

Reverting Animal in Post-Anthropocentrism Character Design: A case study of the Papuan bird of paradise (cenderawasih papua)

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Abstract

This study examines the redesign of the Papuan Cenderawasih bird character through a post-anthropocentric approach in visual arts. As an endemic animal of Indonesia, the Cenderawasih represents the ecological richness and local cultural values that are often reduced by a human-centric perspective. This study uses post-anthropocentric theory and exploratory methods within a practice-led research framework to evaluate the dominance of anthropocentric representations in character design. The results show that the visualisation of Cenderawasih can be developed as an independent non-human entity, presenting a reverting animal strategy to restore the essence of animals in contemporary art practices based on ecological ethics.

Keywords: Post-anthropocentrism; character design; the Papuan Bird of Paradise (Cenderawasih bird); reverting animal.

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1.0 Introduction

The development of character design in the visual arts, animation, and creative industries shows a strong tendency to position animals as symbolic, aesthetic, or functional objects. In many visual representations, animals are anthropomorphised by being assigned human traits, behaviours, or expressions, or used as symbols of cultural identity and as visual commodities (DiMarco & Ruppert, 2022). This approach demonstrates the dominance of the anthropocentric paradigm, a perspective that places humans at the centre of value and as the main subject in the ecological order (Plumwood, 2002).

The Papuan Bird of Paradise of Cenderawasih, as one of Indonesia's endemic species, is often represented in visual media as an icon of beauty, exoticism, and local identity. However, these representations tend to ignore the animal's ecological context and its intrinsic existence (Willert & Knudsen, 2025). An icon is a relation between a sign and its object based on some similarity rule (Rodríguez Higuera, 2024). The dominance of Cenderawasih's iconisation makes it a visual subject tailored to human interests, thereby obscuring its ecological relations and values as a living being. In this context, the image of the Cenderawasih is more reflective of cultural constructions outside Papua, especially from non-Papuan perspectives, which often position Papua as an exotic and marginalised object. In response to human dominance in visual narratives of animals, a post-anthropocentric approach has developed in fields such as cultural studies, ecocriticism, and contemporary art. This approach aims to shift the focus of representation from humans as the centre to the recognition of non-human agency (Haraway, 2008; Giuliani, 2025). In the visual arts, this encourages the creation of works

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that elevate ecological entities as equal and autonomous and construct ethical interspecies narratives.

This research highlights the development of the Papuan Cenderawasih character as a case study using the reverting animal strategy. This strategy refers to the conceptual and artistic process of restoring animal subjectivity in character design by rejecting symbolic representations that serve solely human interests. Through a practice-led research-based visual exploration, this research aims to produce Cenderawasih character designs that reflect the ecological essence, natural behaviour, and social structure of the species. This research is expected to contribute to contemporary art and character design practices while strengthening ethical paradigms based on species interconnectivity and ecological justice, especially in the context of Indonesia's biodiversity (Yeh, 2024; DiMarco & Ruppert, 2022b).

Based on this background, this study aims to explore the design of representative objects of the Bird of Paradise from a post-anthropocentric perspective through the Reverting Animal strategy in character design practice. This study is directed explicitly at identifying anthropocentric representation tendencies that have been inherent in the visualisation of birds of paradise in various visual media, as well as examining how this approach attempts to formulate character design principles that place birds of paradise as non-human subjects with visual agency, based on observations of their natural behaviour, morphological structure and ecological interconnectedness of the species in its habitat. Through a practice-led research approach, this study also aims to produce an exploration of representational design that does not rely solely on anthropomorphism or cultural symbolism, but rather on restoring the essence of animals as autonomous living beings within the ecological system.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Post-Anthropocentrism in Art and Design

Post-anthropocentrism is a critical approach to human dominance in value structures, representations, and aesthetics over non-human entities. In this paradigm, humans are no longer positioned as the centre of everything but as part of an ecological network equal to other living things. This approach has grown in the discourses of ecocriticism, posthumanism, and interspecies studies and has become an essential foundation in art practices that promote ecological justice. Within this framework, sustainability, interdependence, and non-human agency take centre stage. There are critics of human-non-human dualism and emphasize the importance of dismantling hierarchies that place humans as the masters of nature (Tüfekci Can, 2023; Biswas Mellamphy et al., 2024). Toncheva et al. (2025) emphasize the importance of coexistential relations between humans and non-human entities, grounded not in domination or instrumentality but in collaboration and mutual survival. This relationship demands an empathic and ethical approach to other species, as well as a willingness to share space, experience, and meaning in an interconnected world. This concept encourages art practitioners to engage animals as partners in artistic creation. It challenges anthropomorphised visual practices and replaces them with forms that allow non-human subjects to perform in their capacity. In design and visual arts practice, a post-anthropocentric approach opens space for a re-reading of aesthetic and narrative systems that human perspectives have dominated. For example, works by artists such as Marcus Coates and Allora & Calzadilla explore the possibilities of cross-species communication and demonstrate how art can serve as a vehicle for interaction between humans and non-humans. Post-anthropocentrism leads artists to draw inspiration not only from animals' physical forms but also from their distinctive rhythms, movements, and ways of life. This results in a design form that no longer relies on human identification needs but on the authentic expression of the species.

