



DEAD MAN, SUGAR WOLF, & Z-GRADE PRESENT

SKIN CREEPERS

A DANIEL HOLLIDAY PICTURE

Running time: 16 minutes
Genre: Thriller/Science Fiction/Horror
Country: Australia

ALL ENQUIRIES

Daniel Holliday
DEAD MAN
daniel@danielholliday.com

And where we had thought
to find an abomination,
we shall find a god.

And where we had thought
to slay another,
we shall slay ourselves.

- Joseph Campbell

SYNOPSIS

In SKINCREEPERS, occult journalist Van Markes follows up on a lead: Cotton Rench, a conspiracy theorist who needs her help, is paranoid about a coming alien invasion. It's guys like Cotton, guys that know the "truth", who are targeted by **skincreepers** – human impostors, exact copies "right down to your thoughts" – before the truth can get out. It's only a matter of time before a skin Creeper is sent for Cotton. Van will have to act quickly, but first Cotton needs to convince her.

This insane theory sticks a little deeper for Van, so much that, after a few strange experiences, she's compelled to return to Cotton in the middle of the night with some questions. But she never gets to ask them: two skincreepers ambush our heroes that look exactly like them.

In the struggle, the skincreepers are subdued, bound, and our heroes plan their destruction.

But how can Van bring herself to destroy what looks and thinks just like herself? The plan gets out of hand as one of the skincreepers breaks loose, and they call for backup. But once the reinforcement arrives, it's clear this is far from over. And it starts to dawn on Van that she might not be who she presumed she was all along.

I was broken when I came up with SKINCREEPERS. Having spent three months in late-2016 trying to start a life in New York with my partner of eight years, I failed to make the moves necessary to stay in the country for the duration of my partner's master's program. I took a gamble in disassembling my life that didn't pay off when I wanted it to and was forced to return home to Sydney to wade back through the pieces. I became intimately acquainted with the feeling I channeled into SKINCREEPERS: I need to be better, and it's going to suck on the way there.

The world too seemed to be crying out. The political climate of late-2016 fueled a lot of my early thinking on this. The Left had felt as entitled to the White House as I had to a place in New York. And the falling-short was painful. However, as 2017 began, I grew increasingly suspicious of the outwardly directed anger of the Left, the "side of the aisle" a coastal millennial like myself couldn't help but be culturally aligned with. For the Left, it was all "their" fault, their own pain was caused by an amorphous, alien "them". Where I was turning inward, identifying myself as the impediment to my own progress, the Left turned outward.

SKINCREEPERS began to take shape under the influence of what I saw as the only path to progress: the Left, like me, has to acknowledge that they are the problem.

This latent political undertone fortunately became increasingly muted through the process of rewriting and the collaboration with Co-writer and Producer Bridget Harvey. Bridget and I focused on the more timeless, more universal spiritual concern: that you must destroy yourself for the sake of your best self.

I think Bridget and I share an uncertainty around where self-critique stops and self-loathing begins, and

maybe that's a condition others are dealing with also. For me at least, I needed something to propel me out of nihilistic despair and crippling terror at the sheer unknowability of where I'm headed. In that sense, I think there's understandably a lot of secular spirituality – whether Buddhist, Christian, or simply Stoic in flavour – that's found its way into SKINCREEPERS: that hope for one's future is found in a faith in the present.

The central concern that I intended to have communicated in SKINCREEPERS is that truth is to be found inside and below, not outside and above. We ought to direct our energies within especially when the goal appears to lie without. To crib some language from Christian mystic Simone Weil, we must embrace the downward pull of gravity if we're ever to ascend by the upward pull of grace.

And we can't help but suffer profoundly along the way.

- Daniel Holliday

Technology has led us all toward the creation and cultivation of multiple selves. In that sense, SKINCREEPERS began in the tradition of science fiction with a 'What if?': What would you do if you met your online self?

