

Spaceships in the Anthropocene: Peter Kolosimo and the End of (Our) Times

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'Cause the man from Mars won't eat up bars when the TV's on,
And now he's gone back up to space
Where he won't have a hassle with the human race.

(Blondie, 'Rapture')

This chapter investigates the ways in which pseudo-archaeological non-fiction by Peter Kolosimo (1922–1984) intersects with ecological issues connected to recent Italian environmental history and the Anthropocene thesis. As one of Italy's most popular writers in the 1960s and 1970s, Kolosimo was the author of several non-fiction books dealing with pseudo-archaeology, the theory of ancient astronauts, and the (mis)interpretation of historical artefacts. In fact, Kolosimo's first books predate Erich von Däniken's influential *Chariots of the Gods? Unsolved Mysteries of the Past* (1968) by almost a decade. In a series of books spanning 20 years, Kolosimo conveys theories claiming that alien civilizations visited Earth in ancient times, and that proof could be found in paintings, sculptures, and objects from around the world, with supposedly technologically advanced civilizations having left only scarce and puzzling evidence.

This kind of pseudo-archaeological speculation raises several questions about the impact of civilizations on the environment, as highlighted by scientists Gavin A. Schmidt and Adam Frank's 'Silurian Hypothesis', named after a race of ancient aliens from the British TV series *Doctor Who*.² Given that ideas of disaster are central to reflections on the Anthropocene, Kolosimo's depictions of the end of civilizations and

¹ This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 890656.

² Gavin A. Schmidt and Adam Frank, 'The Silurian Hypothesis: Would It

the collapse of technologically advanced societies encourage readers to engage with dangers facing human society. By holding extraterrestrials responsible for mankind's technological achievements, pseudo-archaeology calls anthropocentrism into question in ways that highlight human exceptionalism through a secular myth merging technology and religion. Intriguingly, the technological achievements in question are often the product of non-Western civilizations, from Ancient Egyptian to pre-Colombian cultures, and Kolosimo often pairs non-Western buildings and artefacts with European elements. In that regard, his work participates in the rediscovery of marginal parts of Italy in a decade that saw the publication of countless guides to Italian local mysteries and folklore, all while the country was experiencing significant economic and technological developments.

This chapter is divided into three parts. First, I offer a brief sketch of the history and the ideological content of pseudo-archaeology. Second, I focus on Kolosimo as Italy's most successful author of pseudo-archaeological books, showing how his work can be connected to environmental changes and anxieties characterizing Italy between the 1960s and the 1980s. Third, I highlight the importance of this genre from an ecocritical perspective within the framework of the Anthropocene.

The writer born as Pietro Domenico Colosimo is a somewhat strange case study in the consideration of pseudo-archaeology, but a study of Italian versions of this genre could not start anywhere else.³ Unlike other authors in the field (von Däniken, Graham Hancock, Zecharia Sitchin), Kolosimo presents strange data, mysterious anecdotes, and provocative theories about ancient aliens and lost continents *without believing in them*. Instead of presenting a unified theory as an alternative to official science, Kolosimo always backs down from the hypotheses

Be Possible to Detect an Industrial Civilization in the Geological Record?', *International Journal of Astrobiology*, 18 (2018), pp. 142–50.

³ For further details on Kolosimo's biography, see the chapter 'La diffusione del mistero' in Marco Ciardi, *Il mistero degli antichi astronauti* (Bologna: Carocci, 2017), Kindle edition, from which I have taken the bio-bibliographical information contained in this paragraph. An extensive account of Kolosimo's work can be found in Stefano Bigliardi's 'The Stellar Storyteller: Ancient Astronauts, Science, and Religion in Peter Kolosimo', *Quaderni di semantica*, n. s. (2021–2022), pp. 463–90. Bigliardi was also generous enough to share with me his conversation with Caterina Kolosimo, Peter's widow, now published on the website of the Centro Italiano Studi Ufologici, 3 January 2022, <http://www.cisu.org/peter-kolosimo-comera/>. See also Fabio Camilletti (ed.), *Almanacco della fantarcheologia: Antichi astronauti, continenti scomparsi e futuri passati* (Bologna: Odoja, 2022), which collects several contributions about Italian pseudo-archaeology in general and about Kolosimo in particular.

