

The kitsch dimension of paleoart¹

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Abstract. Much of the discourse on aesthetic theory can be articulated around an emerging artistic discipline called paleoart. The kitsch phenomenon, which has been extensively discussed in the realm of general art theory, can intrude into areas where aesthetic significance is present. One of these areas is within the framework of paleoart and the artistic reconstructions of the distant past. Although the coordinates of this discipline are highly regulated—relying on other areas of knowledge that converge to reveal the appearance of a lost world—paleoart cannot escape the increasingly widespread loss of the aura of the artwork that Walter Benjamin proclaimed. Paleoart has also not been spared from the ethics and morals of its time, nor from the intrusion of the playful and the lack of original significance as a transfer of scientific knowledge. And it is through this blurry film that kitsch operates to stay. We would then be right to speak of a new term: paleokitsch.

Key words: Paleoart, Scientific illustration, Landscape, Paleontology, Paleobotany, Paleoecology

[es] La dimensión kitsch del paleoarte

Resumen. Parte del discurso de la teoría estética se puede articular en torno a una incipiente disciplina artística llamada paleoarte. El fenómeno kitsch, del que tanto se ha hablado en el terreno de la teoría general del arte, puede irrumpir en ámbitos donde la significación estética esté presente. Uno de ellos es en el marco del paleoarte y las reconstrucciones artísticas del pasado remoto. Si bien las coordenadas de esta disciplina son altamente regladas -dependen de otras áreas de conocimiento que convergen para revelar la apariencia de un mundo perdido-, el paleoarte no se puede sustraer a la cada vez más profusa pérdida del aura de la obra de arte que Walter Benjamin proclamó. Tampoco se ha librado el Palearte de la ética y la moral de su tiempo, ni de la irrupción de lo lúdico y la falta de significación original de ser transferencia de conocimiento científico. Y por este borroso film es por donde el kitsch opera para quedarse. Estaríamos hablando entonces con la propiedad de un nuevo término: el paleokitsch.

Palabras Clave: Paleoarte, Ilustración científica, Paisaje, Paleontología, Paleobotánica, Paleoecología

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1. Introduction: Conceptual Framework

The term Paleoart was first coined in 1986 by the artist Mark Hallet in his article "The Scientific Approach of the Art of Bringing Dinosaurs Back to Life," where he confined it to the realm of scientific illustration that develops patterns given by paleontology (Ansón et al., 2016; Buscalioni, 2015). For

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Hallet, the term paleoart constitutes an artistic experience that attempts to recreate how prehistoric beings looked and behaved in their ecosystems. Although his conception is predominantly zoocentric, it is true that through paleoart, what is represented is captured as a snapshot of deep time. Nevertheless, paleoart should be conceived from a broader perspective, as an artistic discipline that provides us with a vision of a lost natural environment, with multiple vicissitudes and interrelations of the wild environment, whether with or without faunal elements.

Given this tentative definition of Paleoart, one might think that its nature is identical to scientific drawing or illustration. Scientific illustration presents intellectualized images that go beyond mimetic representation, seeking patterns to graphically reveal specific identifying features of a species (Cabezas et al., 2016) for study or classification, such as the hairiness of an insect's legs or the venation pattern of a chestnut leaf. Paleoart, on the other hand, tends to seek the imitation of nature in its vivid format, actively searching for the keys to "being alive" (Buscalioni, 2015) and constitutes a "construction of coexistence" (Ortega y Gasset, 1981) spatially and temporally, aspiring to be a true snapshot taken of a space situated in deep time.

A representative example of early scientific illustration depicting untamed animals can be found in Dürer's famous *Rhinoceros*, initially drawn and subsequently engraved around 1515. In these works, the artist, relying solely on external references regarding its appearance, conducts a detailed study of the morphology and external features of the animal. However, the engraving presents a personal and somewhat non-naturalistic view of the rhinoceros, which appears with rigid, riveted skin, as if clad in armor.

