Filmmaker Colin Minihan and actress Brittany Allen have forged a collaborative relationship behind as well as in front of the camera. Allen has produced and been a lead or co-leading actress in three of Minihan’s four feature films: Extraterrestrial (2014), It Stains the Sands Red (2016), and What Keeps You Alive (2018). Possessing a creative versatility for storytelling, she composed the soundtrack for What Keeps You Alive, and wrote, directed, and edited the short film Valentines Day (2014), which centres on a former couple who find their paths crossing again one night.

Extraterrestrial, It Stains the Sands Red and What Keeps You Alive are connected by both geographical isolation and the themes of their respective narratives. While the desert setting of the zombie apocalypse in It Stains the Sands Red sharply contrasts the woodland cabin of the other two films, thematically they all tap into a similar set of emotions. Respectively, a group of friends are tormented by extraterrestrial visitors; a woman is stalked across the desert by an unrelenting zombie; Jules (Brittany Allen) in What Keeps You Alive realises to her horror that her partner Jackie (Hannah Emily Anderson) has sinister intentions for their first year wedding anniversary.

Each film centres around characters experiencing anxiety amidst an intense struggle for survival within the framework of genre, but which belong to different sub-genres.

In conversation with MSJ, Minihan and Allen (Fig. 1) discussed the nature of fear in the filmmaking process and the transformative experience of performance, the transition from writer to director, and despite an ending that threatens to spark criticism, the director’s commitment to the ending he envisioned.

**PR:** Why filmmaking or acting as a means of creative expression? Was there an inspirational or defining moment for you personally?

**CM:** I grew up in a very small town of 25,000 people, on the northern tip of Vancouver Island — quite cut off from any city. And it was a two-and-a-half-hour drive through...
the mountains to get to a real movie theatre. So going to the movie theatre for me as a kid was a huge adventure. It was an experience, and then we would drive back through the mountains with just the headlights illuminating the forest highway, and my imagination would be let loose on that drive. I always found it very inspiring to go to the cinema because it was such a rarity when I actually got to go.

I have one memory where I had made a short film that I’d edited it together. I was thirteen-years-old and I started making shorts when I was quite young — just pissing around with the camera, which was fun. But I remember making one short in particular, and editing it that night, and then taking the video, the Mini DV or whatever it was down to the basement and playing it on a small TV by myself. That same natural experience I had in the movie theatres, I felt for my own work, and in that moment I literally said out loud, even though it was three in the morning, and no one was there, “I’m going to be a filmmaker.” I was thirteen [laughs].

**BA:** I was really young as well when I decided I wanted to do this [to act]. Yeah, I was a crazy kid and when I was four-years-old there was a school talent show that you could only audition for once you were in Grade 1, which was when you were about six-years-old. I begged my mom to ask the teacher who ran the talent show if I could audition, and I sang “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” from *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). And then when I was in Grade 2, I did the same thing by begging my mom to ask the teacher if I could audition for the school play, which I was three years too young to do, and I played Bo-Beep in *Babes in Toyland*.

When I was young, a lot of it was musical theatre and there was one moment — oh God, I think I’m going to cry when I talk about it. I was nine-years-old and I was driving past one of the big theatres in Toronto, and I think *The Lion King* (1994) might have been playing. My parents had probably taken me to see it a few months earlier, and I guess I broke down in the car and begged my parents to help me get an agent, because I just wanted to do it — you feel more confident.

**CM:** Speaking as your partner and seeing a lot of that addiction play out, it’s almost an addiction to overcoming fear, because every role I feel there is so much fear attached for an actor. It doesn’t matter if you are guest starring or you are just in for a day, or if you are the lead, you are overcoming so much to step up in the moment and be real, and to go somewhere else.

**BA:** Yeah, pretty much every single role, and I feel this is really common among actors, but also maybe among a lot of people involved in film. I get zero sleep the night before the first day of shooting because I am absolutely terrified, and it is such a thrill to feel such terror, and then at the end of the day realise you pushed through it — you feel more confident.

**PR:** Interviewing director Alfonso Gomez-Rejon’s for *Me, Earl and the Dying Girl* (2015), he said, “...the medium and the mystery of the process is that I could wake up one day and not know where to put the camera.” Can the filmmaking process be likened to stepping into a void, but is that uncertainty or fear that you have both referred to a source of motivation?