that he delineates, ultimately claiming that he is personally unconvinced, and that it is up to the reader to decide. Kolosimo had a Sicilian father and an American mother, and lived in Bolzano in Alto-Adige, which resulted in him having a very good knowledge of German. During the Second World War, he had a choice between joining the Italian army or the Wehrmacht – he opted for the latter, only to desert and join the partisans in Bohemia, the westernmost part of today’s Czech Republic. Kolosimo went on to be a lifelong communist, starting his career as a journalist for *L’Unità*, the official newspaper of the Italian Communist Party. He was also a great fan of science fiction: as early as 1957, he published the novel *Fronte del sole*, using the pseudonym ‘Omega Jim’, which was a common practice for Italian sci-fi authors at the time due to the perceived ‘foreignness’ of the genre.⁴ Just a few months later, in the first issue of *Cosmic: Selezione di fantascienza*, he published an article titled ‘Fratelli dell’infinito’ (which would also become the title of one of his books) that was dedicated to the existence of intelligent life in the universe. He reprised these topics in the magazine *Oltre il cielo*, which helped launch his career as a popularizer of scientific themes. It is important to stress that *Oltre il cielo* was not exclusively a magazine for science fiction, being dedicated to astronomy, astronautics, and rocket science. These apparently conflicting issues – science and science fiction, factuality and invention – are central to understanding Kolosimo, whose stock of ancient mysteries and possible futures is equally indebted to scientific inquiry and a science-fictional imagination. He founded his own magazine completely dedicated to the subject, *Pi-Kappa*, and published several books that were hugely popular, including *Il pianeta sconosciuto* (1957), *Terra senza tempo* (1964), *Ombre sulle stelle* (1966), *Non è terrestre* (1969), which won the Premio Bancarella, *Astronavi sulla preistoria* (1972), and *Odissea stellare* (1974).

Notes on a Pseudo-Discipline

I am concerned here with a cultural object that is usually neglected in academic scholarship, unless the intention is to discredit it: pseudo-archaeology. Other terms that describe this phenomenon are ‘fantastic

⁴ Arielle Saiber, ‘Flying Saucers Would Never Land in Lucca: The Fiction of Italian Science Fiction’, *California Italian Studies*, 2.1 (2011), pp. 1–51 (pp. 14–15).

archaeology⁵ or the more sympathetic 'alternative archaeology'.⁶ Generally speaking, the label 'pseudo-archaeology' is applied to those archaeological claims that are theorized outside the scientific community, and supported by arguments/data that, despite sounding scientific, are not. Pseudo-archaeological theories, which mostly proliferate among the general public rather than specialists, tend to imitate the style and scope of scientific discourses by presenting proofs and disproving contradicting hypotheses, but their supporting arguments are (sometimes intentionally) misleading. As Garrett G. Fagan and Kenneth L. Feder have argued, pseudo-archaeological texts imitate science while presenting 'fallacious logic, manufactured evidence, misrepresentation of carefully selected data, quotes taken out of context, rhetorical sleight-of-hand and outright error'.⁷

Most importantly, pseudo-archaeology is driven not by scientific rigour but by a strong narrative, and it often takes the form of reportage rather than an essay, as in Graham Hancock's *Fingerprints of the Gods: The Evidence of Earth's Lost Civilization* (1995). Indeed, scientific details and causality are often overlooked in favour of creative juxtapositions and similes. As Michael Carroll writes, 'the evidence presented in support of the theory being proposed is so impressionistic that it serves a function analogous to the inkblots on a Rorschach test, namely: such evidence serves as an ambiguous stimulus onto which the subject can project what he wants to see'.⁸ It is precisely this narrative dimension rooted (or claiming to be rooted) in scientific facts that allows us to consider pseudo-archaeology as related to science fiction. What's more, science fiction directly influences pseudo-archaeology, some of the most notorious examples of which deal with technologically advanced lost civilizations and extraterrestrials visiting our planet.

⁵ Stephen Williams, *Fantastic Archaeology: The Wild Side of North American Prehistory* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991).

⁶ Cornelius Holtorf, 'Beyond Crusades: How (Not) to Engage with Alternative Archaeologies', *World Archaeology*, 37.4 (2005), pp. 544–51.

⁷ Garrett G. Fagan and Kenneth L. Feder, 'Crusading against Straw Men: An Alternative View of Alternative Archaeologies – Response to Holtorf (2005)', *World Archaeology*, 38.4 (2006), pp. 718–29 (p. 720). See also Garrett G. Fagan, 'Diagnosing Pseudoarchaeology', in G. G. Fagan (ed.), *Archaeological Fantasies: How Pseudoarchaeology Misrepresents the Past and Misleads the Public* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 23–46; Kenneth L. Feder, *Frauds, Myths, and Mysteries: Science and Pseudoscience in Archaeology* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2014).

⁸ Michael Carroll, 'Of Atlantis and Ancient Astronauts: A Structural Study of Two Modern Myths', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 11.3 (1977), pp. 541–50 (p. 542).