Paleoart becomes part of a specific stage of scientific research and constitutes a visual archive of the state of science at the time the paleoartistic work is undertaken. One of its evident aims is dissemination, sharing in images the results of a particular paleontological discovery. It also overlaps with a quest for the aesthetic surprise inherent in any paleoartistic effort: the thrill of imagining a lost world in an original and distinctive way (Carrión et al., 2023). Additionally, it serves to highlight those points in the research where there is greater scientific consensus. Furthermore, it fosters dialogue between science and all audiences interested in paleontology. Thus, paleoart fulfills a triple function: historical, aesthetic, and social (Amorós, 2023).

In addition, paleoart possesses the nature of public art within the framework of what is known as relational art (Buscalioni, 2015; Bourriaud, 2006). Historically, this has endowed it with its disseminative power and a prominent role in museums, often science museums, where the interaction between artists and scientists can be showcased. Today, however, paleoart extends its reach through the internet; netizens can educate themselves and enjoy the observation of virtually displayed works and the new discoveries being made related to the prehistoric past. Of course, a paleoartistic work is not exempt from experiencing some of the vicissitudes of art in general, and hence we discuss here the invasive penetration of the "kitsch" phenomenon in the practice of paleoart. We propose an argument that may be judged as eccentric and probably heterodox, but it is undoubtedly pertinent in a context where I argue that the kitsch fact is consummated: its phenomenology trivializes the work of paleoart.

Generally, we refer to the kitsch effect when a work of art is uprooted from the purposes for which it was intended, or is transferred from its authentic rank and adapted to a purpose different from the one that legitimized it, resulting in an alienation from its context (Dorfles, 1973). One example of the use or kitsch vocation of paleoart is seen in the appropriation of images developed within the sphere of marketing. As with art in general, some works considered paleoartistic, especially those containing images of prehistoric animals, have been, for instance, printed on candy wrappers, towels, or hung as posters on the walls of prehistoric enthusiasts' rooms.

We then find that the work of paleoart ceases to be unique; it begins to lose its aura and that intrinsic value of scientific dissemination it was granted by being exhibited in a museum. This dismantles the identity formed by the work and its observer, who likely visited the museum to marvel at the paleontological aura without renouncing aesthetic enjoyment. Thus, in addition to losing the exclusively scientific-disseminative purposes for which it was created, the work enters the system of industrialization and technical reproducibility that Benjamin referred to (2021): a mass production with

predominantly ornamental purposes. In this way, the primary and ultimate purpose of the paleoartistic experience—transmitting scientific knowledge by reconstructing past life—loses its justification in favor of a decorative, ornamental, playful, or, we could say, kitsch use. Furthermore, we witness the fetishization of the prehistoric past, with the portrayal of knowledge being perverted in favor of a hedonistic consumerist spirit. Even the reproduction can be altered according to market demand: changes in color, shape, the prominent paleontological elements, or even the excessive use of decorative components. We propose the term paleokitsch to cover all these cases.

2. Kitsch within the Framework of Our Culture

Defining the concept of "kitsch" is as ambitious as it is bold, as the phenomenon's origins spark numerous debates and divergences. While it is not our intention to dissect its slippery concept in depth, we recognize that its roots in everyday culture—particularly in aesthetics—are sufficiently significant to shed light on some of its *modus vivendi*. Let this reflection serve, then, as a brief and succinct approach to the term *kitsch*.

In its early stages, around the 19th century, kitsch can be associated with the world of decorative objects with figurative qualities. In some cases, it may incite a compulsive urge akin to that of collecting. The origin of the term is somewhat unclear, though it seems to have been used in Germany by artists to refer to inexpensive materials used by some members of their guild. The phenomenon of kitsch has been linked to the desire to own works or reproductions of them, often as a display of social status. Those who treasured such objects often sought to align themselves with cultural elites, displaying in their homes artworks or reproductions of pieces that were often of little monetary value, questionable authenticity, or copies made from inexpensive materials. Some of these reproductions were ostentatious or considered to be in "poor taste," though they often referenced major masterpieces or significant art-historical works.