**BA:** Exactly, and for me as an actor, if I were to give into my fear, then it would likely result in a pretty predictable performance, because it would result in me making safe choices, and doing the same thing take after take. So the scariest thing is to step into every take and go, “I don’t know how this is going to come out. I’m just going to let go of how I just did the scene, I am going to commit fully, and I’m going to just jump.” So that’s the scariest thing, but from that is where the best work comes, I think.

**CM:** It is a void you step into, and you just pray in the moment that you do know where to put the camera. Maybe you don’t pray — I don’t believe in God.
PR: How do you view the place of *What Keeps You Alive* within your body of work? And would you agree that the filmmaking process a constant learning curve, with each film having the capacity to teach you something individual and specific to that experience?

CM: I’ve never really thought, “Oh, I can’t do this movie because how does it fit with my other movies?” It’s tough. You definitely grow with every film and I feel like I’ve learned so much since making my first film, *Grave Encounters* (2011). I probably learned the most through the one film that I’ve made that I would call a failure, which was *Extraterrestrial* (2014) (Fig. 2), because it cost a lot to make, it didn’t make its money back, and it was poorly reviewed. But through the process I would say that I learned so much about coming at my work with less cockiness more than confidence. And also to trust in my own instincts a lot more, and not let the notes of a manager in LA or something effect the screenplay in a way that intuitively I knew was wrong, but I did it anyway to get the film made. So to fight for your own ideas, and there are obviously exceptions to that.

BA: I feel though that you’ve gotten to a place that you have a really great balance, in that you are very strong about your vision, and you’re not going to let every person’s opinion affect the story. But also, when you hear a good idea, you are so open.

CM: Who has the best idea — I hope for that. And there’s never an ounce of ego, whereas maybe when I was twenty-six and I directed *Extraterrestrial* there was a lot of ego. So you learn to completely let go of ego I think and trust in being able to identify the best idea, the most improvised take, whatever it is, and to not be so bullheaded.

PR: I recall David Fincher saying how a little ego is needed to help you take the knocks in this business — to pick yourself up and to carry on.

CM: I would absolutely agree with that.

BA: And you also need a little bit of ego to run a set, to be able to have a ton of people in every department asking you, “How should I do this?” You need to trust your instincts enough in that moment to give answers to everyone.

PR: A storyteller doesn’t need to only be good at telling stories, he or she needs to have the right personality. Is the literary world more suited to the introverted storyteller, whereas filmmaking, with a crew and their many questions more suited to the extrovert? And just as the personality of the individual spectator can influence their response to the film, the storyteller’s personality can influence the story, or guide you towards certain types of stories. Within this, right and wrong in the critique or response to a film becomes clouded.

CM: It is just so incredibly subjective. What I love somebody else may hate, so you can’t please everybody when you make a film. Talking about ego a little more, I think that’s something that isn’t even ego, it’s just reality. If I don’t listen to that person’s critique, it’s not my ego, it’s just the fact that I see the world through a very different lens than they do.

BA: And you see that in the response to a film as well, where one person will come out of the theatre saying, “I loved this part,” and then the next person will say, “That part drove me crazy, why did they do that?”

CM: Talking about personality types, because writing is so dramatically different than directing, I’m an introvert too. I lock myself away and I am writing for months to crack a script, and I edit my films as well, everyone so far, and that’s arguably more introverted than writing. So in between those two things you have this area called production, where you need to be the most extroverted person on the planet, and the most confident and in control on the set — whatever inner demons you are struggling with on any given day, to be able to maintain a cool level head while getting through what is often a very tight schedule packed with very little sleep. So I definitely imagine myself taking off one hat and putting on another through the whole process, especially with independent film and learning the business of film sales because that is a totally different hat.
Occasionally I have to put that hat on midday to have a conversation with someone, and then take it off to go creative again. But a camera has always done a weird thing to me ever since I was young. It was almost creating worlds as a kid behind the viewfinder — I felt so much more confident and comfortable communicating what I wanted. So it’s something that I always just felt, and I very much think that I have that director’s personality as a result of the way I have always felt behind the camera. I don’t know what it does, but it turns me into a different person.

BA: I would say that actually. I guess I’ve gotten so used to it now, but I really do feel that you access a different part of your voice even, and a different physicality when directing. It’s like you go deeper... [laughs].

PR: Colin, do you see a striking difference or a change in Brittany when she’s on set working?