For Co-writer and Director Daniel Holliday, there was another shade to this 'What if?' "In the path toward personal progress, we inherently have to do violence to ourselves," Holliday relates. "What allows a better, truer self to emerge and prosper is the destruction of an old self. Ample protracted suffering is unavoidable." For Holliday at least, the answer to the 'What if?' is that someone has to die.

Those someones in SKINCREEPERS are occult journalist Van (Sinead Curry) and paranoid conspiracy theorist Cotton (Tristan McKinnon). Both Curry and McKinnon were obvious choices for Holliday, having worked together on the period murder mystery short film *Corner and the Cutman* in 2015. "I'm kind of obsessed with odd couples that the events of a movie force to work together," Holliday says. "Especially in a short where the lines of conflict have to be immediately known by an audience, I wanted contrasting talent to draw out characters fundamentally opposed in their worldviews. I had utmost confidence in Sinead and Tristan to crackle and bristle against each other as these characters in just the right way. It's this chemistry that lends the picture a real life."

The formal approach in SKINCREEPERS started resolving during Holliday's initial research. "Like a lot of people in 2016, I had started to look more critically at my relationship with technology," Holliday recounts. "Laurence Scott's book *The Four-Dimensional Human* provided some early insight into why technology felt increasingly horrific to me. Scott writes that technology is essentially Gothic and is terrifying 'because it preys on our instinctive need always to be able to distinguish between presence and absence ... The Gothic seeks to amplify our vague agitation into mortal terror.'"

This led Holliday to return to the masters of Gothic science-fiction, John Carpenter and David Cronenberg. "I can barely sit still in *Halloween* (1978)." Holliday recalls. "You might just be watching Jamie Lee Curtis walking home from school but you're filled with anxiety. The camera moves in such a way that, even with nothing threatening in the frame, you always feel besieged."

With just a treatment in hand, Holliday sought out friends and previous collaborators, first Co-writer and Producer Bridget Harvey and later Director of Photography T. Oxford for their input. "Daniel first conceived an idea for a short film revolving around John Carpenter-inspired visuals and alien doppelgängers, but what was clear from the get go was that he had much more in mind," Harvey points out. "The question, 'Am I a fraud?' is universally familiar, and we wanted to draw on the imposter syndrome I think everyone experiences at one time or another to create a truly unsettling modern science fiction piece."

"In my initial meeting with Daniel, a core discussion point was about horror and science fiction as political documents, often exploring how the personal and political intersect," Oxford notes. "If you take Hunter S. Thompson's premise that 'politics is the art of controlling your environment', then SKINCREEPERS is a film about both literally controlling a space but also about controlling the larger space that we all live within – one's own identity. It is an attempt to reckon with the self, with what one truly knows about the self, and if there is a future if one destroys the self."

"We wanted to prompt answers to the unanswerable," Harvey says. "'Do I matter?', 'Am I real?' and most critically, 'Do I deserve to be preserved?'"

“One of our guiding principles for SKINCREEPERS was to think of it as a shrunken feature,” Oxford says. “We wanted to embrace the variety of set-pieces and locations, and to hopefully give the impression of a wider world surrounding the events within this house.” This approach was there throughout the writing process, one that Holliday and Harvey went through to excavate the best expression of the core idea.

“We all can point to features that are endowed with ideas, especially in science fiction. But how those can be encoded with precision through a story which is the product of actions made by characters? That was largely opaque to me,” Holliday admits. The difficulty in diving deeper and deeper into the idea that under-girds the picture’s script led to transformative rewriting during pre-production.

“There was an instinctive understanding that, at its core, SKINCREEPERS is equal parts a thinking and feeling movie,” Harvey notes. “We’re asking audiences to come on a strange journey with us, to accept that identity is an ever-evolving, mystifying construct that means nothing and everything simultaneously. So through the script’s extensive rewrites, we had to keep coming back to Van, the vessel for us all to compel introspection in the darkest parts of our souls.”