"Good taste" and "bad taste" became two sides of the same coin, representing dignity and social standing. Although this aesthetic reality ultimately led to a trivialization of the objects themselves, it also helped democratize aesthetics, allowing kitsch elements to claim intrinsic value within the culture from which they emerged as *strictu sensu* artistic expressions intended to captivate or evoke a specific reaction from the viewer. In our view, this intention, conveyed through objects, may have helped inaugurate or foster what aesthetic theory would later term *artifice*, a concept that connects directly with various reinterpretations embedded in the vast conception of art.

Therefore, the concept of kitsch should not be unidirectional, just as it is not neutral. It is a term that can generate true literary parables, as happened with Milan Kundera in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Kundera (1984) speaks of kitsch as an aesthetic ideal that behaves as if ugliness does not exist, initially referring to communism and its double standards, the apparent happiness that everything is fine, and finally stating that "kitsch is the aesthetic ideal of all politicians, of all political parties, and of all movements." However, no matter how much we refuse it, according to the writer, kitsch is a categorical agreement with being, it is part of the destiny of man.

Following Kundera, we could say that the 19th-century artist, who was the first to consciously depict the state of nature in deep time, showed the ugliness and terror of the prehistoric world, and therefore did not engage in kitsch with his work. But it could happen that what is forming as a kitsch world—by presenting this denial of the beauty of the lost world—is its contemporaneity, unfolding an idealization of its civilized world. That is, goodness and happiness are only found in progress and humanity, while prehistory belongs to an untamed and terrifying period. All of this without realizing that the paleoartist is simultaneously judging, through the morality of his time, the intact and non-anthropocentric nature of prehistory. Therefore, kitsch is a great deceiver: it uses the paleoartistic work as a negative of progress, and by ferociously portraying the distant past, it creates a contrast in the observer to romanticize and turn the state of well-being of present society into kitsch.

For Valis, for example, kitsch would be complicit with "the corny," constituting a subproduct or a postmodern formula of corniness, representing a whole historicist dialectic that can explain the social and cultural changes of a given era generally associated with bad taste (Valis, 2010).

In *Storia della bruttezza (On Ugliness)*, Umberto Eco says that kitsch triggers a passionate effect, foreign to the more cultured palates of society, so those who enjoy kitsch believe they are experiencing something qualitatively elevated, which, according to Eco, is not at all reprehensible. In fact, the author points out that while one definition of kitsch interprets it as something that tends to provoke a passionate effect instead of allowing for disinterested contemplation, another definition considers kitsch to be an artistic practice that, to ennoble itself and the buyer, imitates and quotes the art of museums. Thus, while the avant-garde imitates the act of imitation, kitsch imitates the effect of imitation; when the avant-garde creates an artistic work, it highlights the procedures leading to it and chooses them as the objective of its own discourse, whereas kitsch highlights the reactions that the work should provoke and chooses the emotional reaction of the consumer as the objective of its operation (Eco, 2007).

Following Eco's definition, both in imitating high art and in provoking emotions, kitsch may have permeated the first paleoartistic works created in the 19th century, coinciding with the rise of the great fossil collectors of the time in England. Thus, we must also assent to the vision provided by Valis and affirm that the corny or kitsch reflect the sentimental, ethical, and aesthetic excesses of an era marked by these great fossil collectors. The prehistoric past was viewed with sentimentality and nostalgia, seeking the aesthetic ideal of all movements and beliefs, as Kundera pointed out. There was also a place in kitsch for those who possessed fossils and reproductions of prehistory and prided themselves on being the cultural elite of paleontology, following Eco.

We can provide so many examples derived from Paleoart that we will limit ourselves to just a few. The wrapping of some prehistoric landscapes with a denigrated romantic style or with a marked lyrical tone by Benjamin Waterhouse Hawkins or Karl Joseph Kuwasseg are kitsch. Another case would be the composition of some of the creatures that appear as hybrids between the biblical monsters of medieval books and the entities of classical mythology created by illustrators related to the world of paleontology, including A. Demarly or George Scharf. It is important to note that kitsch does not reflect a specific artistic style; rather, it showcases a system of values of a particular society, with the artistic field echoing this (Fig. 1A, B, C, D).