Of course, the concept of pseudo-archaeology covers a vast variety of forms, not all of which are connected to science fiction, and I am not going to investigate them all. For instance, certain political or religious groups use archaeological sources to back up their ideological claims,⁹ with pseudo-archaeological proofs of the long-standing presence of certain peoples in certain territories having been fabricated by nationalistic regimes to justify territorial claims. Other examples of pseudo-archaeology include the theories of the independent scholar Felice Vinci, whose *Omero nel Baltico* (1995) claims that the real setting of the Homeric poems is the Baltic Sea by drawing on misleading parallels that have nothing supernatural or extraterrestrial about them. My focus in this chapter is a kind of pseudo-archaeological speculation involving ancient aliens, hyper-technological civilizations, and sudden collapses.

The area of pseudo-archaeology that goes by the name of ‘ancient astronaut theory’ speculates that extraterrestrial beings came to our planet, leaving traces: ‘si va dall’esistenza di particolari reperti archeologici, non spiegabili all’interno del contesto nel quale sono stati rinvenuti, alla manipolazione del codice genetico degli ominidi preistorici e, quindi, a un’influenza diretta sull’evoluzione del genere umano’¹⁰ [ranging from archaeological artefacts, inexplicable in their historical context, to the manipulation of the genetic code of prehistorical hominids, thus directly influencing the evolution of the human species]. According to supporters of this theory, testimonies about ancient astronauts can be found in mythologies and monuments, mostly non-European ones. Extraterrestrial visitors are supposed to have contributed to the technological flourishing of civilizations that disappeared due to natural cataclysms or conflicts – such events can be traced in stories of ‘lost continents’ such as Atlantis, Lemuria, and Mu. Modern myths (say, unidentified flying objects) interact with these theories, suggesting not only that the Earth has always been under surveillance/control on the part of alien civilizations, but also that the survivors of ancient continents took refuge in space or inaccessible parts of our planet.¹¹

The complex cultural genealogy of pseudo-archaeology merges science and esotericism – ‘ancient astronaut theory’ overlaps with the myth of Atlantis and the creatively reconstructed history of civilizations. Paralleling the evolution of archaeology as a science, the first examples

⁹ James R. Lewis, ‘Excavating Traditions: Alternative Archaeologies as Legitimation Strategies’, *Numen*, 59.2–3 (2012), pp. 202–21.

¹⁰ Ciardi, *Il mistero degli antichi astronauti*, Kindle edition, ‘Introduzione’.

¹¹ Ciardi, *Il mistero degli antichi astronauti*, Kindle edition, ‘La diffusione del mistero’.

of it can be found in the nineteenth century, that age of positivism, colonialism, discoveries, and widespread interest in the occult. As European powers attempted to control and map the known world, discoveries of ancient Mayan cities and a more precise understanding of Egyptian culture sparked a vast interest in the mysteries of the human past. This was connected to a commonplace in European esotericism that can be traced to Plato: certain people, despite being isolated and apparently not so 'civilized' in Western eyes, were the descendants of much more advanced civilizations. Such a mythicized view of ancient wisdom, which primarily concerned the Egyptians, the Mayans, and the Incas, was one of the foundational pillars of theosophy, a significant cultural movement founded in the United States by the Russian immigrant Helena Blavatsky in the late nineteenth century that merged recently imported concepts from Asian religions with concepts in the European esoteric tradition.

Perhaps the most important topic of speculation in theosophy was popularized by essays such as Ignatius Donnelly's *Atlantis: The Antediluvian World* (1882) and William Scott-Elliot's *The Story of Atlantis: A Geographical, Historical and Ethnological Sketch* (1895). According to those authors, Atlantis was an advanced civilization that vanished due to internal warfare, along with the continent on which it was situated – cultures like the Mayans and Egyptians were remnants of its glory and knowledge. In Charles Hoy Fort's hugely popular *The Book of the Damned* (1919), this idea was merged with alternative science. What Fort defines as 'damned data' are mysterious events and artefacts that science was unable to explain, or refused to. *The Book of the Damned*, which chaotically and creatively merges elements of several topics like UFOs, had no influence on the scientific community, but hugely affected the popular imagination, and helped shape the work of writers as important as Howard Phillips Lovecraft, whose perception of Fort's theories as unrealistic did not stop him making great use of them in his fiction, as in the novella *At the Mountains of Madness* (1936).

