their regional identities. Thus, the artificial injection of culture, performed by impersonating foreign regional forms, is the only way to quench an intrinsic desire to resist nationalism and globalism. The items in the collection, referred to as SS16, includes dresses, skirts, shirts, and pants, that range between $690 and upwards of $9000 for a single garment. The steep price point limits the consumer market to very wealthy individuals, and it’s plausible to assume that this customer base would reside in an urban environment based on the type of social occasions that dictate such extravagant clothing. Dainotto poses the question, “is it possible that regionalism’s search for heartland is the desire for an ethnic purity that we have lost in the city…?” While the interpretation and mass reproduction and distribution of rural, regional cultures may not be a purely authentic portrayal of regional identity; perhaps it is the only way to revive postcolonial, urban societies

Analysts of critical regionalism, including Frampton, Dainotto, and Eggener, agree that the process of attempting to replicate a cultural identity through critical regionalism is, by proxy, “contributing to that cultural history, participating in the ongoing creation of regional identities,”vi. This theory implies that “the idea of an authentic cultural tradition is, in this
scenario, an illusion,” (491) so by designing garments associated with African tribal regions, Valentino has perpetuated a skewed notion of African tribal culture, precipitating from genuine as well as inauthentic forms. Is it possible that inaccuracies accosted by this cultural imitation are the price that must be paid in order to protect regionalism from rampant globalization? The international spotlight was recently cast on Africa because of the disastrous Ebola epidemic, which eclipsed much of its cultural forms and portrayed the nation, including its subsidiary regions, as primitive and septic. By popularizing regional art forms of rural African peoples, assuming that haute-couture fashion is, in fact, an art form, Valentino is ameliorating the damage done to the regional identity by the international media. If we accept that “local cultural revivals are partly a response to homogenization and standardization,”
 then the act of interpreting and manufacturing styles originating from tribal communities becomes a vehicle for the preservation of their history and recognition of rural traditions on a global scale.

In his essay, Critical Inquiry, Dainotto suggests, “regionalism would appear as the emergence of these marginalized ‘peoples,’ who try to preserve and develop their ‘minority’ cultures against the constraints of the nation-state,”
. This statement implies that the international promotion of cultural styles from Africa’s tribal regions has positive effects by thwarting modern developments and globalization from eradicating indigenous practices.

The effects of globalization have already diluted the cultures of Africa’s city-dwelling population, like all cities worldwide, and threaten to spread to subsidiary regions. On a greater scale, these “marginalized peoples” may represent any regional culture struggling to defend themselves against the “nation-state” of globalism, which assimilates rural areas and rejects their identities, creating one mega-culture that subsists on metropolitanism and nationalism.
The assimilation of regional culture into the mainstream garners criticism for endorsing an inauthentic portrayal of regionalism, and misinterpretation of the culture by those attempting to emulate the regional designs. However, if we accept Dianotto’s assertion that “in today’s ‘hybrid’ societies…there is no cultural tradition, marginal or otherwise, that can be experienced as given,”ix then we may realize that even the regional cultures we are attempting to emulate are, in fact, skewed by our perspective, making it impossible to accurately recognize any regional styles without acknowledging the lens of revised critical regionalism.

Works Cited