Figure 1. A. *Triassic Life of Germany*. Benjamin Waterhouse Hawkins, Art Museum of Princeton University, New Jersey. B. *Features of the Calcareous Period of Shells (Late Triassic)*, Karl Joseph Kuwasseg, Neue

Galerie Collection, Landesmuseum Joanneum. C. *Color Engraving* by A. Demarly, 1883 (Lescaze, Z., & Ford, W., 2017). D. *Reptiles Restored*, 1833, George Scharf (Lescaze, Z., & Ford, W., 2017)

Resuming the *modus operandi* of the phenomenon, it can be pointed out that it forms its own system, and it is not merely an art in decline. If every system is dialectically capable of developing its own anti-system, this is precisely where we would situate kitsch. Consider certain ethical norms and values that must prevail in the development of a paleoartistic work, such as adhering, to create a base drawing, to the morphology projected by the fossils found of a particular prehistoric being we wish to depict. Hence, kitsch would precisely bypass that ethical imperative because it lacks it, seeking instead to develop a beautiful, visually accepted work, to project an image that generates emotions or produces the necessary terror to cling to the benefits of progress. No scientific guidelines that would frustrate its kitsch objective. Kitsch is the evil within the system of art values (Dorfles, 1973), and specifically, in Paleoart, this value system is powerfully represented by fidelity to the development of the latest paleoartistic discoveries, which necessarily forge the ethical imperative for the paleoartistic work to be "good work," a work with the ultimate disseminative purposes that Science implicitly carries within its public sphere.

If we look back at the recent past of the paleoartistic discipline, we ask ourselves to what extent the paleoartistic works of the Victorian era were the product of the artist's psyche imbued with the ethics and morals of the time, or to what extent some of them were engendered under the will to astonish and provoke emotions. This actually does not pose a dilemma, since both arguments are not mutually exclusive. It is likely that, in many of the works, both explanations were allied. And precisely through that crack of seeking the viewer eager for sensations is where kitsch can claim its place in the history of paleoart.

3. Paleokitsch and False Measures of "Prehistoric Beasts"

While the concept of kitsch is neither unidirectional nor conclusive, the phenomenon of kitsch can represent a perversion of human behavior by generating an excess of sentimentality in the observer. This can be appealing and attractive, appealing to universal feelings such as beauty, tenderness, nostalgia, etc. But it can also convey the vertigo of the untamed and the anguish of the terrifying because kitsch seeks a *passionate effect* (Eco, 2007) and moves away from neutrality.

What has been here termed paleokitsch, in addition to relating pseudoscientific production with visual imagery, also encompasses the aspect of a work produced under the auspices of science that ultimately attempts to depict the behavior of past beings, transforming or deforming towards monstrosity all those behavioral coordinates that paleontology has scientifically proposed based on its analyses of prehistoric beings. Thus, we can quickly come across images of enormous dinosaurs presented as cruel and wicked animals with bloody jaws attempting to frighten the viewer. Such is the case with *The Sea-Dragon as They Lived*, a work by John Martin for the cover of *Book of the Great Sea-Dragons* (1840) by Thomas Hawkins. Another work by the same author, *The Country of the Iguanodon* (c. 1857), created for the cover of *The Wonders of Geology* (Volume 1) by Gideon Mantell, demonstrates that depicting ferocity was a common trend (Fig. 2A, B).



