

POSTER TALK

1. Start with **Conan clip**

- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ItU2FG_--wo
- Reactions? Positive and Negative?
- Conan's job is to present funny segments of TV, not to interview African artists or talk about history
- But why not get a translator so Jasper is more comfortable?
- Why not promote his Instagram page? – djasperart
- I'll show it to you a bit later

2. Introduce me

- I'm a film professor at CLC with a PhD from USC film school
- Used to having a certain authority when I lecture
- But today I'm giving a talk about hand-painted movie posters, when I don't have a degree in painting, and I don't have a degree in African history or culture
- So instead of a lecture, I'd like to think of this as an interactive multi-media story
- Please ask questions at any point!

3. Story of the grant

- In the Spring of 2021 I applied for a Fulbright Hays grant to travel to Ghana and Togo for five weeks in Summer 2022

- In my application letter I mentioned my ignorance of African filmmaking
- I curate the international film series at CLC
- From 2013-2021 I showed eight foreign films on campus each year, only two were from Africa
- Why? It speaks poorly of me (I can always take on the personal responsibility to be more curious)
- And it speaks poorly of the film culture that produced me
- Films from Africa just don't get shown as much as European, Asian, Latin American movies
- They don't come to art houses, and they weren't present in the classes I was taking
- My goal was to change that – to be more inclusive, both in my film classes and at CLC's public film series
- (Since then I've added a lot more to the film series – check out the flyers for two upcoming films from Ghana)

4. Walter Rodney

- So I started reading up on African film in general, while also doing the readings and discussions organized by the grant as a whole
- One article assigned to the group was called "African History in the Service of the Black Liberation", by Walter Rodney (1968)

- He says “I will consider certain aspects of African history which would not normally fall under the rubric of civilization”
- White Europeans declare Africa to not be civilized so they can do what they want to the continent in the name of civilizing it
- He counters with Egypt – that DOES fit your definition
- We CAN play your game if we have to
- But we have our OWN game too:
- Hospitality; treatment of the old; systems of law and justice
- **But think of this as a theme for today – who is in charge of the values and definitions for the terms we’re using?**
- What makes a work of art “good”? “beautiful”? “African”? What does it mean to use “African” as a label at all, given the huge diversity of the continent?

5. Rodney on Academia

- Rodney makes another point about the role of Professors and Universities in Civil Rights struggles – read a long quote from him:
- “The national bourgeoisie in the United States appears to be giving a concession. They are saying ‘OK, fine, you go ahead and you study African history and African culture,’ and they will give you so much African history and culture [that] you just have time for nothing else. The object is to

divorce the process of thought and reflection on our past from the process of changing the present so that you feel that you've gained something but you end up in some remarkable contradiction. ... Rockefeller – who is making most of his money out of South African gold, out of the Rand, out of exploiting and participating in Apartheid, the most vicious racial system in the world – that guy is going to finance a chair in African history. That's the type of contradiction. So that if a Black progressive thinks he's doing something by going into African history, using up a Rockefeller grant, all he is doing is forgetting both the domestic and the external implications of American capitalism, and in fact supporting that system because the guys don't mind if you go in a library or museum and lock yourself up all day. That's wonderful; keep you off the street, keep you out of struggle.”

- So I reflected on that
- Today's talk is the result – I'm trying to spread the word about the posters because I see an opportunity to get local artists in touch with the Ghanaian poster artists
- To mediate a conversation
- And to produce art that we display at CLC that is a result and a record of that conversation

6. Learning About the Posters

- A little bit later I saw a post on Facebook about a pop-up poster show at a movie theater in Chicago, where I live
- The posters were from Ghana!
- The Facebook post included a link to a website called “Deadly Prey Gallery”
- I went there and saw some of the following images:
- **SHOW IMAGES:**
- <https://deadlypreygallery.com/>
- **ASK FOR REACTIONS, COMMENTS**
- Groundhog Day, Jurassic Park, Jaws, European Vacation, Rambo, Twin Peaks
- But also Get Out and La Haine
- And Curb Your Enthusiasm(!)
- A surreal mystery – these are making me laugh, AND what ARE they?
- Striking in a lot of ways
- Juxtaposition of the familiar and the unfamiliar
- A sense of exaggeration, and maybe even parody
- A suggestion of a nightmarish “other world” underneath our mainstream popular culture
- AND I loved the posters simply because they were hand-painted and we don’t get that anymore from our movie posters

- I contacted the owner of Deadly Prey, Brian Chankin
- Brian ran an independent video store in Chicago called Odd Obsession