The author who did most for the popular success of the 'ancient astronaut theory' was the Swiss-born Däniken (1935–). *Chariots of the Gods?* – proposing that ancient civilizations had been given advanced technological tools by aliens, and that the proof of such contact could be identified in religions and mythologies – sold millions of copies, and the documentary based on the book was nominated for an Academy Award.¹² The popularity of Däniken's book paved the way for several imitators, most notably Hancock (1950–) and Sitchin

¹² Jonas Richter, 'Traces of the Gods: Ancient Astronauts as a Vision of Our Future', *Numen*, 59.2–3 (2012), pp. 222–48.

(1920–2010). If we take Däniken’s work as a paradigm, we can see that ‘ancient astronaut theory’ is problematic to say the least, not just from a scientific perspective, in that the idea of ancient civilizations receiving their knowledge from aliens is loaded with colonial and Eurocentric prejudices. As Kenneth Feder has written, the concept of people based in today’s America or Asia requiring outside help (Atlantis/aliens) to produce their lasting monuments is ‘predicated on an assumption of incapability on the part of those particular groups and the superiority of others’.¹³ Feder notes that the vast majority of examples in Däniken’s book come from places other than Europe: ‘he thinks that only through the assistance of men from outer space could native Africans, Asians, and Americans have produced the prehistoric works that archaeologists find on these continents’.¹⁴ Däniken is largely silent on monuments like the Palace of Knossos, the Parthenon, even Stonehenge: his doubts arise only in relation to monuments produced by predominantly non-Europeans.

The success of pseudo-archaeology is deeply relevant to our age of conspiracy theories, fake news, and post-truth. Andreas Grünshloß identifies five reasons behind the popularity of pseudo-archaeology:¹⁵

- 1) ‘The fascination with the mysterious’.
- 2) ‘A lay people’s revolt against the academic establishment’ – an authority in pseudo-archaeology is more often than not an independent scholar or someone on the margins of the academic community, attempting to counter a perceived homogeneity, ‘the compartmentalized specialization and the arrogant self-certainty of established academic discourses’.
- 3) ‘Efforts into basic reductions of complexity’ – pseudo-archaeology tends to merge different fields of research into a unified ‘theory of everything’, aiming at simple solutions to great historical unknowns, and the general public does not possess the knowledge to counter visions of complex scientific issues even if false or patently absurd.

¹³ Feder, *Frauds, Myths and Mysteries*, p. 32.

¹⁴ Feder, *Frauds, Myths and Mysteries*, p. 241.

¹⁵ Andreas Grünshloß, ‘“Ancient Astronaut” Narrations: A Popular Discourse on Our Religious Past’, *Marburg Journal of Religion*, 11.1 (2006), pp. 1–25 (p. 15).

- 4) 'Technological explanation and Euhemeristic disenchantment of religion' – pseudo-archaeology casts a 'revolutionary' light on a shared past in which millions of people have blindly and superstitiously believed by proposing a *literal* understanding of religion and mythology from a technological point of view, such that superhuman forces and means depicted in legends and myths are not to be understood as figures, metaphors, or allegories, but as depictions of actual superhuman beings, whose superiority was technological rather than ontological.
- 5) 'A new synthesis between technology and religion' – pseudo-archaeology creates a blend of science and religion, surprisingly apt for secular times, by substituting aliens and technological wonders for 'debunked' gods and miracles, as proven by UFO-inspired beliefs like Raëlism and Scientology.

The Mysteries of a Changing Country

Italy has a rich tradition of pseudo-archaeology, which is perhaps unsurprising given the pervasiveness of ancient history in Italian culture. Even before Kolosimo's work, two novels dealing with pseudo-archaeological ideas appeared in the prestigious periodical *Urania*. In 1954, Luigi Rapuzzi (under the pseudonym L. R. Johannis) published *Quando ero "aborigeno"*, in which he narrated an encounter between hominids and technologically advanced aliens from which modern humankind came into being.¹⁶ In the same year, Emilio Walesko (it is unclear whether this name is also a pseudonym) took up the theme of the lost continent in *L'Atlantide svelata* – a title reprising Helena Blavatsky's classic theosophical work *Isis Unveiled* (1877). A few years later, the popularity of these topics was boosted by the publication of an almanac of strange and unlikely facts, Louis Pauwels and Jacques Bergier's *Le matin des magiciens*, released in France in 1960, and translated into Italian in 1963.¹⁷ Similar themes appear in Mauro Bigliano's numerous books that propose reading the Bible as a text not about God, but ancient aliens visiting Earth.¹⁸ Widespread

¹⁶ I discussed Rapuzzi's work in 'C'era una volta Johannis. Luigi Rapuzzi tra fantascienza, contattismo e fantarcheologia', in Camilletti (ed.), *Almanacco della fantarcheologia*, pp. 43–57.