Van’s shifting relationship to herself and the world was formalised in a thesis around the use of camera in the picture. “Even before finding SKINCREEPERS, I knew that whatever I made this year would have flat camera creeps and be shot anamorphic,” Holliday recalls. “I made note of the subtle dollies in Season 1 of *Stranger Things* (2016), as well as the creep-zooms in *It Follows* (2014). This was an early foothold into getting my head around a ghostly camera, one imbued with the energy of an absent presence.” Movement and height are the two central expressive engines of the camera in SKINCREEPERS, in part because lens selection was limited by the decision to shoot anamorphic. “Once I unlocked the spiritual interplay of gravity and grace inherent in the story, how high the camera was at any moment became the decision of primary import,” Holliday notes.

Perhaps the most striking choice Holliday and Oxford made in the picture’s visual grammar was to bring in copious amounts of bold coloured light. “I looked to *Suspria* (1977) and other works of Italian giallo cinema to find a language for the film wherein colour and light exist on an emotional level.” Oxford recounts. “Daniel and I looked to give each part of this world and each part of the house a unique colour palette that associates with the emotional pitch at that point in the story.” Weaponising colour to render meaning turned the SKINCREEPERS set into an analog for the visible light spectrum, running from cool cyan and turquoise in the living room to a hard red held back behind the house’s rear bedroom door.

“I knew from *The Fog* (1980) and *Escape from New York* (1981) that red and green edging on faces would be big here,” Holliday adds. “But Tim matured this into a far richer and more diverse approach to colour than I would have thought achievable.”

“Other than the script, the first of my original output for SKINCREEPERS was score,” Holliday remembers. These initial musical themes were on-hand during production and proved indispensable for shaping the mood on-set during shooting of the climactic scene. When SKINCREEPERS moved into post, Holliday started from scratch with the picture’s soundtrack. Strung up on a noble piano melody, the finished score is steeped in the theme-driven iconicism of John Carpenter without tipping into nostalgia, embracing the lush maximalism of contemporary epic scores, pioneered by Hans Zimmer. “More than anything I wanted this to feel like a big movie that just happened to be small,” Holliday relates. “I shelved a lot of my natural habits with composition to find a theme structure and textural blend with a dignity that befits the scope of the anamorphic image and the earnestness of where our hero ends up.”



SINEAD CURRY

Van Markes

Sinead Curry is an award-winning Australian actor.

She has performed in films featured at International Festivals such as Palm Springs International, Montreal International, Kinofilm, Long Island Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, Tampa Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, HollyShorts, Newport Beach, Raindance, Festival MIX Milano and Leeds International. Her work has also been seen in Australian Film Festivals Melbourne Fringe, Queer Screen, MetroScreen (Award Winner: Like Breathing), St Kilda and Sydney Film Festival.

Sinead is also a well-established theatre actor, performing at Sydney Fringe Festival, Adelaide Fringe Festival, and Anywhere Festival.

Sinead's notable credits include *iZombie* (2015), *Like Breathing* (2013), and *Deadly Women* (2017).