Figure 2A. *The Country of the Iguanodon*, 1857, John Martin (Rudwick, M.J.S., 1992). B. *The Sea-Dragon as They Lived*, 1840, John Martin (Rudwick, M.J.S., 1992)

Another example might be *Reptiles Restored* (1872), an oil painting by Archibald Willard (Fig. 3). Far from being paleoartistic, these works thus become an epic with a tendency towards pathos and drama because kitsch has managed to mythify, for instance, the wild behavior of Jurassic beings that were part of the animal kingdom. In this sense, the work can fit into the characteristics of kitsch because it draws parallels with human behavior, equivalents of imitation and sentimental pretext, where the mythical charge of heroes and antiheroes is evident in its composition, giving an intrinsically evil aspect to animals of the prehistoric natural environment that are, of course, incompatible with such distinctly human values. Kitsch fraudulently uses the "irrational quotient of our thinking, of our own cognitive faculties" (Dorfles, 1973).



Figure 3. *Reptiles Restored* (1872). Archibald Willard (Lescaze, Z., & Ford, W., 2017)

These mythical representations of prehistoric beings, where good and evil permeated the work, were already worthy emissaries of life in past times when paleontology had much to develop, and morals and religion were prevalent, especially in the Victorian England of the 19th century. Ferocious creatures

often appeared in these depictions as biblical titans with the appearance of medieval dragons; true intentions of brutality wrapped in apocalyptic scenes and threatening environments. This is what paleoartists of the time offered to geologists and writers to sensationalize the covers of their texts, as we have seen in the previous images. The fear and uncertainty that prehistoric life generated at that time in society were, to a large extent, the bastions guiding the hand of the paleoartists more than the scarce and scattered fossil remains. Many more examples could be cited, including grandiloquent discourses on the lost world, such as *Le Monde avant la création de l'homme* (1886) by Nicolas Camille Flammarion. This work was a version of an earlier one, *Le Monde avant la création de l'homme*, published in 1857, whose author was W. F. A. Zimmerman, featuring engravings such as *Primitive World* by Adolphe François Pannemaker (Fig. 4A, B).



Figure 4A. *Scenes of the Primitive World during the Secondary Period*, 1886. Nicolas Camille Flammarion (Diderot Library, University of Lyon). B. *Primitive World*, 1857, Adolphe François Pannemaker

An overwhelming representation of prehistoric life is known as the oldest preserved color image of a dinosaur (Lescaze et al., 2017), *Reptiles Restored* from 1872, the oil painting by Archibald Willard mentioned earlier (see Fig. 1B). This was also the first painting of dinosaurs made in North America, for the lecture "Marvels of the Natural World" held in Cleveland that same year. This work conveys the terrifying vision of the prehistoric world at the time, both of its extinct creatures with their jaws always ready to attack and of the fury of nature, with incessant volcanic eruptions in the background of the landscape enveloping the horizons of the remote past.

During the 19th century, the representation of large prehistoric animals was morphologically changing depending on the artist of the moment, with the versions of the same prehistoric creature being as diverse as they were incompatible. The connection with the concept of paleokitsch coined here is inevitable. Shaped by the religious prism of the time, with deep roots of distrust, excessive morality, and fear of the unknown, the expressive beings of the prehistoric past evoked strong emotions. That said, the scientism of the time was tenuous in paleontology, unable to justify such creations even seemingly. What was evident, however, was that all the illustrations of extinct beings also maintained an aesthetic uniformity that is typical of kitsch understood as an ultra-conservative approach contrary to the stylistic innovation characteristic of the avant-garde (Kulka, 2011). Thus, kitsch operates with visual conventions and universal images, generating slight aesthetic mutations through the paleoart of the time because kitsch must adhere to what is most trite in its representation. On the other hand, kitsch must also play with common emotions, and this was what was offered when depicting past life in the context of the Victorian era of the 19th century.

In an 1883 color engraving by the scientist and artist A. Demarly (Fig. 5), the exaggerated vertical lines of a disproportionately convincing volcanic eruption, along with the profusion of white vapor leaving behind a sunset with a colossal sun, highlight that fantasy and paleo-imagery were the common notes of the paleoartistic representations of the moment. It can be said that each image thus constituted not only a paleontological archive of discoveries but also of the ethics and morals of the time.