This approach is increasingly relevant in an era of ecological crisis and biodiversity exploitation, when visual representations of exploitative animals can reinforce unequal power relations. The survival of various species depends on humans learning to live alongside other creatures in a broken world. Therefore, contemporary art is geared towards constructing representations that enable authentic animalistic expressions, not as aesthetic products for human consumption, but as a form of cross-species solidarity (Yeh, 2024). This statement can be a form of resistance to the capitalistic logic that exploits animal symbols as mere cultural commodities. Finally, post-anthropocentrism demands a repositioning of the human role in artistic and cultural systems. Humans are no longer the sole creators who give meaning to the world but are part of a network of living beings who mutually create a shared reality that is not trapped in anthropocentric symbolic narratives (Boyle, 2025; Kovalyova, 2024; Evers, 2024). In art and design practice, this means opening up participation spaces for non-human perspectives, both symbolically and practically. As such, this approach revolutionises how animals are perceived in character design and contributes to transforming a contemporary art paradigm that is more ecologically and ethically inclusive. This perspective shows that post-anthropocentrism is not only a theoretical framework but also a practical strategy for creating art that is more responsible towards the planet and its inhabitants.

2.2 Reverting Animal: Recovering Animal Subjectivity

Reverting animals is an approach that stems from a critique of anthropomorphism in the visual representation of animals. The term refers to a design strategy that seeks to reposition animals as subjects in their own right, rather than narrative objects governed by human interests. In the context of character design, reverting animals means creating visual representations that respect animals' nature, behaviour, and natural ecosystem. It marks a shift from the anthropomorphic paradigm of animal representation to visual forms that attend to the wholeness of non-human species in their biological and ecological dimensions. Legino et al. (2024) explore parametric inspiration derived from batik motifs, demonstrating how traditional symbolic patterns can be abstracted into systematic generative design structures. This methodological approach is relevant for translating animal morphology and behaviour (Cenderawasih plumage, ritual dance, flight patterns) into parametric character design systems, turning biological movement into design language rather than decorative motifs. Yujin Nagasawa (2012), in her approach to animal ethics, argues that the shift from symbolisation to the existential

recognition of animals is an essential step toward creating a just relationship between humans and non-humans. In the visual realm, this can be translated as a strategy that shapes visual narratives not solely from a human perspective, but also from a reading of the species' habitat, ethology, and ecological balance.

In contemporary artistic practice, some artists have begun to apply the principle of reverting animals as part of a visual critique of the practice of visual colonialism of animals. For example, the work of artist Alexandra Daisy Ginsberg explores the possibility of creating artificial life forms that are not based on human ideals but on ecological needs. In this context, the reverting animal is not just a visual form but also an ethical strategy that seeks to create an autonomous space of representation for non-human species. This view aligns with Jacques Derrida's view in "The Animal That Therefore I Am" (2008), which invites humans to review their subjective relations to animals and to consider animal agency in representational practices.

2.3 Bird Representation and the Issue of Exoticism in Visual Culture

Birds are one of the most recurring figures in human visual and symbolic history, ranging from ornaments and mythology to symbols of nationalism and spirituality. In various parts of the world, birds are often associated with noble values such as freedom, grace, or supernatural powers. In Indonesia, one bird species that stands out visually and symbolically is the Cenderawasih, known for its beautiful plumage and its exotic habitat in Papua. In visual culture, the bird has long been elevated as an icon of Eastern Indonesia's natural beauty. However, it is often presented without a critical understanding of its ecology and its place within the wider environmental system. Such representations demonstrate how aesthetics are used to encapsulate colonial and commercial power relations over the periphery (Wahid, 2025; Büscher, 2024; Demeyer & Vitse, 2024; Tsing et al., 2021).

The concept of exoticism plays a central role in shaping perceptions of animals such as the Cenderawasih in popular visual culture and contemporary creative products. Exoticism, in a postcolonial framework, refers to representational practices that present subjects from the "other world" (in this case, Papua) in an exaggerated, alluring, and spectacular manner, while narratives are controlled by the centre of power, often by people outside Papua (Ansari, 2025). The Cenderawasih is presented in many visual works as an object of admiration. It highlights its morphological attributes, such as long feathers, striking colours, and a unique mating dance, without exploring its ecological context, natural behaviour, or interspecies relationships. Such representations risk reducing birds to mere aesthetic elements, rather than living creatures with ecological agency or existential value beyond their usefulness to humans (Fišerová, 2022; DiMarco & Ruppert, 2022b).

