

“Caribbean cinema continues to be on the margins of the margins, it's a homeless cinema...”: An interview with Lisa Harewood and Jonathan Ali, The Twelve30 Collective

Hanna Klien-Thomas,
Oxford Brookes University, UK

The Twelve30 Collective is an independent film curating initiative with the aim to reframe Caribbean cinema for UK audiences. In collaboration with cinemas, festivals, academic institutions and community groups, the collective brings classic and contemporary films from the Caribbean and its diaspora to the screen. Their initiative seeks to change the perceptions of Caribbean cinema in the global film landscape. Recent projects include virtual screenings such as *Looking at My Family: The Way to My Father's Village* (Richard Fung, 1988) and *My Mother's Place* (Richard Fung, 1990) and the UK theatrical release of *No Place Like Home* (Perry Henzell, 2019) and subsequent tour in cinemas across the country. The latter is the long-lost second work of Perry Henzell, the director of one of the most well-known films of Caribbean cinema *The Harder They Come* (1972) which celebrates its 50th anniversary this year. Lisa Harewood and Jonathan Ali joined Hanna Klien-Thomas to discuss their work, the Twelve30 Collective's mission, challenges in curating Caribbean cinema and plans for the future.

Lisa is a cross platform storyteller. In 2010 she produced the award-winning Barbadian feature film, *A Hand full of Dirt*. In 2013 her debut as a writer and director *Auntie* was released, which focused on migration from the Caribbean and the experience of those left behind. Subsequently, she initiated the Barrel Stories project, a creative oral history project inviting people to share their stories and the impact of migration on parents and the children they leave behind... She has been a resident at the Pervasive Media Studio in Bristol where she explored the intersection of storytelling and technology. She is co-creating a virtual reality piece, *Love and Seawater*, and has written narrative for an augmented reality project *Shared Pasts: Decoding Complexity*.

Jonathan is a film programmer, curator, and writer. In 2006, Jonathan began his career at the Trinidad and Tobago Film Festival, where, among other ground-breaking initiatives, he curated the first Caribbean retrospective of the work of John Akomfrah and Black Audio Film Collective. Currently, he is the Director of Programming for Miami's Third Horizon Film Festival and has held programming positions across a wide range of countries and on different continents, including the Open Doors programme at Locarno Film Festival, Alchemy Film and Moving Image Festival, Tribeca Film Festival, London's East End Film Festival, Toronto International Film Festival, Open City Documentary Festival and Sheffield DocFest. He also is a contributing writer and film critic for *Caribbean Beat Magazine*.

More information about the Twelve30 Collective and contact details can be found on their website: <https://www.twelve30collective.org>

HKT: Thank you for being here and taking the time to speak with me. The Twelve30 Collective is quite a unique organisation in the UK and you are doing such great and important work to make Caribbean cinema and content accessible and visible, literally. Could you tell me more about how the collective was founded?

LH: Jonathan and I knew each other from film circles back in the Caribbean, when he was the programmer of a film festival in Trinidad and Tobago that I frequented and where my work was programmed. And then we found out that we had both moved to the UK in 2016, and had a bit of a chat about the invisibility of Caribbean filmmaking in the UK cinema landscape and thought that maybe we ought to do something about that. So we got together, I think it was in June of 2018. We started generating some ideas about offering curation and programming services to festivals and to venues focussed on making UK audiences of all kinds aware of the quality of Caribbean cinema output. Two things were quite important to us in starting the collective. One was that when we say Caribbean that is a very expansive definition of the term, it wasn't just the English-speaking Caribbean. We wanted to define the Caribbean outside of that particular linguistic limit. So we also included the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, Dutch-speaking Caribbean, and French-speaking Caribbean. We include diaspora communities in other places. And then the second thing that was quite important to us was that we wanted to break this pattern that we saw of Caribbean films only being focused on Caribbean Diaspora audiences in the UK. That's a massive segment of the people that we are targeting, but we're also targeting a wider UK cinema-going community. We're targeting an art-house and world cinema community because we think that Caribbean film deserves to be seen in that canon and that context as well.