CM: I feel the change is astronomical because sometimes the character is so different than who Brittany really is. One of the things that I love about Britt is that she’s just a classic character actor; she’s not a method actor, and so she’s not painful to work with. She’s not that character on set, you can actually talk to her.

BA: Well, sometimes I do prefer to be addressed by my character [laughs].

CM: But I think everybody does, even the filmmaker because you are so in the moment that they don’t want to step outside of the world.

BA: There was a time after What Keeps You Alive I remember, a few weeks, maybe even a month later where you said, “You know it’s okay to let go of Jules.” And I remember you hit me deep in that moment — I hadn’t realised that I had been holding onto her so much, because for Jules I did drop my voice down, I did embody a harder side of myself, even though she goes to such an emotional place, there was an hardness near the beginning at least. And yeah, I think it was a struggle afterwards because also with Jules I found things out about myself playing that role that I really liked, and I thought, “Oh, I want to hold onto this.” But I didn’t know how to adapt that into who I had always been, and so it was a bit of a struggle. Maybe I was trying to hard to hold onto some of those things, instead of just trusting that I could still be myself, knowing that I have those aspects inside of me.

PR: Interviewing filmmaker Sean Brosnan for My Father Die (2016), he explained: “I know a lot of friends who pick their themes first or they’ll pick a story and then say: ‘What do I want to explore?’ I find for me that is very limiting because I just like to explore a world and its characters; to see what theme comes out of that and to let the story dictate it.” Each storyteller takes a different approach, but to speak about theme, are you attentive to specific themes from the outset or is it a journey of discovery?

CM: Every script is different. I used to direct and come up with concepts for music videos, and I think it’s good storytelling practice if you approach the three minute music video as if there is a narrative, a theme to it, because you have to hit that, and you only have a limited time to do it. And you have to shoot the band and sell them as well. But every time is different because sometimes the theme can come from an image that you get in your head first, and maybe that image is what sparks the story. Or maybe it’s a character you really like that you want to explore, and ultimately, that character may slowly reveal the theme. Or you just may have a subject you’re interested in exploring, which is an undertone of everything that is happening, and the characters and the story come from that. So I feel story can come from a lot of different places, and it just depends on the moment in time where that idea becomes the idea that you are going to make.

BA: Whenever we’ll be talking about ideas, we’ll be exploring something and because it’s just a theme, it’s too broad — it’s more of a feeling...

CM: A feeling is so hard to be the starting point of, “Where do I go from there?” And an image can evoke a feeling too, and I’ve had so many powerful images that I say,” There is a film in there somewhere — I hope some year from
now I find and discover what that is.” But I feel like the simple question of, “what if?” Is the best place to start from a story perspective, and that’s usually, “What if this happened? What if you were married and you didn’t know the person you were married to at all? What if they turned out to be a psychopath?” And that then becomes cause and effect, and that can help with a thriller that’s happening in real time for the most part, which just guided the entire script.

BA: I also think that you sometimes discover your themes after you’ve written the first draft. With a recent film Colin co-wrote that they just finished filming called Z (2018), you guys had written the first draft and you sent it out to some people, and I feel like some of their responses were, “Oh, this aspect is great, build up this theme.” You’re not necessarily writing the script to serve the theme to begin with, but once the themes become unearthed...

CM: You can service them and keep them consistent.

PR: Watching the film, what drew me in was a certain feeling that is evoked when things start to become apparent. It is a moment that taps into our familiarity of trust being broken, and its placement is important — the need to build to it with pacing and patience, to benefit the the story on an emotional level as it unravels in its aftermath.

CM: I definitely did not want to come to the big moment in the film too soon, and the multiple hats that I wear is such a challenge. The business man in me that wants to be able to get a distribution deal knows that every distributor out there is going to say, “Can that happen ten or fifteen minutes earlier?” So I have to be like, “Fuck that guy for a minute! I’m not going to wear that hat here, and I’m going to trust what I know is the better version of this film, and put my art first”, which I always do. But yeah, I feel in that moment the power behind it speaks volumes, and everyone can relate to being betrayed or hurt on some level, and I just take it to the extreme in What Keeps You Alive.

