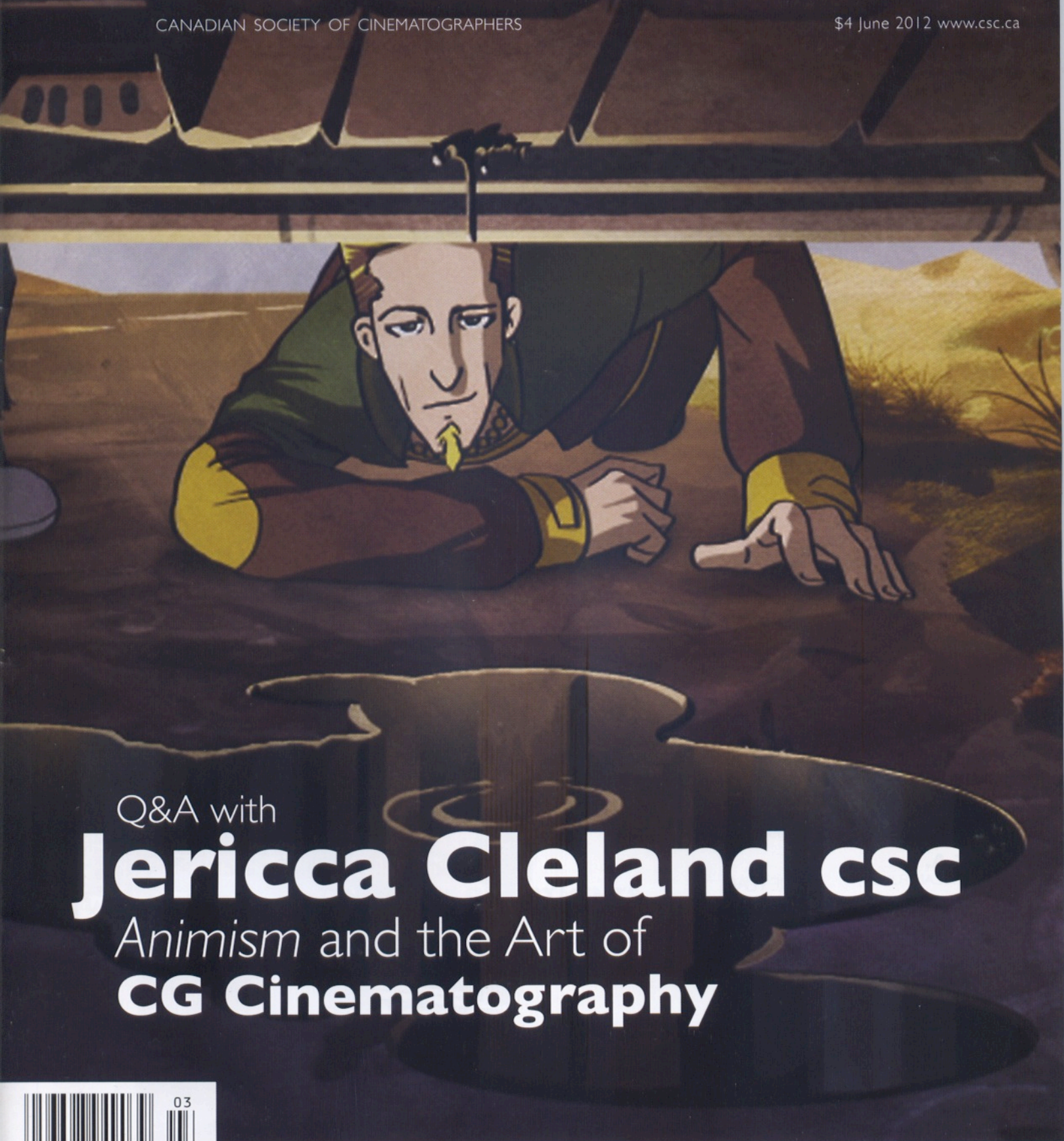


# CANADIAN CINEMATOGRAPHER

CANADIAN SOCIETY OF CINEMATOGRAPHERS

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Q&A with

## **Jericca Cleland csc**

*Animism and the Art of*  
**CG Cinematography**



Lighting *Way Off Broadway* • Art Director Patrick Banister

# Animism

and  
the Art of

# CCG Cinematography

By Fanen Chiahemien

**C**G cinematographer Jericca Cleland csc's latest venture is *Animism: The Gods' Lake*, an animated fantasy television series for teens. The graphic novel-style series centres on a young woman's quest to restore order in a chaotic world using her special powers. Cleland got her start working at Pixar in 1996 as a developer in the game industry before crossing over into computer animation (3D animation). She went on to design camera and staging for *Toy Story 2* (Golden Globe, Best Picture) and *Finding Nemo* (Academy Award, Best Animated Feature). One of Cleland's most recent credits is as cinematographer on the 2011 animated comedy *Arthur Christmas*, which was a box office and critical success – the film garnered nominations and wins at various awards, including the Annie Awards, the BAFTAs, and the Golden Globes, to name just a few. Cleland talks to *Canadian Cinematographer* about her work on *Animism* and explains the process of cinematography in animation.