HKT: My next question is about the name of the collective. Your website states that it refers to the timetabled slot for the first feature screening of the day in the past days of Caribbean cinemas, also to this bygone era of cinema in the region. So could you probably talk a little bit

more about this rich history of cinema in the Caribbean and also how far these traditions have continued in the diaspora?

JA: As you say, the name refers to this bygone era of cinema going in the Caribbean. But it's not a direct reference, it actually comes from Derek Walcott and his poem 'The Spoiler's Return', in which there is a couplet that goes: "All Port-of-Spain is a 12.30 show/Some playing Kojak, some Fidel Castro". So the reference is specifically to Trinidad, the cinemas of Port-of-Spain. There was a tradition that there were set times for going to the cinema across the country. So the first show at every cinema was always at 12.30, then there was the 4.30 matinee, the 8:15 evening show and it was always double features. And then, we won't talk about this one maybe, but then after midnight there were other screenings, which is a whole area of Caribbean cinema exhibition maybe worth exploring? I don't know. I know that pornography is becoming fashionable in film academic circles to research, but that's another topic for another day. So there is this allusion in Walcott's poem, quite apart from the political statement, the reference to Kojak, which is about American culture coming into the country. Kojak of course was a TV show, but the reference is to Hollywood and to its products, cinema and television. Then there is Fidel Castro, so you have these two poles. You have the imperial – the new imperial – side of things and then you've got the anti-imperial side of things with Castro. But cinema-going in the Caribbean began almost with the beginning of cinema. There were screenings in Trinidad even before the 1900s, the first purpose-built cinema was in 1911. Right up through the war, through the 60s into the 70s, cinema-going was a major pastime and cinema had an incalculable effect on Caribbean society and on the psyche of the Caribbean person. Hollywood really became entrenched across society and in all sorts of different ways that went way beyond just going to the cinema or to be entertained. And that effect is still felt today. But of course the way the films were seen by Caribbean audiences was very particularly Caribbean. There was a tradition of interacting with the cinema that was being seen, talking back to the screen, people commenting in the cinemas, particularly down in the pit as it was known as, the cheap seats as opposed to the more expensive seats in the balcony. All that's gone now, there are the multiplexes now for those who still go to the cinema and you know, the tradition of talking back to the screen has all but disappeared. It was a way of Caribbean people inserting themselves into the drama and making themselves part of what they were witnessing. I have to say I don't know to what extent that tradition extended to the diaspora. For example, when Caribbean audiences saw *The Harder They Come* in cinemas in London in the 1970s, how did they respond? Were they reacting to the film the way audiences in Kingston were reacting? It's a good question, but just to say that the rich tradition is all but gone now. It's also because cinema viewing habits have changed. We don't go to the cinema as we used to. In the same way, the cinemas aren't the same as they used to be. And there is the gentrification of cinemas, certainly. In the Caribbean, they're much smarter now than they were. When I was a child they were a bit dingy. These once

grand movie palaces, dream theatres, were a bit dingy and you felt comfortable in them, you know, being your authentic self. When these smart new multiplexes opened up, first of all, ticket prices went up. I don't know if working class audiences felt this was the place for them to go economically, and also, in terms of class, that they wanted to go and associate themselves [with these places]. The middle classes don't react the same way as the working classes do in the cinema, in my opinion. So that's a very long answer to your question.

LH: Certainly in Barbados, where there's still a drive-in, that interactivity is part of what makes the experience unique. The honking of the horns, the flashing of the lights, sometimes people will literally get out of the car and run around, particularly with an action movie if the stunt was particularly dramatic. And I've seen this kind of reaction in some screenings here of a blockbuster like, say, *Black Panther*, where people will come out of their shells and have that interaction. But maybe here it is maybe more isolated. I think people still have a desire to have that dialogue with the screen.

JA: There are no more drive-ins in Trinidad, so that could not happen...

LH: I feel sorry for you guys!