Figure 5. *Color Engraving* by A. Demarly, 1883 (Lescaze, Z., & Ford, W., 2017)

In the illustrations that the artist John Martin created in collaboration with paleontologist Thomas Hawkins for the *Book of the Great Sea-Dragons* (1840) (see Fig. 2A), darkness appears as something intrinsic to the planet of that time. Hawkins himself, after describing a fossil, explained to his readers the work of paleontologists: “By such inductions, we revive the habits of creatures that disappeared long ago and recolor the fiery Monster that flees across the expanse of the Seas like a lightning bolt to its distant prey, with lust satiable only by blood” (Hawkins, as cited in Leskaze et al., 2017).

4. Paleokitsch in the Age of Technical Reproducibility

Walter Benjamin coined the concept of the aura of a work of art, defining it as the "here and now" in which the work was produced, its specific context, and its immediate and contemporary purposes. An original and unique work, created by an artist with their knowledge and genius, would retain all its aura intact. However, if that work began to be photographed and profusely reproduced through serial reproduction processes, then that auratic glow of the "here and now" Benjamin referred to would

eventually disappear in each duplicate of the original work. And although the history of art and paleoart treasures an immense variety of original and unique works, from the industrial and technological revolution onward, major pictorial representations, among others, were subjected to serial reproduction so that anyone could boast of having the vision of great artistic works in their homes. Paleoart also experienced these vicissitudes, losing its original representations through copying, finding its way into the homes of enthusiasts as part of room decor, collectibles, recreational items, propaganda, etc.

In this regard, it is interesting to reflect on an aspect arising from the reproductions of works, which John Berger addresses in his book *Ways of Seeing*. Berger points out that "the meaning of an image changes depending on what one sees next to it or immediately afterward. And so, the authority it retains is distributed throughout the context in which it appears" (Berger, 1972). Thus, the unique and unrepeatable work hanging in a museum and viewed in a specific context of meaning, where its presence in the museum room provides certain artistic and semantic potentials, is seen differently. Imagine a paleoartistic work hanging in a science museum within a paleontological context, which is most likely. That paleoartistic work will gain a high degree of scientific significance, as it will cooperate with the global message, in coexistence and connivance, and be displayed alongside other works of paleoart, explanatory panels, and reproductions of skeletal structures of beings from the past. Each scene proposed in the museum will be enhanced in relation to the others; each will owe its scientific significance to the cohesion of the entire room, its theme will be fully consistent, and its legitimacy as a paleoartistic work will have few fissures. However, if a reproduction of that work hangs in a child's room, for instance, adorning a panel full of photographs and other images unrelated to paleontology or perhaps other various paleontological reproductions in a space alien to scientific dissemination, an intimate, everyday space like a room in a house, we understand that a drastic change occurs in the way the work is viewed, a rupture in its degree of scientific connotations. Thus, the image the reproduction casts into the room loses the significance for which it was created and becomes a point of reference not only for the image from which it is reproduced but also for other varied images surrounding it. At this point, we must revisit Dorfles' definition of kitsch: a paleoart work experiencing the described vicissitudes is uprooted from the purposes it was intended for, resulting in a true alienation from its context (Dorfles, 1973). This overused obscuration of possessing a reproduced copy of a paleoartistic work and placing it outside its range of paleontological significance is paleokitsch.

Returning to our discourse on the fascination with prehistory, we must not forget that paleontology and the world of past beings have also spread to a significant part of enthusiasts through fiction novels, cinema, or even the world of recreational objects from the toy industry. Thus, paleo-imagery and/or paleokitsch have a dedicated segment of the population faithful to the fantasy recreation of prehistory primarily for mere leisure and entertainment.