¹⁷ The pair also founded a magazine, *Planète*, in 1961, which had an Italian edition from 1964.

¹⁸ Stefano Bigliardi, 'Of Polenta and Elohim: Mauro Bigliano's "Ancient Aliens"'

interest among the Italian public in themes related to pseudo-archaeology can be connected to a fascination with the occult in the 1950s and 1960s, defined by Fabio Camilletti as decades of ‘occulture’, in line with Christopher Partridge.¹⁹ This *occult* must be understood broadly, merging fiction with non-fiction, and ranging from traditional magic to urban legends, from spiritualism to UFO sightings.²⁰ Kolosimo’s very popular work was by no means isolated; rather, it captured the imagination of a readership that was already heavily invested in the subject.

Kolosimo’s peculiar argumentative style differentiates him, insofar as he does not provide a specific thesis: his books are collections of curious facts and unexplainable stories, rhapsodically pieced together in relation to a recurring theme. In many cases, images of different artefacts are placed side by side, with their similarities highlighted. Kolosimo never tells his readers that *this* or *that* happened for certain; rather, he lets them wonder whether a certain hypothesis might be true. Such a narrative style brings together science and pseudoscience on the same level. In *Ombre sulle stelle*, the lifelong communist Kolosimo starts by delineating Soviet successes in the space race with great exactitude, only to move swiftly to astronautics and UFO sightings, both international and Italian. *Fiori di luna* discusses topics as varied as cryptozoology, the Hollow Earth, Atlantis, and Soviet rocket science. This does not mean that Kolosimo accorded the same importance to science and pseudoscience, but rather that he respected their capacity to stir the reader’s imagination. It is not by chance that Kolosimo often refers to science-fiction classics in his work: *Odissea stellare*, devoted to alternative interpretations of Homeric mythologies, opens with a long reference to Jack Vance;²¹ *Ombre sulle stelle* puts rocket science and UFO sightings alongside Luigi Rapuzzi’s *Quando ero “aborigeno”*.²²

Kolosimo’s work chimes not only with cultural changes in post-war Italy, but also with environmental changes. From the 1950s to the 1970s,

between Anti-Religion and New Religiosity’, in B. Zeller (ed.), *Handbook of UFO Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), pp. 270–94.

¹⁹ Fabio Camilletti, *Italia lunare: Gli anni Sessanta e l’occulto* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2018); Christopher Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West*, vol. 1 (London: T & T Clark International, 2004); Christopher Partridge, ‘Introduction’, in C. Partridge (ed.), *The Occult World* (New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 1–14.

²⁰ In 1978, when Steven Spielberg’s *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* came out, an unprecedented number of UFO sightings took place in Italy, more than a hundred per month. See Stefano Dalla Casa, ‘Dischi volanti sull’Italia’, *Il Tascabile*, 4 January 2019, www.iltascabile.com/scienze/dischi-volanti-italia.

²¹ Peter Kolosimo, *Odissea stellare* (Milan: SugarCo, 1974), pp. 9–10.

²² Peter Kolosimo, *Ombre sulle stelle* (Milan: SugarCo, 1966), pp. 179–80.

significant economic growth radically transformed Italy, which went from being predominantly agricultural, with a large part of the population living in the countryside, to being industrialized and urbanized.²³ People moved to new metropolitan areas, including many leaving the South for the more polluted North. There was an effort to establish a system of motorways connecting the whole country, and the number of cars grew: Italy's most important car manufacturer, Fiat, went from 100,000 units a year in 1950 to 1.6 million in 1966.²⁴ Unprecedented experiences arose with this, as Stephanie Malia Hom notes: 'automobiles changed urban panoramas and natural landscapes, transforming centuries-old piazzas into parking lots and scarring mountain passes with asphalt. [...] This car culture spurred developments in touristic infrastructure, like the motel [...] and the Autostrada del Sole [...], allowing for easier access to packaged destinations, which exponentially increased tourist numbers'.²⁵ Swathes of Italy became a strange mixture of suburbs, industrial districts, and countryside, in a form of 'industrializzazione diffusa' or 'campagna urbanizzata' – what Monica Seger calls an interstitial landscape.²⁶

