Thomas Lamarre

Japanese studies, animation theory, translation, and media ecologies

Thomas Lamarre is a scholar of Japanese culture and media whose books connect the close examination of images and texts with the technologies, institutions, and forms of life that make them possible. He is best known for The Anime Machine (2009) and The Anime Ecology (2018), two substantial studies that helped make Japanese animation a site for developing media theory. His earlier work concerned Heian calligraphy and poetry and the cinematic writings of Tanizaki Jun'ichirō. Alongside those books, he has translated Japanese fiction and French philosophy, edited scholarly collections, and taught across Japanese studies, art history, and communication. He joined the University of Chicago in 2020 after a long career at McGill and a documented affiliation with Duke. He is now Chicago's Gordon J. Laing Distinguished Service Professor and a professor emeritus at McGill.[1, 2, 3]

The route into that career was unusually circuitous. Lamarre studied biology and French literature at Georgetown, completed a doctorate in oceanology in France, and subsequently trained in East Asian languages and civilizations at Chicago. His encounters with manga and anime in Japan preceded their widespread acceptance as university subjects. By the early 1990s he was teaching them at McGill while also developing historical work on Japanese writing. More recently, collaborations on animal life, plant intelligence, and environmental thought have brought the scientific and humanities parts of his formation into renewed contact.[4, 5, 6]

His work is difficult to capture under the label "anime expert." A characteristic research problem is how to describe an object without stripping away the relations that constitute it: a poem's brushwork, an animated image's layers, a television series' distribution, or an animal's conversion into data. That continuity is an interpretation of his published practice, not a claim that he planned the whole trajectory in advance. The documented career contains changes of scale, collaborative detours, and books that became different books in the writing.

Biology, French, and the move into Japanese studies

The official account of Lamarre's education begins with biology and French literature at Georgetown University and a docteur ès sciences in oceanology from the Université d'Aix-Marseille II. Chicago records his A.M. in 1987 and Ph.D. in 1992. These are successive areas of training, not evidence for a simple conversion narrative in which science was abandoned for culture. Public sources do not adequately establish why he changed fields, how the transition was financed, or which private circumstances accompanied it.[7, 8]

The combination nevertheless helps locate the skills that became visible in his work. Japanese-language historical research required textual and cultural competence. French enabled a sustained translating practice and engagement with continental philosophy. Scientific training supplied a further vocabulary for relations among organisms, environments, and technologies. The PlantMediaCollective's biography explicitly connects his recent nuclear-ecology research with earlier training in cell biology, microbiology, and ocean sciences. It is firmer evidence of continuity than retrospectively turning the oceanology doctorate into a prediction of every later book.[9]

Lamarre credits Chicago's mass-culture anthropology and workshops with informing his research. In Japan, he collected material while living in a corporate men's dormitory, sharing manga and watching Dragon Ball. Francophone comics had preceded this encounter. His recollection identifies neither the corporation nor an employment relationship.[10]

That recollection supplies something a publication list cannot: an encounter with the uses of media before their conversion into academic categories. Watching a serial together, exchanging material, and returning to it in conversation differ from treating an isolated artwork as the expression of a nation. The later emphasis on circulation and collective life is consistent with this experience, although the evidence does not permit a claim that the dormitory alone caused his intellectual direction.

McGill: teaching, historical scholarship, and editorial work

He began teaching anime and manga at McGill in 1992, recalling initial student resistance and much greater acceptance a decade later.[11]

McGill supplied a durable setting in which several practices could coexist. Historical Japanese studies, moving-image analysis, and philosophical translation were not successive jobs replacing one another. His work crossed East Asian studies, art history, and communication studies, with editorial roles in the Mechademia annual and Minnesota's Parallel Futures series.[12, 13]

An archived McGill publication list shows the editorial labor around the monographs. It records Visuality in Modern Japan, with Joseph Murphy; a Between Cinema and Anime issue; Impacts of Modernities, with Kang Nae-hui; and Against Preemptive War, with Tani Barlow, Yukiko Hanawa, and Donald Lowe. Later entries identify work on Mechademia with Christopher Bolton and Frenchy Lunning. These are concrete collaborations in making scholarly forums, rather than evidence that all contributors constituted a single school.[14]