JA: What I can say, in my experiences with the Trinidad and Tobago Film Festival, with audiences watching Caribbean films in general and specifically Trinidadian films [in the multiplexes], they engaged in that kind of way and response. And sometimes Trinidadian films would get a theatrical run in the cinema beyond the life of the festival. And I would imagine that the audiences felt comfortable while watching Trinidadian films in responding to and interacting with the film in that way.

HKT: This is absolutely fascinating. Would you say there is a community aspect to Caribbean audiences and cinema going in the UK? Do you invest a lot of effort into building these audiences?

LH: I think technically, because we're more on the curating and programming side, we haven't been in audience development, we're usually selecting films for venues or for organisations that have audiences and have their own outreach. The exception to that was during the pandemic, when we did a couple of direct screenings ourselves and we had a really diverse range of people showing up to those online screenings. But I think those screenings probably primarily appeal to a diasporic audience just because of the networks through which we were promoting them. But if I think from 2018 to now, we've had a very diverse set of people come through to see the films that we've curated and that's what we wanted. We're completely invested in the Caribbean diaspora seeing these films because, of course, what they get from

it is completely different from what somebody who's not from that community gets from the film. But we've cast the net a lot wider than that, and it's been really interesting to see how sometimes in that mixed audience where you've got a Caribbean diaspora audience and you've got a non-Caribbean diaspora audience in attendance, that the Caribbean diaspora audience in the Q&A is almost helping to read the film, read the nuances of the film for the non-Caribbean person, helping them to understand certain things that they may have missed, giving them context, helping them to understand maybe a dialect or a language or a gesture or something, through some of the commentary that they give, so it's been really interesting to see those audiences interact with one another.

HKT: And when it comes to the curation process, could you tell me a little bit more about how you choose your films?

JA: Well, we have different approaches, depending on the events we do. Sometimes we're asked to curate an event to mark a specific occasion and that would determine what we would programme. It also depends on the venue that we're screening at and we take that into consideration as well. The main consideration, whatever the event, wherever the screening is taking place, is always: do we think this is good work? And is this something that we feel comfortable and secure with presenting to audiences and can stand by as a work of cinema? It's always the first consideration. We do not screen films merely for the sake of representation of Caribbean filmmaking, it has never been our primary motivator. Of course, it does very much factor into what we show, but aesthetics and representation go hand in hand every step of the way. And we wouldn't want to show something that we couldn't stand by in terms of being a good work of cinema. So regardless of what we're showing, and we've shown art films, we have shown conventional genre cinema, we've shown short work and feature length work, we've shown documentary work, we've shown fiction, and experimental work, it's all one and the same to us in terms of being cinema. It just has to be good cinema.

HKT: When it comes to collaboration partners, could you give an insight into who you are working with and who are valuable partners in the Caribbean as well as in the UK?

JA: There are a number of organisations and institutions that we have worked with in the past and we continue to work with, who have been very helpful in our mission. One of those at the very beginning was the Independent Cinema Office. In fact, our very first work of the collective was in response to an open call from ICO. For one of the Screening Days events, we put together a programme of Caribbean short films called Caribbean Calling. We've continued to work with the Independent Cinema Office. Their Archive Screening Days was the very first

place that we showed Perry Henzell's *No Place Like Home* (Perry Henzell, 2019),¹ and that was ground zero really for that film's exposure to programmers.. Another institution that's been very key on this, which takes us across into the academic side of things, is the Birkbeck Institute for the Moving Image. I did my postgraduate work at Birkbeck and already had a relationship with the institute. Our very first public in-person screening event took place at Birkbeck. And we've done several virtual events with them since and they've continued to be strong supporters of the Twelve30 Collective. Our last event, which we held in December of last year, was with the Birkbeck Institute of the Moving Image, our presentation of two films by Richard Fung. We've also worked with a number of cinemas bringing *No Place like Home* (Perry Henzell, 2019) to theatrical audiences, so we very much rely on the cinema networks in London and the UK to do what we do.