As modernization made remote areas accessible, the nation's dark past returned to haunt the present. Gabriel Moshenska talks of the 'archaeological uncanny',²⁷ something that brings the dead into the world of the living, the past into the present, the strange into the familiar. New approaches to national history revolving around counter-stories and alternative genealogies appeared in a large number of tourist guidebooks dedicated to the unusual, the strange, and the mysterious, most notably Mario Spagnol and Giovenale Santi's *Guida all'Italia leggendaria misteriosa insolita fantastica* (1966–1967), occasionally referenced in Kolosimo's books, and Dino Buzzati's *I misteri d'Italia* (1978), a posthumous collection of articles published in the newspaper *Corriere della sera* in 1965. A substantial part of Kolosimo's success was due to such uncanniness resonating with readers' curiosity: his most famous books correlate Italian history and landscape features with places at a distance in time and space, reflecting how communications and movement were becoming easier as changes swept across the Italian peninsula. Like the genesis of pseudo-archaeology in times of exploration and scientific

²³ Monica Seger, *Landscapes in Between: Environmental Change in Modern Italian Literature and Film* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), pp. 10–11.

²⁴ Stephanie Malia Hom, *The Beautiful Country: Tourism and the Impossible State of Destination Italy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), p. 135.

²⁵ Hom, *The Beautiful Country*, p. 135.

²⁶ Seger, *Landscapes in Between*, p. 13.

²⁷ Gabriel Moshenska, 'The Archaeological Uncanny', *Public Archaeology*, 5.2 (2006), pp. 91–99.

inquiry, Italian pseudo-archaeology flourished when both outer space and Italy's remote corners seemed increasingly accessible.

In contrast to the likes of Däniken, Kolosimo constantly uses examples from Italian geography, along with more traditional examples of famous archaeological mysteries, such as the pyramids or Nazca lines. The Etruscans appear frequently in Kolosimo's work: in *Italia mistero cosmico*, he recounts the tale of an Italian professor in Venezuela who claims that they were originally from the Peruvian Andes;²⁸ in *Astronavi sulla preistoria*, it is suggested that a sketch in the Tomb of Montagnola resembles a spaceship.²⁹ The choice of a civilization synonymous with death, mostly understood through necropolises and tombs, conveys an interest in an obscure part of Italian history, as opposed to the history of the Romans, so often evoked in nation-building processes.

More unusual examples pertain to Kolosimo's own experiences or the opening of Italian wonders to mass tourism. In *Astronavi sulla preistoria*, Kolosimo makes a list of buildings that could have been inspired by ancient spaceships, with Puglia's traditional *trulli* [stone houses with conical roofs] appearing in the company of Mayan pyramids and Egyptian obelisks.³⁰ Thanks in large part to the partly state-owned organization Nuove iniziative per il Sud (INSUD), in operation from 1963 to 1991, southern Italy benefitted considerably from mass tourism. INSUD spent more than 40 billion lire on projects in the South, especially through its subsidiary Valtour, which created and managed tourist villages.³¹ Liguria was also heavily featured in the work of Kolosimo and of the writers of *Pi Kappa*.³² One of the

²⁸ Peter Kolosimo, *Italia mistero cosmico* (Milan: SugarCo, 1977), pp. 101–18.

²⁹ Peter Kolosimo, *Astronavi sulla preistoria* (Milan: SugarCo, 1972), p. 51.

³⁰ Kolosimo, *Astronavi sulla preistoria*, pp. 36–43.

³¹ Hom, *The Beautiful Country*, pp. 143–44.

³² As for *Pi Kappa*, see for instance Enzo Bernardini's articles 'Arcadia Ligure' (year II, issue 5, May 1973; pp. 34–37) and 'Ruspe sulla preistoria' (year II, issue 6, June 1973; pp. 54–57). The latter directly addressed the damages that growing urban expansion and the construction of new motorways create to the landscape, compromising important prehistorical sites in the area of Finale Ligure. Bernardini also co-authored (with Giacinta Rossi-Ris and Caterina Serafin) the guide 'Italia: viaggio nella preistoria', which appeared on the magazine in July and August 1973, and was meant as a portable tourist guide of mysterious sites and facts, to be used in those two months when most Italians go on vacation. Italian mysteries are not interesting only because they deal with national history and culture, but also because they have become easily reachable, and readers are invited to go investigate them. Notably, *Pi Kappa* was not only concerned with national tourism, but also with international destinations: the magazine

Italian regions that more than any other underwent radical environmental changes due to (often illegal) urbanization to accommodate new touristic needs, as well as one close to the French riviera and the international jet set, Liguria is portrayed as a mysterious land, where local superstitions about witches and devils merge with pseudo-archaeological speculations. Being at the Balzi Rossi cave (a prehistorical site immediately before the French border) means being, in Kolosimo's words, 'sulle sponde dell'ignoto'³³ [on the shores of the unknown]: a metaphor, of course, but also a reference to one of Italy's most renowned and exclusive beaches. The linking of a popular site to a commonplace of pseudo-archaeological speculations brought together the local and the foreign, and exoticized a part of Italy in ways resonating with new industries.