- In 2011, a friend gave him a book called “Ghanavision”, collecting some of posters
- Brian loved the book and went to the internet to see if he could buy some of the posters to decorate his video store
- Robert Kofi Ghartey sells them to Brian
- The “Deadly Prey” book is a collection of the posters Brian buys from Kofi and they’re different than the ones
- People at the store love them and want to buy them but Brian doesn’t want to sell them
- Customers ask about the artists, and ask about having posters commissioned
- Thus Brian and Kofi go into business together
- But where did Kofi’s posters come from? And the posters from the Ghanavision book? How far back does this go?
- The artists have strange signatures: Heavy J, Stoger, Salvation, Mr. Brew, Death is Wonder, Dallas, Leonardo, Francisco, Africattah, Muslim
- There were other odd phrases on the posters:
- Manso Video Mamobi, Name Video Yungwa Market
- Manso Video Mamobi, Pall Mall Video Club Tudu, Rolls Royce Video Club, 007 Video Club
- I started researching and found other art books devoted to the history of the posters – Extreme Canvas and Extreme Canvas 2, Bloodywood

7. So this is the history of the posters

- In the mid 1980s there is a rise of Video Clubs
- Thanks to VCRs and video cassette technology, people begin operating small grass-roots movie theaters, sometimes out of their homes, or out of a bar/restaurant, or any communal gathering space
- Or sometimes they'd travel with their equipment
- A TV, a VCR, a couple of videotapes (bootleg, pirated), a gasoline powered generator, and a vehicle
- There are more traditional movie theaters in Ghana, showing legally and with higher visual quality, but it's a more expensive endeavor, and limited to the biggest cities
- Let's talk about that later
- The owners of the video clubs start to commission posters from local artists
- They'd more likely refer to them(selves) as "sign painters"
- People who did advertising for businesses
- Most commonly hair salons
- **SHOW IMAGES OF HAIR SALON ADS**
- **Dajasper art on Instagram**
- **https://www.instagram.com/dajasperart/?hl=en&__coig_restricted=1**
- These aren't artists with university training
- There ARE artists with university training
- Let's talk about THAT later, too
- For now, just keep in mind that these video clubs and movie posters are very unofficial
- Grassroots culture, from the ground up

- Even within Ghana, these screenings and posters aren't taken seriously or considered important
- No one would ever think anyone outside of Ghana would ever hear about the screenings or the posters, and so no one in Ghana would ever need to have an opinion on whether or not they reflect well on Ghana, or on official conceptions of what Ghanaian culture should be
- That's foreshadowing
- The poster painters make functional art that is designed to promote businesses and sell products
- BUT something about painting movie posters seems to awaken something in them
- On the one hand, the posters are exaggerated because they're trying to get people to buy a ticket
- They were meant to be eye-catching to drivers speeding along a dusty road
- Ernie Wolfe calls them "neon signs without the electricity"
- But some posters aren't all THAT exaggerated
- My "For Your Eyes Only" poster (1981) is quite faithful to the original – clearly the artist is working from an image he's been given
- Some of the posters are painted quickly
- But on the other hand, many posters have a great amount of detail – it clearly means something to the artist that they are doing a good job
- **SHOW FIRST MANDY ELSAS CLIP – MR. BREW AT WORK**
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0FeI1UmL0Dk>

- They sign their art and create names for themselves
- They try to top themselves and top each other
- A poster artist might end up painting posters for the same movie if it's very popular, and multiple copies of the tape are in circulation
- There aren't accessible printing presses to make copies of the poster
- So an artist might start to amuse themselves, or bring their own imagination to the painting
- **SHOW *Death Wish 1 & 2* by Heavy J**
- **Pass the book around**
- Remember that the 1980s was the great era of American action movie stars, often people who became huge movie stars by going to the gym instead of acting class
- Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Jean Claude Van Damme, Steven Seagal, Dolph Lundgren, Mr. T, Carl Weathers
- American action movies were hugely popular around the world because they were accessible
- American comedies don't travel well to other cultures
- They didn't rely on dialogue
- And the video clubs are exhibiting movies to paying audiences, while showing them on small TV sets
- **SHOW MANDY ELSAS CLIP TWO**
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0FeI1UmLODk>
- The movies with lots of action and spectacle are the most popular

- Action, horror, cop, war, kung fu – movies from Hollywood, but also Hong Kong and Bollywood

8. Getting the Idea for the Project

- I was born in 1974, and I'm around the same age as the poster artists – we all grew up loving the same spectacular movies
- I loved the posters and decided it was worth paying the money to have one commissioned
- I thought it would be a nice record of my trip, and that it would be especially great if I could meet one of the artists and describe the film I had in mind, so that his poster would be directly based on my performance
- It would be a collaboration between the movie from my childhood, my memory, his talent, and his cultural background
- I could sneak away from the rest of the Fulbright group when there was some free time
- I liked this idea, but then I remembered the Walter Rodney article, and realized I was being selfish