**Canadian Cinematographer:** How did you approach the cinematography for *Animism*?

**Jericca Cleland:** Well, it's a small budget, but there's a real opportunity to have a lot of creative freedom. Within the constraints of the project we can really exercise a great relationship between the production design, the cinematography, the staging and the editing. They're all working really closely together to support the story through cinematic design. Our approach to it is very similar to the cinematic feel that you would have in live action, so we're still designing it from a standpoint of space and lighting. You're bringing the discipline of cinematography into a 2D medium, which is really interesting.

**CC:** What was your process in pre-production?

**JC:** In pre-production I developed a cinematic design, which

outlined the use of filming style, composition, shape, language, colour, light, and staging to support the story. This involved reading the story and determining, "Okay, so there are three major storylines, and I want each of them to have an identity in terms of cinematic feel while still having unity in overall style." One storyline is designed to be rectilinear and highly symmetrical with deep space shot with wider lenses, and a cool, predominantly blue colour palette. The second storyline is meant to feel like it was shot on longer lenses with soft shapes and compositions that are more organic, less symmetrical, and more planar. It's designed to be warmer, with more of a sense of a glowing light and reds in the palette. The third storyline is more asymmetrical, more dynamic, unexpected. Given what this cinematic design implies in terms of colour, shape, and architecture, the set design and the character design all need to support what we want in the filming. So preproduction was about storyboarding out that vision and working through the overall production design in support of the visual storytelling. The challenge in 2D is understanding the visual choices well enough to communicate the desired space, perspective, lenses, depth of field, and lighting despite working in flat paintings.

**CC:** How are the images created?

**JC:** So we start out drawing digital storyboards which represent the general shot design and staging. Based on this and on further scene planning, we determine our camera setups and master shots in each location. The background paintings are done digitally in Photoshop, which allows us to also easily relight locations for different times of day and moods. Once we have the master shot paintings done, we derive all of the other backgrounds needed for each scene. Then we paint the characters and props in proper perspective for each shot based on the staging and action required. Once the art assets are all created, we can put them



Animation: The God's' Lala images courtesy of Zeros2Heroes Media, Inc.

into shot production. So let's say we have a character and a car, a diner and a street. For these things to feel like they're positioned in space, the Photoshop file will have layers which are taken to [Adobe] After Effects. Then we position the character, the car, the diner, the street or whatever in space the way we need to in order for the CG camera to frame and move through them as intended. Everything is done digitally with two-dimensional elements on flats using a computer camera to simulate the kind of movement that we want to create. The effect of the lens we want is largely achieved through controlling perspective, relative scale of objects, and depth of field.

**CC:** How does the camera come into play?

**JC:** The camera is in After Effects, so it's a computer camera with a computer camera lens. In some cases the camera's not moving, it's just static, and the relationship between the foreground and the background is a spatial one that you just set up based on the eye, saying, "I want this to feel like a 35 mm lens." But in the case where we have camera movement happening, we do have a lens, and the camera physically moves through space, with 2D elements placed on cards in space to replicate how it would feel in reality.

**CC:** So you work with actual lenses?

**JC:** I do work with a lens palette, but because we're in 2D on this show, they're somewhat theoretical. But we still want that sense of discipline over the lenses. I typically use a broader palette of

lenses in CG, but on this show, the reduced set will approximate 24 mm, 35, 50, and 80 with some additional special cases. It's really been interesting for me because I've never worked in 2D before in flat paintings, so it's been a very interesting transition of taking CG cinematography with its high correlation to live action in terms of lenses and movement, and bringing that aesthetic into something that is painted. I think we're pushing the medium quite far, because you don't usually see this kind of cinematic discipline in animation.

**CC:** How would you characterize the main difference between the role of a CG cinematographer in animation versus live action?

**JC:** Cinematography has got a different lifespan in CG than it does in live action where you might come on to a show three weeks before the shoot, shoot it and then step off. Animation is different, you work it in stages, starting rough and progressively refining. The role that we consider a cinematographer starts earlier and goes longer in animation. And the decisions happen a little bit more spread out. In live action, most of the visuals in terms of camera and lighting come together the moment that you go to camera. But in CG cinematography, I have to make the lens decision at an early stage, and I have to think about how the lighting is going to affect the composition, or depth of field is going to direct the eye even though they're not fully executed at that stage. So it's being able to break down the component visual decisions along the production stages and imagining them together in your mind, seeing from the early rough versions through to the end result in support of the intended final vision.