PR: I look at film as being a psychological construct — built around the levels of consciousness. The Jungian concept of the shadow complex relates to the drama of What Keeps You Alive — Jules struggling against her shadow, desiring civility over conflict, as opposed to Jackie who has been consumed by her shadow. Jung argued that in the confrontation with this complex was necessary for us to discover moral authenticity — allowing it to erupt and to be incorporated into our consciousness. This relates to Jules’s character and supports the notion that film is a psychological construct.

CM: It’s a great way to read it, but for me, Jackie’s darkness isn’t just the classic shadow, it’s a disease in her. I personally relate more to the theme of trust and betrayal, and less so to maybe more [to Brittany] your character allowing darkness to overtake her a bit, so you can have a chance at survival, and obviously struggle immensely getting over this betrayal, to find this darkness and that anger. But for me, the film really is about not knowing the person who you love the most (Fig. 3).

BA: I think as people, what you are talking about is something that both Colin and I deal with in different ways — just in that for me, I’m somebody who repressed my shadow self for years, and swallowed it, and lived in a constant state of anxiety because of it [laughs], and so I think one of the reasons I was drawn to Colin...

CM: Is because I let the darkness out.

BA: I knew that he lived a little bit more on the edge, and he would encourage that to come out in me too. And maybe for you, it’s kind of about getting to know that darkness in yourself, and not letting it overtake you — harnessing it and using it. I do think that he harnessed his — he’s the one who wrote the words that Jackie says, and you went to a place in yourself to find that.

CM: Very much so.

BA: So yeah, how can you let it out in a way that is constructive...

CM: And not destructive to oneself.
**PR:** At some point in critiquing the film, one needs to ask where the line is between the storytellers and the characters...

**CM:** I wrote the film from within, but I wasn’t studying every psychopath and every piece of dialogue that has been said in recorded interviews. I was saying those lines from within me, through my voice, and so I was channeling a certain level of darkness in order to write that character. And also I want it to be fun and so she does it with a wink and a nod. But it comes from within, and so on the page I put the light and the fucking dark down.

**BA:** Colin is a night owl, especially when he’s writing and editing, and sometimes he won’t go to bed until 5am in the morning. And I remember some nights he’d come to bed...

**CM:** I was an asshole.

**BA:** No, no, I don’t remember that side of it. I just remember you coming in and being shocked with what you had just come up with. You were shocked at the darkness.

**CM:** It’s fun to go there.

**BA:** But that’s after hours of harnessing it.

**CM:** I love going somewhere, and the same way that you as an actor fall into the character, I get that opportunity. There’s nothing more exciting than when you are writing a script, when you’re writing the lines and you’re literally crying as you are saying them. And you are not crying for what that character is saying, you are crying because you are reaching a part of yourself that is just so truthful, and you’re putting it on the page, or in this case I was just angry [laughs]. But that was exciting to be an animal.

**PR:** A part of the conversation around this film will be about when it should have ended, which divides the audience. Why did you choose to not end it sooner?

**CM:** It would be a cop out to end it sooner. To end any film at the moment where the audience may be like, “Oh, that’s satisfying; oh, my heart feels warm walking out of the cinema,” fuck that feeling. That’s not what I’m after when I make movies — I want the opposite of that. I am perfectly happy pissing people off with an ending and letting them discuss it, because at least then I’ve evoked a real feeling, versus this feeling of, *oh, I’m satisfied you know with my Hollywood ending.* Especially writing and directing an independent film where I have final cut, I’m going to end the movie wherever the hell I please.

I always had the visual in my head of seeing Jackie as a young girl shoot the bear, when in actuality, portraying that visually and seeing her death through that lens was just so poetic for me, that there was no escaping that’s how I wanted to end the picture. And that was the most awesome scene to discover in the edit, how it would come together too because that’s very much a scene where not every frame is storyboarded. That’s not really my style, I like to be in the moment and find in the moment where I’m going to shoot it and how it’s going to flow together. But it was just one of those magical scenes that I think is one of the best parts of the picture, and if you can go along with the ride to get there, you’ll be so much more satisfied than if I had ended it ten minutes earlier, at a more obvious point.

**PR:** I recall asking C. Robert Cargill about the violent ending of *Sinister* (2012), and he spoke about the need for the pay-off. The earlier ending of *What Keeps You Alive* is arguably bolder...