- Maybe there could be a way to find young people who might want to learn about these artists and collaborate with them
- So this talk today is part of me trying to do that
- I emailed Brian and asked him if I could interview him to talk about my idea
- **SHOW CLIP FROM BRIAN INTERVIEW**
- *Apology for some swear words*
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vuNlnYITbK0>
- Here's a clip I asked about my perspective as a white guy trying to learn about the artists

9. Heavy J

- Brian got me in touch with his agent Kofi, who met me in Accra and took me to visit Heavy J
- I talked with him for an hour and then asked if he would let me film him, so that I would have some footage to bring back to show that he was interested in collaborating with people back in the US
- I was interested in the period between the end of the video club films (the late 90s) and the rise of people outside of Ghana paying for commissions (about ten years later)
- **SHOW CLIP FROM HEAVY J INTERVIEW ON YOUTUBE**
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=20BXvMgYA78&t=65s>

10. Frimpong, Mami Water, and his perspective as a Ghanaian professor

- Part of the deep, rich history I found was this:
- there were also a lot of posters of the movie *Splash*, which was a comedy, unlike most movies shown at video clubs
- The 1980s gave us a lot of teen sex comedies, but I wasn't seeing posters for those
- Why *Splash*?
- **SHOW IMAGES OF SPLASH POSTERS**

- While I was in Ghana I met a professor named Joseph Oduro Frimpong, who teaches African Popular Culture at Ashesi University in Ghana
- He studies the history of the posters, collects them, and is working on finding a permanent gallery space for them in Accra
- I decided to ask him about what was going on here
- I've been trying my best to educate myself, but it's always better to speak directly with an expert
- **SHOW FRIMPONG INTERVIEW**
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sHjrCIRubs8&t=619s>

- One of the Splash posters referred to her as Mami Water
 - This is a local spirit of the ocean
 - She could grant success to fishermen, but she could also be vengeful
 - She would seduce men and demand that they be faithful to her, not to sleep with other women – if they broke this rule they would lose their fortune
 - I started to see the ways that the poster art could be a dialogue between American movies and local culture
 - The poster artists showed that the American movie Splash would have local appeal
 - **[ASK FRIMPONG ABOUT “CANDIDATES FOR HELL”]**
 - Here we see Mami Water in a movie that is about a corrupt priest
 - Ghanaian movie, 1996
 - The more that you dig into the posters, you find that there is a lot of ambivalence about Christianity, as well as movies that combine Christian iconography with traditional West African spirituality
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- Part of what’s fascinating about the posters is that they’re often the only record of movies that were so cheaply made that they truly no longer exist
 - They were shot on video tape, only one or two copies were made, they circulated throughout the video clubs, and then they’re copied over, or lost

- Part of a larger discourse about official movies vs. local popular culture
- After Ghana gains independence in 1957, the new president Kwame Nkrumah puts forth a Pan-Africanist philosophy
- Ghana should move forward, make progress, support African unity
- Ghana should modernize
- Ghana should put its best face forward to the world
- Movies are a part of this
- **Remember the theme – who is in charge of definitions of what is good, valuable, respectable?**
- European colonizers had imposed their own standards of civilization, of religion, upon Africans
- As the colonies assert themselves upon independence, they announce their own new definitions to replace them
- But the Ghanaian posters and video films don't fit these definitions
- Too cheap, too crude, too 'backward', embarrassing, exploitative
- Nkrumah takes the British organization "the Gold Coast Film Unit" and adapts it into the Ghana Film Industry Corporation
- But it's hard to shake off colonialism so easily
- You can't just take the film school set up by the British and replace it with Ghanaian talent

- You've still got the legacy of British definitions of what movies should be, how filmmaking should be taught
- Nkrumah wants polished movies, shot on celluloid, that can be popular at home, inspiring, and ambassadors for Ghana to the rest of the world
- He's an important figure, but he's also head of a one-party state, he's eventually ousted in a coup while he's traveling abroad
- There's an element of nationalist propaganda to the movies he wants made
- It's expensive to shoot on film, and there are a small number of movies made – but they aren't enough to sustain an industry
- Meanwhile, self-taught filmmakers in Ghana and Nigeria are making whatever they want, quickly and cheaply showing movies to audiences at video clubs, listening to what they like, and adjusting future movies accordingly
- FESPACO films vs. Video Films
- Should there be a Pan-African cinema, with its own Film Festival, high-brow, competitive with prestige art cinema around the world? (Top-down mandate)
- Or should film culture grow from the bottom up?
- **Who gets to decide?**
- So too with the posters
- Art is taught at universities, but the universities exist before independence