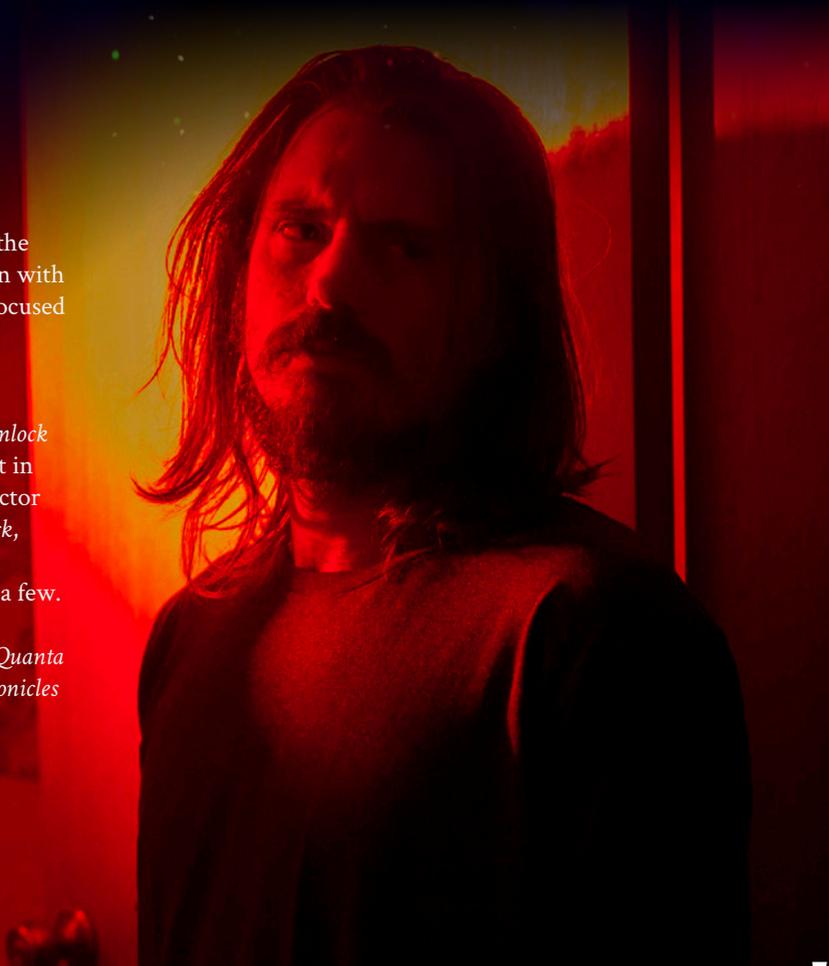
TRISTAN MCKINNON

Cotton Rench

Tristan studied acting at The Actors Pulse and at the Actor's Centre Australia. After an extensive season with Shakespeare On The Green (2008-2013), he has focused his energy on feature film and short film projects.

Tristan has recently toured the United States promoting the successful horror short *Alfred J Hemlock* (2017) at numerous festivals, including Screamfest in Los Angeles. Tristan has received multiple Best Actor awards for his lead performance in *Alfred J Hemlock*, which has also been awarded Best Director, Best Cinematography, and Best Horror Short to name a few.

Tristan's recent credits include *The Sirius* (2016), *Quanta* (2016), and horror cult sensation *Wyrnwood: Chronicles Of the Dead* (2017).



DANIEL HOLLIDAY

Director · Writer · Producer · Composer

At age 11, Daniel Holliday wrote and drew knock-off *Captain Underpants* comics with his best friend under the imprint Holliwood Comics, a portmanteau of their surnames. In the back of a how-to drawing book, Daniel found a list of possible future paths for kids like him. Last on the list: "Film director". He shrugged off the spark reading this gave him, confident it could never happen. Holliwood Comics was enough work as it was.

Born in Sydney, Australia, Daniel's debut short film *Corner and the Cutman* travelled to festivals across North America in 2015, including HollyShorts in Los Angeles and Montreal World Film Festival. He strives to cultivate a holistic directorial style, drawing on his past lives as a musician, photographer, and graphic designer.

BRIDGET HARVEY

Producer · Writer

Bridget is a filmmaker from Sydney, Australia. Since graduating from UNSW in 2015 with a BA in Film Studies and Creative Writing, Bridget has freelanced on short films, web series, and television, most recently Jane Campion's *Top of the Lake: China Girl*.

After seeing *Raiders of the Lost Ark* as a child, Bridget unequivocally knew two things: she wanted to create fun, daring movies that move and inspire audiences, and that all truly great characters must have killer style.

Bridget is currently developing her oeuvre as a writer and director of horror and science fiction whilst collaborating with and supporting her peers as a producer.

T. OXFORD

Director of Photography · Producer

T. Oxford lives and works in Sydney, Australia, serving as cinematographer on short films, music videos, and TVCs.

A graduate of the Australian Film Television and Radio School, Tim's narrative credits include *Port's End* (2017) and *Corner and the Cutman* (2015), his previous collaboration with Daniel Holliday.