His essay "Otaku Movement" appeared in Japan After Japan (2006), edited by Tomiko Yoda and Harry Harootunian. The collection placed popular culture alongside questions of recession, national identity, labor, and the organization of postwar knowledge. It locates Lamarre within a critical-Japan-studies conversation extending well beyond animation.[15]

These institutional arrangements matter to the mechanics of the career. Teaching supplied recurring occasions to formulate problems for different readers. Journals and edited volumes made room for arguments shorter or more collective than a monograph. University presses carried difficult books and translations to specialized audiences. The record supports an account of that infrastructure. It does not support claims about his salary, private wealth, daily writing hours, or the financial ease of any particular period.

Uncovering Heian Japan: reading the written surface

Lamarre's first major monograph, Uncovering Heian Japan: An Archaeology of Sensation and Inscription (2000), studied court poetry and calligraphy in early Japan. It challenged the retrospective treatment of Heian culture as the origin of a homogeneous national language and identity. His method combined textual interpretation, visual attention to writing, and political history. The written surface mattered: calligraphic gesture, stylistic differentiation, and the relations between characters and images could not be reduced to the transcription of speech.[16]

The book's materials include rebuses, kana, and Ki no Tsurayuki's poetics. It received the 2002 John Whitney Hall Book Prize.[17]

These particular objects distinguish the project from an abstract denunciation of nationalism. Lamarre was examining the materials from which later accounts of cultural unity had been made.

This early work also complicates the conventional picture of his career as a migration from old literature into new media. Writing already appeared as a material arrangement of perception and social relations. The relevant comparison with the later animation research is therefore methodological: close examination of expressive technique could disturb an apparently self-evident cultural category. It would be excessive to say that calligraphy and anime are the same medium, or that one offers an unbroken national genealogy for the other. His resistance to precisely that kind of cultural continuity is part of what makes the juxtaposition useful.

Shadows on the Screen: translating Tanizaki's cinema

Shadows on the Screen: Tanizaki Jun'ichirō on Cinema and "Oriental" Aesthetics appeared in 2005. Lamarre assembled extensively annotated translations of Tanizaki's film-related writing and accompanied them with substantial commentary. Much of the translated work dated from 1917–1926. A novelist often encountered in English through his later fiction and In Praise of Shadows became accessible as a participant in early cinema and its experiments with race, sexuality, perception, and modernity.[18]

The book is a particularly clear instance of translation operating as research. Lamarre did not merely attach a theoretical reading to an already familiar English corpus. He helped

constitute the corpus readers could examine. The relation between translated text and commentary allowed an interpretation to be checked against material that had previously been less available to those readers.

Anne McKnight's contemporary review identifies the importance of that alternating structure. It unsettles the familiar account of a decisive Tanizaki "return" from Westernized modernism to Japanese tradition. Filmic superimpositions, doubled images, and changing sensory experiences continue across the apparent divide. McKnight also asks for fuller treatment of the relation between American Orientalism and Japanese cinematic responses. The review records both what the book opened and a question it left available for further work.[19]

The stakes extend to Lamarre's own practice. Japanese material is not simply brought in to illustrate a theory developed elsewhere. Reconstructing the corpus changes the historical and conceptual question. Translation here joins textual scholarship, cinema history, and interpretation in one extended task, an arrangement that would remain important in his later work with French philosophy.