**CM:** I don’t even see it as being bold, I see it as being a safe choice to be honest, and I think the ending that I went for is by far the bolder version. And the bolder version would have been had I not had you [Brittany/Jules] breathe at the end, but I do, and I wanted to just do that because it’s kind of funny, because it’s something that I very much struggled with — should she die, or should I give the audience a little bit of hope? I just felt the film had been such an amazing battle of wits and strength up until that point, and on the last day of the sound mix, which is basically the final place you get to change your film, I said, “You know what, fuck it. Unmute that — I want her to breathe.” And I feel like it leaves room for the sequel [laughs]. I killed you brutally the last time in *Extraterrestrial*, and you are so blatantly going to die in *It Stains the Sands Red* (2016) (Fig. 4). I don’t know, Jules is a fighter.

**PR:** The audience is often guilty of watching a film and expecting a character to act rationally, to suppress impulses that we ourselves in the context of the story would not necessarily do. This could critique the argument that the earlier ending was the stronger ending, by exposing the unrealistic expectations we have for the behaviour and choices of characters.
BA: It’s almost like when you are watching a film, you are able to have the 20:20 sight that you wouldn’t have if you were in the film — if you were that person in that moment. So because you are sitting at a safe distance and you are analysing it, and you are already thinking ahead, then yeah, your sense of what would be rational in that moment...

CM: Is totally skewed. But for me that’s always a challenge in the writing, of how do I keep this story going? How do I not just have this story be a thirty-minute picture? And I want the audience to have fun and to go along with the ride, and if I can entertain them throughout that journey without losing them to logical gaps that they seek out from a safe distance, then I’ve done my job. But if everyone wants to pounce on a character for not shooting her at the moment she has the chance, well sure I could have wrote that, but that would have been a cop out as well.

I just feel storytelling is a delicate art form, especially a movie like this where there’s two characters for ninety percent of the film. Those are incredibly challenging films to write because you can’t cut to the ‘B’ story and then cut back at a convenient time, which is all every movie ever does now. So when you’re stuck with those characters and they’re not cutting away to any side narrative, of course the audience are going to question her actions. And they would respond differently because they are a different person. And if you’re still thinking that there is an ounce of you that can convince her to drive away before the neighbours show up at dinner, and they’re saying to the character (at the screen), “No, it’s not going to work,” that’s good too. I’m happy with them being angry in that moment because they’re invested, and the key is keeping them invested, whether they like the action or not.

PR: As a storyteller you shouldn’t care whether the audience is happy or not, or rather, pleased with the experience of the film?

BA: Yeah, I think it would get in the way of telling your story.

CM: If I worry about pleasing people and trying to write the happy ending, then I’m totally not wearing my artist hat, I’m wearing my business hat.

BA: I have to think about that as an actor too, if sometimes I am walking on the set with people I haven’t met before, or producers I really respect who have done a lot of work, there’s a part of me that might want to please them, and I just have to tell that part to, “Please leave.” And, “I’m going to just commit to my work in this moment and make choices that serve the work, not the people.” Obviously it’s a collaboration, but if I’m trying
to please people in my art, then again, it will clam me up and make me insecure, and I will not trust my instincts.

**CM:** And you just don’t have time to do that.

**BA:** I think that unfortunately why so many people don’t make things is because, and it’s a feeling I can relate to, so I empathise with it, but it’s because we are so afraid of what other people will think, and our wanting to please other people.

**CM:** Some artists make it half way through and then doubt themselves. And it’s not that they’re doubting themselves, they are worried about other people’s thoughts.

**BA:** Afraid of what the response will be, and yeah, of course we always expect that people are going to hate it for some reason too.

**CM:** And they might, and if they do great. Whatever, onto the next one.

**BA:** You’ll survive. That’s definitely something I’ve admired about Colin ever since I’ve met him, is that he’s somehow been able to not let that get in his way.

**CM:** When I had that moment at thirteen and I realised I wanted to be a filmmaker, it wasn’t so I could get glowing reviews — it was so I could create that world, express myself and tell my story, whatever story that is. The reviews and opinions of people, that’s the worst part of filmmaking — it’s actually letting the film go. I’d be perfectly happy leaving some of my films in a vault that only I could watch them, but that’s not the case. In this business you have to actually let your baby go, and at that point the film is no longer the filmmaker’s, it’s the world’s, and it’s a cruel world I’ll tell you.

**BA:** Yeah, but it’s also really exciting to hear people take away from it their own personal interpretation, and to see a community get built up around a film, and to have people conversing about it and debating it. I think that’s so cool that it has its own life.