In character design practice, exoticism can be reflected in a tendency to emphasise anthropocentric visual beauty: birds are rendered with elements modified to suit human tastes, often resembling fancy dress, human dance, or emotional personification. In fact, in the context of conservation and visual ethics, it is essential to recognise that birds like Cenderawasih play critical ecological roles, including as pollinators, indicators of tropical forest health, and part of a network of species interdependencies (DiMarco & Ruppert, 2022b). Without this understanding, visualisations of bird characters will continue to operate within a framework that reinforces human dominance over animals and their habitats.

Through a post-anthropocentrism approach, the representation of birds, especially Cenderawasih, can be repositioned conceptually and visually. In character design, this can be translated into the creation of visual forms that not only consider physical beauty but also integrate aspects of behaviour, habitat, and ecological interactions. In this way, representations of Cenderawasih characters become more ethical, contextual, and transformative, while offering an alternative paradigm for visual production aligned with the values of ecological justice and interspecies equality (van Dooren et al., 2025; Willert & Knudsen, 2025; Haraway, 2016).

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research Approach: Practice-Led Research

The practice-led approach was used in this research. It is a research method rooted in creative practice as the primary source of knowledge. This approach not only positions the creation of artworks as a result but also as an exploratory process for understanding and critiquing specific issues in depth (Ikeya et al., 2025). Through this method, the practice of character design becomes a reflective and investigative field for anthropocentric dominance in animal representation. "Practice-led research acknowledges that new knowledge can be generated through the process of creation itself, where the researcher is both the maker and the inquirer." (Batty & Zalipour, 2025; Spencer, 2025).

3.2 Conceptual Framework: Post-Anthropocentrism and Reverting Animal

The theory of post-anthropocentrism (Giuliani, 2025; Haraway, 2008) is the foundation of this research. As a conceptual foundation, the concept of reverting animals is used to redesign the Cenderawasih character. In this research, animals are treated as entities with intrinsic value and visual agency, not as reflections of human symbolic needs. Exploitative anthropomorphic or iconographic approaches are avoided in the design process. Instead, character development is done through observation of the biological traits, social behaviour, and ecological connectivity of birds of paradise in their natural habitat.

3.3 Techniques and Research Stages

The research process was divided into three main stages. The first is literature and visual studies. In this section, theoretical references on post-anthropocentrism, non-human agency, and interspecies design ethics were reviewed. Artworks and designs of birds of paradise

characters in popular media, illustrations, and cultural artefacts were also observed to identify anthropocentric patterns. The study also included identifying visual elements that highlight cultural symbolism, exotic aesthetics, and anthropomorphic forms.

The second stage was observation and artistic exploration. In this stage, visual and ethological data on birds of paradise were collected through video documentation, photography, and scientific reports on their habitat and behaviour (Ikeya et al., 2025). After that, initial sketches and form explorations were made based on the birds' movement rhythms, morphological structures, and social interactions rather than human symbolic assumptions. Then the principle of "design with empathy" was applied, placing the animal as a subject rather than an aesthetic object. The third stage is the critical reflection and design revision stage. It involves evaluating the design through critical reflection on its visual aspects, which may still be anthropocentric. The following process involves preparing visual and narrative documentation of the creative process as part of the conceptual argumentation. Finally, revision is based on ethical considerations of animal representation and principles of ecological coexistence (Yeh, 2024).

3.4 Validity and Validity of Research

To achieve validity in practice-based research, transparent documentation of the creative process, in-depth reflection on artistic decisions, and an examination of the extent to which theory and practice are linked will be conducted. Each design stage aligns with the principles of visual ecology and interspecies ethics to ensure the characters do not deviate from the post-anthropocentric framework.

4.0 Findings

4.1. Post-Anthropocentric Representation in Cenderawasih Character Design

The character of the Cenderawasih can be developed visually without falling into anthropomorphism, cultural symbolism, or even exotic aesthetics. Post's anthropocentric approach presents animals as visual subjects with agency rather than merely as aesthetic objects or cultural icons. Human facial expressions, traditional clothing, or gestures that resemble humans are not the characters typically depicted in conventional approaches. Instead, the way birds move, the ritualistic mating interactions, and the way birds guard their territories are the direction of the design. This approach aims to return the animal body to itself (DiMarco & Ruppert, 2022). Reflection of human desires or imagination is not the goal of this approach.