The Anime Machine: cels, layers, and the problem of movement

Published in 2009, The Anime Machine: A Media Theory of Animation begins from the constructed image. Cels, animation stands, compositing, the distribution of drawings across layers, and techniques for producing motion receive sustained attention. Its case studies range across Miyazaki Hayao, Anno Hideaki, Murakami Takashi, and CLAMP. This range keeps the book from being simply an account of a single auteur or studio.[20]

A central distinction concerns two orientations to movement. "Cinematism" names a tendency toward movement into depth and a world organized for a mobile viewpoint. "Animetism" directs attention to movement across and between image planes. A foreground, a character, and a background can move differently; the interval between layers becomes productive. These are analytic tendencies, not a rule that every live-action film belongs to one category and every animated work to the other.[21]

The difference changes what a critic looks for. Instead of asking only what a character represents, one can ask how a character is separated from its environment, how the eye distributes attention across a frame, and how an image makes movement felt without continuously redrawing everything. "Limited" animation need not be assessed solely as an unsuccessful approximation of fuller movement. Its arrangements may generate a different relation among stillness, movement, and looking.[22]

The "machine" in the title consequently exceeds the camera stand. It names a productive organization of forces and relations, including technical processes and the possibilities of perception they sustain. Calling it a machine does not mean that a device mechanically

dictates a single social meaning. The book's wager is that technical organization has explanatory weight that neither national-cultural symbolism nor narrative interpretation can simply absorb.[23]

Its account of CLAMP's Chobits also examines gender and desire: the gynoid mediates desire rather than merely filling a male protagonist's lack.[24]

A useful way to understand this wager is to imagine two analyses of the same image. One follows a story's conflict over technology. Another follows how the image itself arranges a viewer's relation to space and movement. The analyses can coexist, but the second may reveal something the first leaves untouched.

Reception and the limits of the machine

Lamarre's conceptual ambition also attracted objections. Caleb Simmons's ImageTexT review praises the concrete analyses while questioning whether the abstract machine can be treated as sufficiently independent of the social and historical forces already folded into it. The objection is consequential: a method designed to escape one determinism can establish another if its analytic starting point is granted too much autonomy.[25]

Kathryn Dunlap's Rhizomes review extends the discussion of layered images and spectator positions toward three-dimensional cinema.[26]

Taken together, these responses show a framework being tested beyond anime interpretation. Whether perceptual form adequately explains political consequences remains an open question.

Animal figures, racial ordering, and the Speciesism essays

While developing animation theory, Lamarre was also examining how animated animals participate in political worlds. "Speciesism, Part I: Translating Races into Animals in Wartime Animation" appeared in Mechademia in 2008. Its problem is more specific than the observation that cartoons contain racist stereotypes. It asks what happens when distinctions among human populations are reorganized through distinctions between species.[27]

This shift matters because an animal can be recruited into an apparently inclusive community while that community remains hierarchical. A cheerful multispecies ensemble does not automatically establish equality. The critical task is to examine the relations it makes seem natural or desirable. The connection with his earlier studies of national formation lies in attention to the expressive operations through which a collective is assembled, rather than in assuming that all representations repeat an identical ideology.

The series continued with "Tezuka Osamu and the Multispecies Ideal" in 2010 and "Neoteny and the Politics of Life" in 2011. The sequence moves from wartime racial

ordering to the ambitions and difficulties of multispecies life and the political stakes of youthful or cute bodies. These essays should remain distinct publications rather than being collapsed into a single argument about animal metaphor.[28, 29]

His contribution on wartime animation and multiethnic nationalism to The Politics of Culture: Around the Work of Naoki Sakai places this inquiry in another collaborative setting. It connects animation studies with the critique of cultural and national boundaries.[30]

Translation alongside theory: 2012–2023

Lamarre's translations are a substantial part of his production, with different kinds of collaboration and responsibility. Kawamata Chiaki's Death Sentences appeared in English in 2012, translated jointly by Lamarre and Kazuko Y. Behrens. The novel's dangerous poem and its circulation make it an apt neighbor to his interest in media effects, but the fiction is Kawamata's work; a resemblance to Lamarre's research concerns should not erase the author or co-translator.[31]

His translation of Muriel Combes's Gilbert Simondon and the Philosophy of the Transindividual includes a preface and afterword. Simondon's vocabulary helps pose a question recurrent in Lamarre's work: how do individuals and collectives come into being through relations, rather than entering those relations as already completed units? The bibliographic record distinguishes a 2012 release from a 2013 copyright date. The book is a translation of Combes's interpretation of Simondon, not a direct translation of Simondon by Lamarre.[32]