LH: I would add Watershed in Bristol to that list, not just as a venue but also in terms of the Cinema Rediscovered Festival. They were the first to see the potential of *No Place like Home* (Perry Henzell, 2019) and really played a pivotal role in promoting – the film to partner venues across the UK. They went the extra mile to really support and encourage us in getting the tour set up... and taught us a lot of the ropes of working with distributors and venues. It was the first undertaking that we had of that scale and they were really pivotal in helping us to make that successful.

HKT: We just started talking about the film, so would you like to give more insights into the background story of No Place like Home (Perry Henzell, 2019), this turbulent kind of story?

JA: It was this mythical cinematic object. We knew it had existed and then had disappeared before the public got to see it, then it was rediscovered and finished in time for a premiere in 2006, just before Perry Henzell, the writer and director, passed away. It was at the Calabash Literary Festival in Jamaica, one of the organisers of which is Henzell's daughter, Justine Henzell. But not long after it was pulled. In 2019, finally, it re-emerges with all the music rights cleared. The same year we got an opportunity through the ICO to programme something at the Archive Screening Days, and it just seemed the perfect choice to go with this film and give it its UK theatrical premiere. As you say, a film with one hell of a background story that goes back almost 50 years. And it's just astonishing that a film really this good had all these challenges to see the light of day. It's futile to think what could have happened if the film had

¹ The final cut of *No place like home* was released in 2019. Perry Henzell had started production of the film in 1973, with many interruptions due to funding and his improvisatory, open-ended shooting. When he completed the final scenes in 1981, the negatives of the previous shoots stored in the US had disappeared. Henzell never directed again, but the boxes containing the negatives were found in the early 2000s. The fim was restored and screened in 2006.

premiered back in the 70s when it should have done, the opportunities that were probably lost because of that... for Perry, for Caribbean cinema, who knows?

HKT: Based on your experiences of curating and programming, what would you say are the challenges when it comes to Caribbean cinema in the context of the UK?

LH: If I compare doing screenings in the Caribbean versus the UK, I think people would probably be quite surprised to find out that in the Caribbean, it's actually quite difficult to programme Caribbean work. At least in the context of Barbados it was quite difficult to programme that work, because there are no independent cinemas. There's just a cineplex. Cineplexes are in the business of getting as much audience as possible and selling as many tickets as possible, and they often took a dim view of content that was not coming out of Hollywood or elsewhere. So finding the alternative spaces in which to screen is always the challenge. Those spaces are often prohibitively expensive or they're not made for a cinema experience, they're multi-use spaces and not ideal. And then you, unfortunately, have the psychological barriers that people have to valuing the work that's coming out of their own countries from their own filmmakers. And I think that's probably true of lots of places, not just the Caribbean people who've been fed a steady diet of Hollywood films and just have a certain expectation. Whether that expectation has to do with production values, with the way the story is told, pacing, or the race of the people they see on screen, all sorts of things, and it can be quite challenging. Even though once they've seen the film, you can see that there is a hunger for more and that there's an appreciation, it can be quite challenging sometimes to even get those audiences in a room with those films that we feel have something to say to them. Screening in the UK context, of course we have a lot more independent cinema spaces, but the challenges are still the same. Those spaces still need to drive an audience in order to continue to exist. And so you have to be able to programme not just films that meet your criteria for quality in terms of their storytelling, but you also have to be able to find that balance of helping to bring audiences to those spaces. You know, if they're only bringing in two or three people to a film that we're screening in an independent venue, how likely are they to turn to us again? So there's always that balance to be struck and people have a preconceived notion of what Caribbean cinema is. And quite often that notion is that it's either slapstick or ghetto narratives, or they just have no idea and are always sort of pleasantly surprised when we bring a film like *No Place Like Home* (Perry Henzell, 2019) or some contemporary cinema that is much more nuanced or, you know, they find out: "Oh, there's experimental filmmaking from Caribbean filmmakers, that's interesting!" Because they're expecting a certain kind of cinema, so you almost have to start, I wouldn't say in a deficit, but with people having a preconceived notion that you kind of have to try and counteract whether that's at the venue and programmer level or that's at the audience level.