Figure 6. Nestlé offered the Spanish public a collectible album, from 1930 to 1935, dedicated to showing the most popular prehistoric animals of that time (<http://folklore-fosiles-ibericos.blogspot.com/2019/01/los-dinosaurios-en-la-cultura-popular.html>)

I have arranged a series of examples of paleokitsch in its most playful aspect, which have been significant references for understanding the concept. The Nestlé brand offered the Spanish public a collectible album with its products from 1930 to 1935, dedicated to showcasing the most popular prehistoric animals of that time (Fig. 6). As evident in each of the cards, the most remarkable aspect is the objectification of the prehistoric being at the expense of its biological dynamics and natural environment. Another example of this lack of scientific significance is the sensationalist reductionism with which the collection of plastic dinosaur miniatures by the well-known industrial bakery brand Bollycao was advertised on its cover in 1993 (Fig. 7A, B).



Figure 7A, B. Cover for the collection released by the well-known industrial bakery brand, Bollycao, in 1993. (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/valentinvn/with/5037456816/>)

The *Sinclair Oil and Refining Corporation* contributed to solidifying the relationship between dinosaurs and oil. The American gas station, founded in 1916, had its image lent by paleontologist Barnum Brown, who discovered the mythical *Brontosaurus* in 1902, among others, in exchange for

funding (Fig. 8). The company released a whole collection of merchandise with its emblematic dinosaur, including decorative items (Fig. 9A, B, C).



Figure 8. *The Sinclair Oil and Refining Corporation* helped consolidate the dinosaur-oil relationship. Paleontologist Barnum Brown, who discovered the mythical *Tyrannosaurus rex* in 1902, lent his image in exchange for funding (<https://picclick.com/Collectibles/Advertising/Gas-Oil/Gas-Oil-Companies/Sinclair/>)



Figure 9A, B, C. *The Sinclair Oil and Refining Corporation* released a whole collection of merchandise with their iconic dinosaur, including decorative items (<https://picclick.com/Collectibles/Advertising/Gas-Oil/Gas-Oil-Companies/Sinclair/>)

In relation to the world of cinema and literature, as previously mentioned, both contributed to a powerful vision of prehistoric beings, which made a striking entrance into the collective imagination. This led to a cultural momentum: on one hand, cinema and literature promoted paleontological studies, while on the other, it sparked a desire among enthusiasts to incorporate aspects of prehistory into their daily lives by integrating various objects with distinctly *paleokitsch* features into their homes. Literature thus began a prolific field of narrative exploration, which would later be adapted into film. As a

precursor, we can cite Arthur Conan Doyle's iconic novel *The Lost World*, which inspired a film of the same title—a short produced in 1925 by Harry O. Hoyt. However, the first film to depict dinosaurs was an earlier short, running 5 minutes, filmed in 1905, *Prehistoric Peeps*. This first film was followed in successive years by countless titles that presented the latest paleontological discoveries in an appealing and educational way. Among many others, these included *The Primitive Man* (1913), *Gertie the Dinosaur* (1914), *The Ghost of Slumber Mountain* (1918), *The Three Ages* (1923), *King Kong* (1933), *One Million BC* (1940), *Robot Monster* (1953), *King Dinosaur* (1955), *Godzilla, King of the Monsters* (1956), *One Million Years BC* (1966), *Valley of the Dinosaurs* (1974), culminating in the famous *Jurassic World* saga, which began its journey in 1997.

In short, cinema produced a substantial number of films in which the ferocity of prehistoric beasts, with certain traits inspired by mythological creatures, unleashed terror. Cinematic *paleokitsch* was thus served, with a reductionist sensationalism and a deliberate fetishization of the animals that populated the distant past.

5. Paleoimagery as a Transgression of the Scientific Ritual

One significant phenomenon within the realm of kitsch, particularly relevant to paleoart, is the concept of "paleoimagery." Gillo Dorfles (1973) elevates the phenomenon of kitsch to an imaginative panorama, stimulated by mass art. He posits that what should be a private fantasy has become a public activity through the mass media, leading to the collapse of distinctive capacities between art and life and causing an absence of ritual in the creation of art. This notion of the absence of ritual, as Dorfles references, aligns with Walter Benjamin's (2021) theories, which have been extensively discussed and reinterpreted in art theory and aesthetic treatises in subsequent decades. This idea ties into Benjamin's discourse on the impact of technical reproducibility on art, as previously mentioned.

