

Commercialisation of Popular Culture in Cinematic Ideology: A Critical Reading of *A Trip to Jamaica*

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Abstract

The growing commercialisation of popular culture in Nigeria is traceable to the increasing volume of Nigerian video films constantly released both on formal and informal platforms. These video films are mediated cultures which assimilate popular aspirations and dreams of the mass audiences. This essay is therefore aimed at exposing how commercialisation of popular culture can be concealed in ideology with the ultimate aim of box office triumph. By so doing, it critically examines Robert Peters' *A Trip to Jamaica* and its sequels using film theory and criticism. These films are contextualised as commercialisations of popular culture in bald-faced ideology. It is found that the sensationalism of anticipation created before the release of contemporary commercial films helps disguise their commercial nature to boost box office sales.

Keywords: Nollywood, video film, commercial, popular Culture, ideology.

Introduction

The unending adventures of Akpors as presented in *30 Days in Atlanta* (2014), *A Trip to Jamaica* (2016), *10 Days in Sun City* (2017), and the most recent *Merry Men: The Real Yoruba Demons* (2018) are potpourris of trendy assimilations of popular culture in Nigerian video films. In the typical Nigerian setting, Akpors is a popular young comic archetype who embodies the vibrancy and exuberance of an average youth. These movies showcase Akpors in commercial popular culture humour, spectacle, mannerisms, slangs and the cultural mind-set of the mass of youths. Love, adventure, betrayal, loyalty, infidelity and domestic life are recurrent motifs that dominate these comics. Their commercial successes

largely depend on the extensive use of social media publicity employed on and off screen. However, their plots and thematic drives remain major aspects of academic contentions. This paper critically evaluates how commercialisation of popular culture is concealed in the cinema in order to fuel box office returns.

Critical Reading of *A Trip to Jamaica*

A Trip to Jamaica is a new Nollywood comic movie that cuts across the Atlantic. It stars award-winning popular culture celebrities from Nigeria, Ghana, Jamaica and America. Its Nollywood A-List casts include AY, Funke Akindele and Nse Ikpe-Etim, with cameo appearances from music stars like Cynthia Morgan, Patoranking and Olamide. Other celebrities include the Gollywood lover boy stereotype Chris Attoh, Hollywood veteran Dan Davis, Eric Roberts, Paul Campbell of *Third World Cop* (1999) fame in Jamaica, and Rebecca Silvera a former Miss Jamaica. This film came as a sequel to an earlier comic hit *30 Days in Atlanta* (2014) produced by same duo of AY and Robert Peters which chronicles the adventures of Akpors to and fro Atlanta.

As a result of this 2014 film's commercial success, *A Trip to Jamaica* was shot to entice an already existing audience in 2016. This explains why this film broke the 137 million naira record set by Guinness World Record holder *30 Days in Atlanta*, to become the highest grossing movie of 2016 in Nigeria (**Plate 1**). The movie shattered the box office revenues of all big budget Hollywood titles released same year in Nigeria like *Batman Vs Superman*, *Captain America*, *Suicide Squad*, *London has Fallen*, *Gods of Egypt*, *Doctor Strange*, *Tarzan*, *Magnificent 7*, and *Central Intelligence*. However, this record was quickly surpassed by *The Wedding Party I* (2016) which reportedly net over 452 million naira, trumping *A Trip to Jamaica*'s over 168 million naira box office records (Ukwuoma, 2017).



Plate 1: Box Office Comparison of *30 Days in Atlanta* (2014) and *A Trip to Jamaica* (2016). © Izuzu, 2016.

In *A Trip to Jamaica*, two distinct sets of characters cause events to happen. On the one hand is the union of Akpors and Bola who seek adventure to the home of Abigail and Michael in Atlanta. On the other hand, a group of drug lords led by Casper who unsuccessfully attempt to corrupt the escapades of Akpors and Bola. The film's overall unconventional plot segmentation is as follows:

1. Prologue: One Lagos Music Fiesta.
2. Opening Sequence: Akpors and Bola arrive in Atlanta.

3. Complimentary plot of Michael's illicit business partners introduced as well as Abigail's melancholy.
4. Day out: Akpors and Michael go golfing while Bola and Abigail go on a ladies outing.
5. The two couples make a trip to Jamaica.
6. A potpourri of unrelated scenes.
7. Akpors outwits the kidnappers and the film ends.
8. End Credits.