JA: The Caribbean is and continues to be in many ways inconvenient when it comes to certain things and cinema is one of them. Caribbean cinema continues to be on the margins of the margins. It's a homeless cinema. It is the ghetto of world cinema and it just doesn't tick boxes, it doesn't fit neatly into people's perception of what cinema is, you know? It's still, in so many contexts, either getting lumped in with Latin American cinema or in other contexts, African cinema. Caribbean cinema is not Latin American cinema and it is not African cinema, it is Caribbean cinema, but people don't want to hear that a lot of times, it's too complicated, it means doing too much work trying to understand nuances and shadings that they just don't have time to deal with or just don't care for. I had a very eye-opening experience, and I suspect that as the year continues, it's going to happen more and more in the 50th anniversary year of *The Harder They Come*. I thought there are a lot of people who have seen at least *The Harder They Come*, even if they don't know any other Caribbean cinema. But I introduced one screening of the film a little while back and I asked the audience who has seen the film, and I think one person out of a few dozen raised their hands. And this wasn't only, say, young people, it was a range of ages. So if you've not even seen *The Harder They Come*, it's a lot of work that has to be done to let people know it's more than that film and you haven't even seen that film, so the work continues. And yeah, we're doing what we can. But we have no illusions about this in terms of what Lisa said, what people think Caribbean cinema is. Or in terms of world cinema and the narratives around world cinema, the books that have been written and we're trying to rewrite the history or add to the complicated history and make it more into what it actually is. And that takes some doing. It's complicated not only because the Caribbean is complicated, but also because the Caribbean is not one ethnicity, it's not one language, it's not one kind of culture. That complexity is really too much for people who are looking at their bottom lines, cinemas, for example, need to sell tickets and they need to be able to present something they can easily sell to an audience. So there's work that needs to be done to educate not just audiences, but, you know, cinema programmers and festivals, what Caribbean cinema means. And that is the work that we are engaged in doing. So we will be continuing to do that work despite the challenges.

HKT: Thank you for this, it is also along the lines I thought when I read your introduction to Richard Fung's films about the feeling of being labelled, in his case as Asian hyphen video artists, as queer filmmaker, and how that then affects programming. How being pigeonholed is in stark contrast to the fluidity and, as you mentioned, the diversity that is the Caribbean.

AL: Richard's case is a perfect example of how multifaceted, deeply complex artists can have their work become a reductive product. In certain contexts, Richard is held up as a great Asian artist-filmmaker, in other contexts he's a great queer filmmaker or queer Asian filmmaker. But so often his Caribbean-ness is either reduced or completely wiped out for people who don't know the work of his that deals very specifically with his Caribbean roots, born and

raised in the Caribbean. And it's not only that, his aesthetic is very much born out of his identity as a Caribbean person, and you can't watch any of his films, even if the subject matter is not specifically Caribbean, all of his films are still born out of a Caribbean way of thinking and being, and that is so often erased.

HKT: Just to conclude, you have already mentioned quite some things that you have been doing and that you intend to continue doing in the future, but what changes would you like or hope to see? Not only for the work of the collective but also in terms of the cinema landscape and industry as it is now?