**CC:** Can you talk about the differences between CG cinematography on a 2D animation project versus a 3D animation project like *Arthur Christmas*?

**JC:** When you're working in 3D animation you have a certain amount of physicality and space, it's very similar to live action. When you move into 2D, the camera becomes hypothetical in a sense, although in a 2D/3D blend like *Animism*, there are some cases of a camera with a lens on it. On a show like *Arthur Christmas* the difference between working in animation and live action is very small. Characters are real size, cameras move through real time and space with real lenses. Working in 2D there's a little bit more of a leap of having to hold in your mind very firmly what you're trying to create and then problem-solving on the screen to get what you want. We're bringing the same discipline that you use in cinematography in live action in terms of considering lens, perspective, depth of field, relationship between foreground and background, atmosphere, lighting and all of those aspects, and bringing that into the paintings. Basically, it takes the same eye of the cinematographer and the same considerations for staging, lighting, camera and movement, and adapting them into 2D.

**CC:** What are some of the pitfalls of shooting a 2D show like *Animism*?

**JC:** In 3D computer animation, you have real space that exists within the virtual world created in the computer. If something needs to be 10 feet away, you put it 10 feet away. When you're working in 2D you don't have the same real space that you have in a CG animated film. If you were shooting something like *Ratatouille* and you want an over-the-shoulder of the rat on the chef or something like that, you set them a real, physical distance apart on a given lens and your camera works the same way a live action camera works—you get correct perspective and scale for free. But in 2D those relationships are theoretical; you want them to feel the same as they would if you were shooting it for real. So it comes down to having a very strong sense of what those things should look like and staying disciplined and clear about the composition choices, the spatial choices, and keeping an eye out that the lenses feel real.

**CC:** How do you work with your crew when doing this type of cinematography?

**JC:** Regardless of medium, I work very tightly with the production designer because the sets need to support the intended filming and staging, to make sure that the goals of the production design and the goals of the cinematography are aligned. If we want a sense of deep space and symmetry, the sets have to have the appropriate scale and depth and architecture that will support the kind of composition that we want and the kinds of lenses that we want to use. By the same token, I work very closely with the editor because you don't want to shoot a bunch of stuff that won't work in the cut. I want to make sure the way that we're planning on shooting is going to work in terms of the cut so that we are all trying to tell the same story. And the value of the image is up on the screen and not on the cutting room floor.

**CC:** When you talk about the sets, you're obviously talking about drawings on a computer.

**JC:** When I shoot live action and when I shoot in 2D, for me the spaces are still real. They live in my head in a very real way, so when I think about, say an exterior of a small town, I'm thinking about it as a real set. We want the relationships between where that car is parked or where that building is or where the fence is or which part of town is leading out of town and which part of town is leading in – these things, although we're representing them essentially on paper, they still need to work spatially. So I treat them and we talk about them like they're real, and we think about the staging as if it's physical, and then we represent what we need to in the actual image.

**CC:** Is there a large pool of CG cinematographers in Canada?

**JC:** In Canada, there's a very, very small number of CG cinematographers. There's a difference between head of layout, who runs the camera crew and oversees that stage of production, and a CG cinematographer. It's similar to the difference between your head camera operator and your DP. There's been a lot of confusion over what it means to be a director of photography in CG. As in live action, there are some DPs that are very focused on lighting and others that are very much focused on camera. When I work on a show it's very important to me that I design the camera, staging and lighting together so that everything works in synergy. There's a growing awareness in the industry that this medium has tremendous potential for cinematography. I'm hoping to see more commitment to it and more of a discipline in the art form as well as giving people who have been working in this craft that title and recognizing that role.

**CC:** So how do you identify within the industry?

**JC:** I really strongly identify myself as a cinematographer. Even though in animation the role is a little bit more expanded because you start earlier and you go longer – sometimes two or three years on a show – I feel like it's a very similar relationship in terms of what the director relies on the cinematographer to do and the role the DP technically has in guarding the entire image. I find that when I approach CG cinematography, I always go back to what I've done in live action in the way that I think about it in terms of space and motion. It doesn't matter what medium you're working in, the role of the cinematographer still exists and the overall function of bringing a story to the screen through camera, staging and lighting is relevant no matter what you're doing. The cinematographer's eye, sense of space, lens, light, movement and all of those things that we bring to live action translates to animation. It's really the same thing. That set of visual storytelling skills is what we as cinematographers bring to a film and it's a vital role in any medium.

*Animism: The Gods' Lake will air on the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network starting this fall.* 🍁