David Lapoujade's William James: Empiricism and Pragmatism, released in December 2019 with a 2020 imprint, likewise includes Lamarre's framing work. Its attention to experience and relations supplies another philosophical conversation for media research. The publisher specifically identifies his afterword's engagement with materialist ontology, affect, and epistemology. There is a practical connection here: introductions and afterwords are spaces in which a translator can explain what becomes possible when a work enters a new linguistic and disciplinary setting.[33]

In 2023, Minnesota published Isabelle Stengers's Making Sense in Common, translated and introduced by Lamarre. The book concerns the practices through which people think and act together under ecological and political pressure. Its relation to his environmental research is close, but translation remains an encounter with another thinker's project, not proof that all positions in the translated work are his own.[34]

These activities also prevent a misleading chronology. French philosophy did not arrive only after his work on anime, and translation was not a retirement from original scholarship. Historical translation, literary translation, and philosophical translation overlap different stages of the career. They demand differing judgments about idiom, technical vocabulary, explanatory apparatus, and what readers can reasonably be expected

to know.

The Anime Ecology: television, bodies, and distribution

The Anime Ecology: A Genealogy of Television, Animation, and Game Media appeared in 2018. Where The Anime Machine foregrounded production and image organization, the later book examined television, distribution, and media infrastructures. Its three-part architecture moves from relations between screens and brains to a history of television and then to family broadcast, home theater, game-play, and portable-interface complexes.[35]

The 1997 Pokémon broadcast incident brings flashing images, bodily responses, and the regulation of viewing into the inquiry.[36] The question exceeds an episode's content. His later Cornell presentation examined infrastructure, sensibility, and power.[37]

The book's treatment of television also resists an easy succession in which "new media" simply replaces broadcasting. Animation moves among television, video, games, portable devices, and online circulation. The connections matter as much as the boundaries. The 2017 article "Platformativity: Media Studies, Area Studies" states a related problem in terms of the relations between media platforms and human beings, including individual and collective formation.[38]

Simon Gough's review draws attention to the book's use of Japanese television scholarship and its analysis of franchises including Crayon Shin-chan, Detective Conan, .hack, and Megami Tensei. Those cases permit investigation of arrangements that are larger than an individual program yet cannot be understood adequately as a list of commodities. Television is a historically changing connection among media and social practices, not merely a rectangular object in a room.[39]

For Lamarre's working method, the expansion creates a demanding problem of scale. Detailed formal reading must coexist with histories of distribution and distinctions among kinds of infrastructure. An account that stays entirely inside a scene misses its circulation; an account that sees only a global industry loses the particular operations of images and interfaces. His books work between those levels, with the risk that the conceptual apparatus can become more difficult to follow than any single case.

How one research project became several books

In a March 2024 interview, Lamarre explained that The Anime Machine began as an oversized project encompassing production, distribution, consumption, and circulation. Division produced The Anime Ecology, which itself narrowed to Japanese television. Further material remained for provisional projects called The Anime Life and The Anime World.[40]

This account is valuable because it replaces the appearance of a perfectly sequenced intellectual program with the ordinary constraints of research and publication. Selection,

cutting, and rescoping are part of the work. The projected titles describe plans at the time of the interview; they are not included here as published books.

He also emphasizes anime's awkward disciplinary fit and Guattari's importance alongside Deleuze, retaining psychoanalytic and Marxist problems within the inquiry.[41]

Duke and Chicago: appointments, teaching, and new collaborations

The transition from McGill to Chicago includes a Duke affiliation that abbreviated biographies can obscure. A January 2019 announcement of Duke's Critical Asian Humanities program names Lamarre among its faculty, and a 2020 Duke thesis records him on its committee. His William James translator biography identifies him as a professor in Duke's Department of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies. These establish work at Duke; they do not establish precise appointment endpoints or warrant inventing a clean sequence of resignations and moves.[42, 43, 44]

Chicago announced him as new faculty in 2020. The Gordon J. Laing Distinguished Service Professorship followed in July 2021. His institutional location spans Cinema and Media Studies, East Asian Languages and Civilizations, and the College, while the McGill emeritus affiliation preserves the earlier career. He had been elected a fellow of the Royal Society of Canada in 2016.[45, 46, 47]

The changing affiliations enlarge the settings in which the research can be taught and discussed. His earlier historical and linguistic expertise remains active in the newer media and environmental work, and teaching remains one of the ways that different audiences enter those questions.