In the film's prologue, the location is revealed as we see a close-up of Akpors (Ayo Makun) in the usual crowd that participate at the annual Lagos State music event titled "One Lagos Fiesta" which holds every 31st of December to usher in the new year. In a whimsical move, Akpors runs into the stage, snatches the microphone from the event presenter and seizes the opportunity to propose to his fiancée Bola (Funke Akindele) on live LTV. A crosscut joins Bola to the narration as Akpors calls her on phone to watch the live romantic proposal without an engagement ring. She is perplexed by her lover's imaginative move and quickly replies *yes* to her fiancé. Shot of fireworks follows as the sequence cuts to the film's opening at the airport.

Popular culture overlays with the narrative in this prologue sequence. By this, Robert Peters creates the motif of this comedy and establishes the exposition to the two main characters of the film Akpors and Bola. Lagos is arguably Nigeria's entertainment hub and the centre of artistic creativity and commercialism. This explains the multitude that converge yearly at the "One Lagos Fiesta" cross-over night party in a city that simultaneously houses the biggest churches in Nigeria who also hold cross-over night services same time. Popular music is an integral part of Nigeria popular culture as presented in this sequence. A popular Nigerian music star Olamide is seen performing his hit song that was one of Nigeria's street anthems in the year 2016. The presence of the popular Lagos comedian Gbenga Adeyinka D 1st as the event's presenter highlights comedy as complementary to music and dance in Nigeria, as comedians and musicians accompanied by dancers are now commonplace in every entertainment event.



Plate 2: A long shot of Akpors and Bola arriving in Atlanta for a pre-wedding honeymoon.

Segment 2 opens with a montage sequence of airport passersby as the scene reframes to expose Akpors and Bola at the Hartfield-Jackson International Airport (**Plate 2**). The two love birds are in Atlanta for their pre-nuptial honeymoon and are hoping to be hosted by Bola's cousin, Abigail (Nse Ikpe-Etim). A single following shot tracks Akpors and Bola who meet an airport police to help photograph them. Shortly, Abigail enters the frame to receive them to Atlanta. Three of them walk out to meet with Michael (Dan Davis) who is Abigail's husband. This mobile frame is interspersed with the opening credit and the title shot. Bird-view drone shots reveal the city's contemporary atmosphere as the two couples drive to Michael's picturesque mansion which Akpors describes as similar to *the full St. Andrews Cathedral in Warri*.

Quite remarkable in this sequence is the motif of Abigail's gloomy countenance. She is framed abstract-minded at different situations. The connotation of this motif exposes the film's ideology that all that glitters is not gold. By this, Abigail is presented sad to validate the veneer of melancholy that lies beneath her facade of respectability. As we shall see, she is only permitted to roam the confines of the mansion in ignorance of the world outside her household to the selfish desires of her spouse Michael. Thus, she sees in the lovebirds a freedom and life missing in her ostensible social existence. In segment 3, the sequence

shifts focus to introduce Michael's illicit business associates. The flash sequence showcases the inside of a crowded night club with music and dance. As the scene reframes, we see some of the illicit businessmen discussing Michael's alleged perfidy. The sequence moves to Michael's house where the hosts and the guests are all seated at the dining for breakfast. The humours that characterize this scene emanate from Akpor's aspersions on Andrew the Butler (Barry Piacente), the bald domestic servant of Michael and the products placement of Peak Milk in bald-faced advertisement.

The sequence progresses to a medium shot of Bola and Abigail standing along the passage-way as the former quizzes the latter on the sad looks since their first meeting at the airport. Abigail first claims to be fine, but after a closer scrutiny, she accepts that something is wrong. Michael is blurred in the background trying to eavesdrop on them. As the scene reframes, Michael confronts Abigail to know what she and Bola were discussing. In this dialogue, Robert Peters fully exposes the main reason for Abigail's unhappiness and the film's ideology. According to Abigail; *I feel like a prisoner in my own home . . . I want to go back to my family*. Rather than get an encouraging response, she is once again threatened with the exact words and actions she has not been used to. This leaves her in tears as Michael whistles down the stairs (**Plate 3**).



Plate 3: The lens shifts focus to emphasize Abigail's emotions and blurs Michael in the shot whistling down the stairs.

Akpors and Michael go golfing, and Akpors once again displays droll behaviours (segment 4). He claims to have golf skills but fails to handle the golf club in the manner ideal of a professional. Bola and her sister Abigail are seen in alternating shots having a ladies outing. As the narration advances, Sonnie (Eric Roberts) calls Michael on phone to inform him that no matter where he goes, they (Sonnie and his men) are following him. The significance of this scene to the narrative is that it attempts to set conflict to the plot. This conflict is heightened in the next scene as Bola queries Akpors over implicating items on his mobile phone.