Another tourist site that recurs in several of Kolosimo's books is Mount Musinè near Turin – photographs illustrating *Italia mistero cosmico* show Kolosimo there.³⁴ This place, in which the amateur archaeologist Mario Salomone supposedly discovered a prehistorical astrological map carved in stone, is at the entrance of the Susa Valley, where fierce and divisive environmental activism arose in the 1990s in opposition to the construction of a high-speed railway line (No TAV). Clearly, Kolosimo's examples resonate with environmental changes that the country was/is undergoing. His references to Italian mysteries are not simply curiosities; rather, they mirror the development of a mass petro-culture in a changing country, where everything was suddenly reachable, and national heritage was being reduced to the level of a tourist itinerary – his references are to be understood according to the critical categories of a globalized discourse on pseudo-archaeology.

The Silurian Hypothesis: Can We Really Think of a Different World?

Ancient aliens and catastrophes in an imaginary past might appear to have little to do with our planet's ecological problems. Yet, pseudo-archaeology is an interesting lens through which to consider the Anthropocene, the era when (to paraphrase Dipesh Chakrabarty) our species stopped being simply a biological force and became a geological

organized guided tours of international sites connected to the mysterious and the occult, such as Stonehenge, Petra, and Egypt.

³³ Peter Kolosimo, *Civiltà del silenzio* (Florence: Salani, 1978), p. 11.

³⁴ Kolosimo, *Astronavi sulla preistoria*, pp. 9–12; *Italia mistero cosmico*, p. 87.

one.³⁵ Reckoning with past societies that collapsed despite their allegedly advanced technology presents an opportunity to rethink the possible collapse of *our* civilization(s). Fantasies of collapse have been central to science-fiction accounts of the Anthropocene and the work of climate activists since Rachel Carson's 1962 *Silent Spring*, at least. Imagining the downfall of advanced civilizations is an opportunity to reflect on sustainability: discussions of hypothetical technologies similar to our own can highlight the perils of the Nuclear Age and petromodernity, suggesting the need for cleaner sources of energy.

In part, pseudo-archaeology led Schmidt and Frank to their Silurian Hypothesis, intended as a thought experiment about time. If an ancient industrial civilization had actually existed on our planet, the two astrophysicists ask, how would we know?

One of the key questions in assessing the likelihood of finding such a civilization is an understanding of how often – given that life has arisen and that some species are intelligent – an industrial civilization develops. Humans are the only example we know of, and our industrial civilization has lasted (so far) roughly 300 years (since, for example, the beginning of mass-production methods). This is a small fraction of the time we have existed as a species, and a tiny fraction of the time that complex life has existed on the Earth's land surface (~400 million years ago). This short time period raises the obvious question as to whether this could have happened before.³⁶

The first problem raised here is that life is rarely preserved in geological records. Only a small fraction of life gets fossilized, and this percentage 'varies widely as a function of time, habitat and degree of soft tissue versus hard shells or bones'.³⁷ Fossilization rates are low in tropical and forested environments, and high in arid environments and fluvial systems. The number of dinosaur fossils is incredibly small when one considers the long period during which they lived on Earth – a hypothetical species with a lifespan as short as *Homo sapiens* is likely to have left no fossils at all. The chances of complex objects surviving are similarly small: the handheld Antikythera Mechanism, crafted in Ancient Greece to compute celestial movements, was 'a unique object

³⁵ Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'The Climate of History: Four Theses', *Critical Inquiry*, 35 (2009), pp. 197–222.

³⁶ Schmidt and Frank, 'The Silurian Hypothesis', p. 142.

³⁷ Schmidt and Frank, 'The Silurian Hypothesis', p. 143.

until the Renaissance'.³⁸ Humankind's impacts during the Anthropocene are the notable exception to the scarce traceability of life in geological records.