The mass consumption of prehistoric themes has led many enthusiasts to create plastic activities that propose a fantastical view of prehistory, creating scenes and creatures that, while seemingly ancient, are imbued with amplified doses of fantasy. This activity, termed "paleoimagery" by Debus and Debus (2011, as cited in Buscalioni, 2015), can be integrated into the imaginative kitsch phenomenon. However, the boundary between paleoart, on one side, and paleoimagery and paleokitsch, on the other, is not always clear-cut. This ambiguity arises because prehistory has not always been understood as a definitive and scientific field of study. We navigate the shifting sands of various converging disciplines within prehistoric studies, where a paleontological reconstruction cannot be done without some degree of imagination due to incomplete information. Prehistory, fortunately or unfortunately, relies on the study of fragments. Paleoart is more robust in its scientific dissemination when it reconstructs a paradigm agreed upon by the majority of specialists. However, given knowledge gaps about the distant past, paleoartistic works naturally contain traces of paleoimagery to varying degrees.

The dysfunctions arising from the lack of scientific rigor cause paleoartistic works to lose their nature as public art, breaking the commitment to motivate a community of individuals united by a desire for paleontological knowledge. Paleoart interprets the various positions that paleontologists have held about the past, based on fossil evidence, reflecting both consensus and areas of disagreement. While paleoimagery may have aesthetic value, it lacks the pragmatic purpose inherent in paleoart.

Nevertheless, paleoimagery proliferates in the virtual world due to the democratization of information transfer, presenting diverse images of the remote past that, although possibly deviating from paleontological rigor, are widely accepted by the public. These artists create paleofantasies for enthusiasts, such as the dreamlike environments of Joe Tucciarone or the animated beings of David Krentz. Many enthusiasts claim the title of paleoartists, developing projects without the consensual scientific responsibility, where fantasy with some prehistoric formulation dominates their productions. This phenomenon of paleokitsch has grown into a substantial online community, connecting public and private pages globally. This community includes artists, collectives, scientists, enthusiasts, designers, and those engaging in paleotourism. Examples include websites like paleoymas.com and the Fundación

para el Estudio de los Dinosaurios en Castilla y León (fundaciondinosaurioscyl.com), among others. This fervent passion fosters what Buscalioni (2015) describes as "freak knowledge."

6. Conclusions

We understand that this proposal about the kitsch vocation of Paleoart is instructive, as it exposes its ideological interstices and highlights, by contrast, what we believe should transcend in a paleoartistic work, namely the very absence of ethical values. Paleoart defines a transfer of pure knowledge, not of values or ethical principles inherent to our cultural permanence or our ideas of good and evil, for instance. Reflecting on this absence of morality forces us to sharpen our senses and keeps us expectant about what should be or what is the system of signification of the paleoartistic work.

Although we understand that our proposal on paleokitsch is also current and denotes a reality, it is clear that kitsch surrounds us in everyday life. This is due to the fact that we live in a period where values constantly undergo a process of disintegration and, at times, consensual and symptomatic exaltation, which favors the flourishing of kitsch, as Dorfles (1973) pointed out. This phenomenon occurs in various fields such as Art, Literature, and Cinema, and of course, in the territory of Paleontology, where its borders, sometimes unclear, are transgressed with impunity, turning the transfer of knowledge into abjection, not only aesthetically but methodologically.

Despite the phenomenology of paleokitsch, or thanks to it, it is important that we continue to promote the creation of art based on paleontological data. The visual language has an enormous power to interpret reality and has the potential to become an important tool in the formal curriculum. We hope that this brief article serves as inspiration to continue breaking down the barriers between the arts, humanities, and experimental sciences. Our corollary is that the introduction of scientific complexity into the artistic experience is useful for our understanding of the past and, at the same time, ensures that the visual arts become an integral part of scientific practice (Amorós et al., 2021).

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