In a ludicrous combat, the lovebirds amuse their hosts especially by making out with each other in the middle of a fight. This leads Michael to propose that they all go on a trip to Jamaica in his private jet in the morning, an announcement which excites all but Abigail. Before the sequence ends, a cut reveals the limousine of Sonnie on the street instructing one of his men to monitor Michael's trip to Jamaica in the morning.



Plate 4: A bird-view shot of Montego Bay in Jamaica.

In segment 5, the two couples make their way to Jamaica in opulence. As they arrive at Montego Bay in Jamaica, a drone reveals the touristy environment of the country (**Plate 4**). Sonnie's man trails them down to their lodge in the Jamaican island and connects with Casper (Paul

Campbell). On the beach side, several shots entice the audience but do not necessarily advance the narrative. Akpors and Bola indulge in public display of affection along the beach; Michael is once again contacted on phone by Sonnie who now informs the former that his men have followed him to Jamaica; Abigail crushes on Tayo a cute shirtless black stranger to the point of reading a book upside down, and Michael gets riled by Abigail's seeming ingratitude.

Furthermore, Akpors lusts after Jodi (Rebecca Silvera) a pretty barmaid to the fantasy of mistaking "sex on the beach" drink for the literal meaning of the words. Afterwards, he acclimatizes himself to the Jamaicans on the beach and claims to play soccer more than the legendary Jay Jay Okocha. He also claims to be friends with popular Nigerian musicians who can speak Jamaican patois more than the natives. Thus, he calls Patoranking and Cynthia Morgan on phone to fraternize with the Jamaicans using patois. The response from the natives floors the Nigerian superstars at home leading them to hang up abruptly. In an inept move to salvage his prestige, he discredits the Jamaican "skunk weed" on the grounds that Kwale in Delta State, Nigeria has harder marijuana. To prove his point, he smokes heavily from their marijuana and instantly begins to hallucinate to Bola and Michael's aversion and Jodi's glee (**Plate 5**).



Plate 5: A low-angle shot of Akpors behaving badly on a beach-side tree and Bola's voice translated in English language.

Segment 6 forms a potpourri of several comic and lugubrious scenes which hurriedly drive the plot to its dénouement. Abigail stares at her man Michael flirting with another woman openly on the dance-floor, making her feel like an interloper in her own affair. Tayo her crush comes by and as she begins to dance with him, Michael appears to question her audacity. Akpors is framed on the sides with Jodi his fantasy lover and Bola comes to whisk him off Jodi's sight. Bola on her part becomes attracted to Marlon (Alex Moure) a Jamaican who tries to teach her how to swim to the condemnation of Akpors. All parties reunite and Jodi shows them round the island. As the sun sets, they return to the lodge and Akpors quickly excuses himself from Bola in bald-faced lies of going to watch Nigeria vs. India nations' cup qualifiers. He returns back to Jodi with Bola secretly trailing him to the point of watching him and Jodi walk away in each other's arms. This leaves Bola in tears and in the arms of her Jamaican crush Marlon. The scene reframes Akpors and Jodi strolling down the road and kidnappers picking him up.

Akpors is been kidnapped alongside Michael and Abigail. At the kidnappers' den (segment 7), it becomes clear that Sonnie and Casper are responsible. The sequence moves over to the beach as Bola accompanied by Marlon and Tayo run to Jodi to get details of the kidnap. Bola recalls that Abigail confided in her thus: *Michael is a criminal, he has a full-fledged career in money laundry, racketeering, drugs, you name it . . . He is at the bottom end of carefully manipulated line of criminals. His boss is called Sonnie and there is one Jamaican called Casper.* This helps them invite the police to investigate the crime. The sequence returns back again to Casper who sends his errand man to bring Abigail to him. In the dialogue between Casper and Abigail, it is exposed that Abigail was an innocent maiden who blindly fell into the wrong hands of Michael.



Plate 6: A shot of Akpors rescuing Abigail as he manages to outwit Michael the criminal and the kidnappers. Note the frontal image on screen right looking through the window to realize the high presence of police.

Abigail is forced to expose Michael's secrets and Akpors manages to snatch a gun from one of the abductors, leading to the escape of Akpors and Abigail, and the arrest and prosecution of others including Michael (**Plate 6**). In a dramatic twist that constitutes the plot's dénouement, Akpors and Bola make a U-turn on their compatibility reading by declaring that they do not seem perfect for each other. Thus they unanimously agree to part ways two days before their arrival in Nigeria. This gives them the leeway to connect with their crushes as Abigail ends up happy in the arms of Tayo her prince-charming; Bola unites with her Jamaican crush Marlon; and Akpors romances with Jodi his beach-bar lover.