Plants, nuclear ecologies, and Digital Animalities

The Neubauer Collegium's Phytological Critique, a 2023–2026 project, makes the recent collaborative turn concrete. Lamarre works in a group including Michael Fisch, Stacey Moran, Adam Nocek, and Vicki Kirby, among others. The project brings plant intelligence into conversation with computational and environmental sciences and philosophical critique. Its collective composition is important: the inquiry requires encounters among fields, rather than an individual scholar simply declaring a new expertise.[48]

The Green Heresies conference of October 3–4, 2025, combined discussions and screenings with support from several Chicago institutions, including the Neubauer Collegium, the Committee on Environment, Geography and Urbanization, the Franke Institute, and the Film Studies Center. This is a visible part of the practice's material support: convening people, organizing formats, and obtaining institutional space for questions that cross disciplinary boundaries.[49]

Digital Animalities: Mediating Life in an Age of Planetary Domestication, coedited with Jody Berland, was published on July 21, 2026. Its organization around capturing, playing, and consuming extends the investigation from animal images toward technologically mediated animal lives. Contributors include scholars working on histories of science, media, environments, and human–animal relations. The collection is a new collaborative publication, even though some faculty biographies still describe it as forthcoming.[50]

The relationship to the earlier Speciesism essays is substantial without being identical. Wartime animated animals raise questions about political membership and hierarchy. Digital capture, environmental monitoring, entertainment, and consumption raise additional questions about how living beings become available to knowledge and intervention. The object has expanded from representation toward the infrastructures that participate in organizing life.

Current institutional biographies also identify Half Life: Radiation and Animation as an ongoing project and connect it to nuclear disasters and the agency of radioactivity. No completed publication of that book was verified for this profile. PlantMediaCollective's account is particularly useful here because it links the nuclear-ecology work to Lamarre's scientific training without making the recent projects seem either a complete break or the inevitable fulfillment of his youth.[51, 52]

Reading the career, and its remaining gaps

Across this record, Lamarre's practice combines several kinds of labor: constructing and translating a corpus; examining small technical or formal operations; moving between Japanese and European intellectual traditions; teaching; editing; and convening interdisciplinary research. Their proportions change, but none can be reduced to the publicity role of explaining anime to outsiders.

One can also see recurring limits that a profile should preserve. The sources do not provide a reliable reconstruction of his childhood, household, private finances, or ordinary working day. His accounts of formation are retrospective. Institutional biographies sometimes lag behind publication dates, and an announced project is not a finished book. The theoretical terms are contested instruments, not results that every subsequent scholar must accept.

A productive reading order depends on the question. Shadows on the Screen makes the labor of translation and historical reconstruction especially visible. The Anime Machine is the central encounter with image construction. The Anime Ecology expands that encounter into television and distribution. The Speciesism essays and Digital Animalities trace related but changing questions about life, hierarchy, and mediation. The early Heian book remains essential to understanding why material forms of expression were part of Lamarre's work before anime became its best-known subject.

As of November 2026, the career remains open-ended: teaching and translation continue alongside published collaborations and unfinished research. Its most demonstrable

continuity lies in the sustained effort to make a research object more accurately describe the relations through which it exists, while retaining enough technical, historical, and linguistic specificity to prevent those relations from becoming a metaphor for everything.

Sources and bibliographic notes

The profile draws on primary institutional records, publisher records, interviews, scholarly publications, and identified reviews. Interpretive connections between projects are the profile's synthesis. Chinese renderings of English book titles in the companion edition are descriptive, not claims about authorized Chinese editions.

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