The Silurian Hypothesis prompts reflections on the extent of the traces left on Earth in relation to the unsustainability of human ways of life: 'while we strongly doubt that any previous industrial civilization existed before our own', Schmidt and Frank state, 'asking the question in a formal way that articulates explicitly what evidence for such a civilization might look like raises its own useful questions related both to astrobiology and to Anthropocene studies'.³⁹ This question addresses the conceptual problems raised by pseudo-archaeology, often inadvertently: why is the kind of life being imagined so similar to the carbon-based forms that we know? Why is the purpose of hypothetical aliens always so similar to that of European colonizers? And why is their technology so similar to ours, as if today's machines were the only possible outcome of every civilization? As Grünschoß argues, ancient alien theory entails 'technological projections onto the surface of ancient religious texts and artifacts – projections from a scientific space age era into a remote religious and cultural past'.⁴⁰

Schmidt and Frank are of a different persuasion, noting a paradox when it comes to 'the Anthropogenic footprint on a geological timescale':

The longer human civilization lasts, the larger the signal one would expect in the record. However, the longer a civilization lasts, the more sustainable its practices would need to have become in order to survive. The more sustainable a society (e.g. in energy generation, manufacturing or agriculture), the smaller the footprint on the rest of the planet. But the smaller the footprint, the less of a signal will be embedded in the geological record. Thus, the footprint of civilization might be self-limiting on a relatively short timescale.⁴¹

In other words, the indicators that we could use to detect an ancient industrialized civilization are those at the basis of the definition of the Anthropocene: stable isotope anomalies for carbon, oxygen, hydrogen, and nitrogen; sediment records; extinctions; non-naturally occurring synthetics; plastics; elements with an atomic number greater than that of uranium. Such markers are 'a consequence of the specific path that

³⁸ Schmidt and Frank, 'The Silurian Hypothesis', p. 143.

³⁹ Schmidt and Frank, 'The Silurian Hypothesis', p. 148.

⁴⁰ Grünschoß, "Ancient Astronaut" Narrations', p. 16.

⁴¹ Schmidt and Frank, 'The Silurian Hypothesis', p. 144.

human society and technology has taken'.⁴² In all probability, it would be very difficult to detect an industrialized society that had developed renewable energies – theories about ancient aliens and super-advanced civilizations can only be accepted by postulating technologies completely different from ours, which raises the problem of what traces to look for.

Thinking about alien life leads to reflections not only about the shapes that life can take, but also about what life *is*. Ancient alien theory paradoxically tends to be anthropocentric: humankind is subordinated to a more powerful intelligent species inclined towards similar purposes and activities. In the end, Earth's inhabitants are not God's chosen, but those of extraterrestrial masters. Even biologically, aliens tend to be reminiscent of humans, whether small and grey or in the guise of giant lizards. What about life taking a form not based on carbon? It could appear in a shape that people might not even understand as 'life', presenting difficulties akin to conceptualizing the agency of matter and the non-human. Indeed, speculations about ancient aliens that go hand in hand with attempts to explain the vastness of the cosmos and the finitude of our species often end up just imparting what is already known.

Conclusion

Kolosimo was not an exceptionally original thinker, nor did he give rise to a revolutionary understanding of the Anthropocene. Despite often discussing the possibility of technologically advanced civilizations or alien species visiting Earth in remote times, Kolosimo is never really interested in outlining a unified theory, and does not speculate much about the reasons why civilizations like the oft-referenced Atlantis collapsed. Was it war? A 'natural' disaster? A problem of sustainability? In this sense, Schmidt and Frank's ideas are not played out fully in Kolosimo's writings, which display curiosity and openness to a wide variety of sources that are somewhat at odds with hard science. Yet, Kolosimo does invite readers to question Earth's history, and to imagine courses of action. One feature is always present in his books: fascination with the unknown, evoked as much by the vastly remote as the local – he is in awe of the natural and cultural qualities of our planet, which must be preserved. A book such as *Il pianeta sconosciuto* is important because of its holistic perspective, however much it deals with 'damned data'. In addition to cryptids like the Loch Ness Monster or the Yeti, Kolosimo

⁴² Schmidt and Frank, 'The Silurian Hypothesis', p. 148.

addresses popular ‘mysteries’ spanning the depths of the oceans and what lies beneath our planet’s crust. That book’s introductory pages, commenting on the moon landing, declare:

Mentre [l’immaginazione] ci porta alle stelle, dimentichiamo di guardarci attorno. Se lo facessimo, saremmo forse indotti a scendere di sella per dare un’occhiata ad un altro pianeta sconosciuto [...], dove ci vediamo formulare tutte le domande che giungono a noi dallo spazio e dove molte risposte sono suggellate da un punto interrogativo più avvincente d’un [sic] *suspense* siderale.⁴³

[While our imagination takes us to the stars, we forget to look around us. If we did, we might be tempted to stop and take a look at another unknown planet, [our own,] where we are confronted with the same questions that arise from outer space, and where several answers await just beyond a [certain] question mark that is more compelling than a sidereal cliff-hanger.]

⁴³ Peter Kolosimo, *Il pianeta sconosciuto* (Milan: SugarCo, 1969), p. 12.