This comedy which continues the story about the adventures of Akpors as started by the precursor of *30 Days in Atlanta*, premiered in Lagos on September 25, 2016 with a celebrity football game featuring the likes of Kanu Nwankwo, Jay Jay Okocha, Peter Rufai, Joseph Yobo and Stephen Appiah. *A Trip to Jamaica* is highly commended for its technological fascinations and formal stylistics which meet up to the Hollywood standards of quality picture. This explains its box office success both in the United Kingdom and in Nigeria. However, there is no

new Nollywood movie of this box office height that has gotten critics mercilessly frayed as Robert Peters' *A Trip to Jamaica*. The prime reason for this lies in the absence of a story in the entire diegesis. The film appears as a mere commercialisation of popular culture in cinematic ideology without any intention to conceal its barren patch.

The executive producer and lead actor of the film, Ayo Makun (AY), hinted that this hilarious instalment of the Akpors series shot in Lagos, Atlanta and Jamaica was not conceived of originality, but of a clamour for sequel to *30 Days in Atlanta*. According to him, "after the success of *30 Days in Atlanta*, there were a lot of calls for more so we decided to do a spinoff to showcase further adventures of Akpors" (as cited in Adiele, 2016). This exposes how video films are often built on mere commercialisation of popular culture in high voltage potpourri of adventure, love and crime with little humour.

The plot is characterised by clichés with lots of jokes falling flat and characters undeveloped in favour of the filmmaker. AY's interpretation of Akpors tries unsuccessfully hard to amuse despite speaking Nigeria Pidgin English even in faraway Atlanta and Jamaica. Patoranking and Cynthia Morgan's appearances add nothing entirely to the plot development. Likewise the character of Abigail played by Nse Ikpe-Etin who is married to UK-based Clifford Sule in reality. In the film, Abigail is portrayed as a mere bearer of the film's ideology without adding any life to the plot's causal, temporal or spatial information. Stylistic elements like music and staging are placed haphazardly without enhancing the plot and appealing to viewers' senses. The eponymous journey comes entirely late in the film (around segment 5 out of 7) leaving the plot hanging for too long and finally deflating it before establishing character exposition and motivation. The film's box office success comes on its vast use of popular culture easily identifiable by its target audience. Popular musical soundtrack, dance steps displayed at various parts of the film, popular kente fashion showcased by Akpors and Bola on arrival in Atlanta, the popular Warri accent, and social media are highly utilised in this film to build upon its commercialism.

Conclusion

Nollywood on its part is a merchandise of popular culture where standardization of films is made based on the success of previous hits. This is particularly the case of Robert Peters' *A Trip to Jamaica* which was conceived not based on artistic ingenuity, but as a result of the commercial success of its precursor *30 Days in Atlanta*. This explains why the film has been widely vilified by conservative critics for its absence of a story and plot. As pointed by Adorno, the standardization of popular culture is concealed in such a way that the audiences do not feel the trace of the former imitated in the new. The ideology of this is that popular culture disguises the manner in which standardization of popular imaginations is made through what Adorno calls 'pseudo-individualization'. Pseudo-individualization means the manner in which this imitation is disguised through the use of technological fascination and formal stylistics that mediate identifiable aspects of popular imagination, dreams and aspirations of the masses.

The mediation of mass aspiration is the prime function of popular culture. As a result, in spite of the degree of standardization of popular imaginations, popular culture continues to wax stronger and stronger. Standardised films score great commercial success because as observed with the case study of *A Trip to Jamaica*, these films are commercialisations of popular aspirations concealed in cinematic ideology. This ideology is reflective of the consolidation of what Marx himself describes as *commodity fetishism* and *false needs*. Standardizations of products become ever increasing in order to keep the masses in *trend* of their needs, leading them to live in false needs.

Popular culture as found in these sequels shape the tastes and preferences of the masses, thereby moulding their consciousness by instilling the desire for false needs. The dreams and aspirations of the masses embodied in popular culture are always not fulfilled. Popular culture succeeds in achieving this ideology in such a way that the masses do not realize it. This explains why the masses keep coming back again to consume products of popular culture, thereby placing Nigerian video films as indigenous images with inner dynamics that mediate the Nigerian social history.

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