When not on set, he can be found haunting the cinemas, used bookstores, camera vendors, and photo darkrooms of this world, both home and overseas.



What was the biggest lesson working on SKINCREEPERS?

DANIEL HOLLIDAY: A deep and deliberate prep period marginally improves the possibility of executing on the “best version”, but more importantly it substantially increases the quality of the “worst version”. Handling doppelgängers on an often claustrophobic set, the team’s rigorous prep meant that even if we lost our heads, we couldn’t lose our movie.

BRIDGET HARVEY: Knowing the right moment to step in, and the right moment to let others take the lead. Working on a short means working with limited resources, time, and money, and those limitations can often lead to a cacophony of voices pulling in opposite directions. It was a lesson in trusting my voice as being the right one at times, and trusting the expertise and instincts of my team at others.

T. OXFORD: We all learned from SKINCREEPERS the importance of pre-production and research, going beyond the nuts and bolts of preparation for shooting. We all had a high degree of authorship and comparing the finished film with my own visual journal from the period, it surprises me to see how much of that preparatory research was infused into the final work, often without my conscious realisation.

Why is science fiction important?

DH: Humans are too defensive and too anxious to look critically at themselves. We need abstraction away from the familiar to learn lessons about where we find ourselves. History and science fiction are these abstractions.

BH: Science fiction literature and cinema has always reflected the core of society, especially in periods of strain and flux. The genre has always provided a space to ask difficult questions, provide hope, and of course entertain.

TO: We buy into a world with new conventions, strange inventions, lurid planets, and hulking spacecraft. Through a prism, we are forced to ask questions about the fragility of our existence, our perception of ourselves and experience of time and reality, of how we interact with the natural and potentially supernatural world.

What movies left you with a terror you couldn’t shake?

DH: The American remake of *The Ring* left me pretty ruined as a kid, same with *Hide and Seek*. I could never get to sleep after watching *The X-Files* when I was 5 or 6 either. I was scared of being scared for a while.

BH: Babak Anvari’s 2016 horror *Under the Shadow* is the last movie I can remember feeling truly unnerved. *It Follows* similarly had me shook for a long time, and to round it out, I can’t go past *The Shining*.

TO: Recently, the most lingering horror that I’ve seen was the conclusion of *Twin Peaks: The Return*. A woman at a door, another woman calls out, a final piercing scream. Each an innocuous ingredient used perfectly to leave a final haunting moment.

Could SKINCREEPERS become a feature film?

DH: SKINCREEPERS was really tailored to the short form, so much so that certain rules of the world are only there to make certain moves possible in a sixteen minute runtime. That being said, I’m still kicking around a lot of the top-level ideas, some of which we barely touched. I’m definitely keen to find the story that is able to keep expressing those ideas. That story might be pretty close, but it also might not. I guess I’m interested in the feature-length spiritual successor more than nutting out a straight adaptation, continuation, or whatever.

FULL CREDITS

Directed by
DANIEL HOLLIDAY

Written by
DANIEL HOLLIDAY
& BRIDGET HARVEY

Produced by
BRIDGET HARVEY
DANIEL HOLLIDAY
T. OXFORD

Director of Photography
T. OXFORD

Sound Design
SIMON ALLEN

Production Design
NOEL MYAING

Music by
DANIEL HOLLIDAY

Van/Markes SINEAD CURRY
Cotton/Rench TRISTAN McKINNON
Anna ELEANORE KNOX
Runner/Double for Ms Curry HANNAH LEHMANN
Double for Mr McKinnon BRADLEY FREE
Woman on phone SONYA KERR

Background BEN RICE
ELENI SCHUMACHER
MICHAEL THOMPSON
JOHN PEGIOS
ZEKE DE JONG

Camera Operator T. OXFORD
Camera Assistant TOM GILLIGAN

Production Recordist SIMON ALLEN

Standby Props NOEL MYAING

Production Assistant BEN LING

Stills Photographer LUCY ZHANG
ALEXI KARAHALIOU
BEN LING