4.2 Cenderawasih behavior and morphology as a visual resource

Before the design exploration, an inventory of visualisations of birds of paradise in graphic media, cultural products, and institutional symbols was conducted. From existing observations, a strong aesthetic pattern emerged: feathers symbolised luxury, the bird's body was simplified into a static silhouette, and bright colours were used hyperbolically to create the impression of a "tropical paradise" (Willert & Knudsen, 2025). From the field data exploration that has been conducted, the following points were found:

- Birds of paradise have complex and choreographed mating rituals.
- The structure of the tail feathers is an idea for shape transformation during mating attractions.
- Their strong ecological attachment to certain forests shapes their behaviour and their use.

4.3 Design Exploration depicts Non-human Agency

This research shows that the creative process is encouraged without the use of symbolic elements such as crowns, additional accessories, or human expressions. In addition, the simplified design will reveal the bird character as a symbol of a non-human agent. The character design above shows the Cenderawasih's tail as dominant because the tail of the Cenderawasih is the main asset for him in attracting the opposite sex and looks dominant in terms of size compared to the size of his body, as shown in the following Fig. 1. When viewed from a human perspective, this approach looks like creating a visual work in the form of an index because there is a sign that shows a cause-and-effect relationship or direct correlation with the object (Rodríguez Higuera, 2024). However, the deconstruction does not aim to produce an index. Through this approach, the characters created are ecological entities that live and act within the tropical rainforest system. This approach does not produce symbolic representations of the "Beauty of Papua". "The real ethical turn in character design occurs when we begin to design with the animal, not about the animal." (Boyle, 2025; Kovalyova, 2024).



Fig. 1: Cenderawasih Illustration
(Source: Author, 2025)

5.0 Discussion

5.1 Positioning the Cenderawasih as a Subject, Not an Object

The final completed character design shows that birds of paradise can be portrayed expressively without being transformed into humans. The body expressions, natural colour intensity, and interactions between birds are arranged into a visual narrative system that remains communicative. However, these birds of paradise do not mimic human story structures. Characters are not given human names, human voices, or humanised storylines; instead, narratives are built from natural events, such as migration, breeding season, or habitat threats, that shape the dynamics of the birds' lives. This approach positions the bird as a visual subject, that is, as a centre in its own right, free from anthropomorphic or symbolic interpretations that distort its existence (Haraway, 2008). As such, this character design seeks to reject representations of animals as mirrors of human culture and instead appreciates the uniqueness of the species in its complete and autonomous form.

5.2 Ethical and Aesthetic Implications in Character Design

The results of this study show that character design can be an effective medium to build deeper ecological awareness. Instead of reducing animals to icons, design practices can be used to voice the existence of those who are marginalised in an anthropocentric visual world. The characters developed from the reverting animal approach also open up new potential in interspecies aesthetics, an aesthetic that is not only visually beautiful but also ethically just. By applying the design principle of post-anthropocentrism, the resulting Cenderawasih character not only enriches the visual design repertoire but also encourages reflection on how humans view, perceive, and represent the world beyond themselves.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

This research shows that adopting a post-anthropocentric approach to character design enables a more ethical and ecological representation of animals. As a case study in this research, the Papuan Cenderawasih is successfully represented visually by emphasising its agency as a living being rather than merely a cultural symbol or aesthetic object. The post-anthropocentric approach allows the design of the Papuan Cenderawasih character without reducing it to a mere cultural symbol, a human personification, or a visual decoration. Instead, the character is developed as a tribute to the integrity of the bird's body, movement, and ecological life. Instead of speaking through words, it communicates through silent movements, the rhythms of nature, and its authentic body structure. Despite the efforts to redefine character design through a post-anthropocentric lens, this study has several limitations. First, the research focuses exclusively on the Papuan Cenderawasih as a single case study, which may not fully represent the anatomical or behavioral complexities of other endemic species. Second, as the current literature review is primarily based on older sources, there is limited integration with more recent studies published in the last five years. Furthermore, this research is limited to the author's creative exploration and visual strategy (practice-led research), without conducting empirical audience-reception tests to measure the design's effectiveness in a commercial or public context. Finally, the scope of the design is restricted to 2D digital illustration, leaving the challenges of 3D modeling and interactive media for future exploration.

Based on this background, this study aims to explore the design of representative objects of the Bird of Paradise from a post-anthropocentric perspective through the Reverting Animal strategy in character design practice. This study is directed explicitly at identifying anthropocentric representation tendencies that have been inherent in the visualisation of birds of paradise in various visual media, as well as examining how this approach attempts to formulate character design principles that place birds of paradise as non-human subjects with visual agency, based on observations of their natural behaviour, morphological structure and ecological interconnectedness of the species in its habitat. Through a practice-led research approach, this study also aims to produce an exploration of representational design that does not rely solely on anthropomorphism or cultural symbolism, but rather on restoring the essence of animals as autonomous living beings within the ecological system.

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Paper Contribution to the Related Field of Study

This study introduces a post-anthropocentric approach to character design, promoting ecologically ethical, non-human-centered representations of the Cenderawasih bird in the visual arts.

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