LH: I don't know if we have the capacity to change the cinema landscape, but we can definitely make a contribution to a certain narrative that we feel has been written about the Caribbean, to try to get some works recognised as part of the canon. I think certainly with *No Place Like Home* (Perry Henzell, 2019), at so many of those screenings we had curators or programmers, people who come along who are sort of film buffs say to us: why is this film not more widely known? Why is this film not in the pantheon of great films? Because it's a film that can sit right alongside American independent films of the same era. So that was very gratifying for us. For example, *The Guardian* writes about the film and in the same article in which they wrote about Melvin Van Peebles' long lost film.² So it's that kind of recognition for Caribbean work that is really important to us. We'd love to be able to do obviously more screenings. When the films are screened, when we've programmed them but somebody else is screening them, it's out of our hands. And sometimes we see that there is a missed opportunity in terms of the way that the film is positioned in the marketing or in the audience outreach that the cinemas maybe aren't quite so sure how to frame the films. And that's something that I think we'd like to get more involved with. We're always happy to include a programming note or record an introduction. We have some practical constraints, because of structural issues and funding limitations for Caribbean film output. It's not like there's 20-30 films coming out every year. So that's always the challenge for us, how to continue to curate new work when there's a set amount, particularly features, that get produced every year. But that's changing. I think there's an increasing quantity of work coming through, both from the region and from Caribbean filmmakers working outside of the Caribbean in the diaspora. It would be really good to have more of a dialogue between Caribbean heritage artists and filmmakers working in the UK and Caribbean filmmakers based in the Caribbean. I think Jonathan probably brought Morgan Quaintance to the attention of a lot of curators of Caribbean work who

² Gilbey, R. (2021). 'Blaxploitation salvation: film directors' children on rescuing their fathers' lost movies'. [online] *The Guardian*. Available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2021/jul/29/blaxploitation-film-directors-children-melvin-van-peebles-and-perry-henzell-movies>> [Accessed 19 April 2022].

probably didn't really understand or know what he was doing, and more of that kind of exchange and dialogue is really important for us, even though our focus at the moment is firmly on bringing Caribbean work to the UK.

JA: Lisa is spot on here and I'd just like to add to that, and I'm glad she made a reference to Morgan Quaintance. So often in the UK, the Caribbean is conflated with the British Caribbean and the two entities, while of course they are related, are separate. They are different, they're not the same, and you can't just exchange one for the other. And too often when people say Caribbean film in the UK, what they mean is Caribbean British film or British Caribbean film. But there is a Caribbean cinema that comes directly from the region. You know, that is not filtered by a diasporic British experience. Just as the British Caribbean cinema is, of course, filtered by that experience. Very often when it does consider, if at all, the Caribbean as a contemporary space or a space as a physical reality, it's filtered through space and time. So there's all that that has to be considered. And Morgan Quaintance is a very good example of a filmmaker who has no illusions about himself being British. You know, he's not from the Caribbean, he's of Caribbean heritage. And Morgan actually recently wrote a review of the show that was on at Tate Britain 'Life between Islands'.³ He picks up on this point of the difference between the Caribbean as a lived space, a lived reality with people who are living there now and living a reality there now, and the imagined Caribbean, the Caribbean as an imaginary, as it is held by many people in the UK and many artists in the UK, curators as well. That Caribbean is another, different Caribbean. You know, if it exists at all, it exists, as I said, as an imaginary and that real Caribbean was a Caribbean of decades ago. The Caribbean as we know it to be, coming from there, it hasn't stayed frozen in time. No place stays frozen in time. The Caribbean is a modern, dynamic part of the globalised digitalised world, and it's completely different to, you know, the Caribbean, as it was then, the Caribbean as probably many people in Britain think of it. The Caribbean often is portrayed in British media and these TV shows where British Caribbean people go to the Caribbean to discover their roots and report back in their British accents.

HKT: I think this is a great ending with all these interconnections, all these relationships still to be explored further. And I would just like to say, I think your work is amazing and I hope we can collaborate more in the future. Thank you for the interview.

Biographical note:

Dr Hanna Klien-Thomas is a research fellow with the Creative Industries Research and Innovation Network (CIRIN) at Oxford Brookes University. Her PhD project on Bollywood audiences in the Anglophone Caribbean was funded by the Austrian Academy of Sciences and

³ Quaintance, M. (2022) 'Centre. Margin. Other', *Art Monthly*, (453), pp. 7–12.

she was an affiliate scholar at the Institute of Gender and Development Studies in St. Augustine (University of the West Indies). Previous publications include monographs on Cuban Hip Hop and Hindi films, as well as various articles on digital practices, activism and fandom. Her current research project focuses on temporalising and spatialising media practices in UK Caribbean Carnival events. Contact: hkien-thomas@brookes.ac.uk.