

Ruin Lust, Fantastic Futures: From the Eighteenth Century to Contemporary Speculative Archaeologies

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the ruin as a device of cognitive estrangement used in speculative fiction to thematize given conceptualizations of historical time. Drawing on the hypothesis that the fantastic ruin and archaeological methods applied to past futures matured in the European imagination during the early modern age, this research locates twentieth-century fantastic archaeology in the long-standing history of the ruin within speculative imagination. Since the eighteenth century, the remains of the past have synecdochically fostered the idea of a future observer contemplating the ruins of the present. Throughout the nineteenth century, the idea of radical changes to come increasingly incorporated the possibility of disasters, catastrophes, and extinctions and speculations about lost civilizations. This article outlines the connection between these textual genealogies, with a particular focus on English-language literature and twentieth-century pseudo-archaeology that speculates about hyper-evolved terrestrial or alien civilizations in a distant past, through the case study of Peter Kolosimo, an Italian author who compiled his books drawing on sources from many European cultural traditions, and whose works have been translated into several languages, including English. (GI)

KEYWORDS: Ruin, speculative archaeology, ancient astronaut hypotheses, lost civilizations, catastrophes



Introduction

The contemplation of ruins has been an essential ingredient in the emergence of a science fictional mindset. During the early modern age, the physical decay of the artifacts of past civilizations stimulated the conceptual construction of the passing of time and thus informed the conceptualization of the future in the European mind (Clute). Building on the conceptual framework established by Darko Suvin (Suvin; Parrinder), the ruin may be defined as a device of *temporal cognitive estrangement*: it prompts a temporal defamiliarization, originating in the narrative dominance of a *novum* validated by a cognitive logic. It provides a *novum*—a fantastical element, a departure from the

author's experiential reality—which invites a form of distanced fruition, an *ostranenie*, disrupting the mental automatisms with which we conceive time, and providing a meta-understanding of the lenses through which we view history. Drawing on the methodological perspectives of comparative literature and cultural history, this article aims to connect the long-standing history of the relationship between ruins and the future with a recent form taken on by fantastic speculation: that of pseudo-archaeology. Pseudo-archaeology—or “fantastic” or “fringe archaeology”—refers to the fanciful interpretation of the remnants of the past and their use outside the boundaries of the disciplinary fields devoted to the study of history, to trace in them signs of fantastic events: legendary civilizations, ancient catastrophes, aliens who came to Earth in bygone eras. These ideas are found in books that enjoyed great commercial success in the twentieth century (and still do). Works such as Erich von Däniken's *Chariots of the Gods?* or Graham Hancock's *Fingerprints of the Gods* have had wide trans-national circulations owing to their translations into numerous languages. Millions of copies have been sold worldwide, with multiple television programs and films in their wake, inspired by their ideas (Feder 16, 60, 267). Peter Kolosimo, an Italian author active between the late 1950s and the early 1980s, exemplifies a pseudo-archaeology close to the themes and rhetorical-narrative strategies typical of science fiction, which may be described as “speculative archaeology.” Kolosimo's books lend themselves very well to exemplifying the twentieth-century use of the futuristic ruin. This article assumes that texts that have entered the Anglosphere through translations are of interest in the study of English and American literature and culture.

Heliotropic civilizations

As early as the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, ruins appeared in European art as *memento mori*, warnings against human *vanitas*, emblems aimed at stimulating the contemplation of the mortality of things and people, and the passing of time (Clute; Macaulay). The feelings of melancholy aroused by this contemplation were captured around 1779 by Heinrich Füssli (Fuseli) in *Der Künstler verzweifelt vor der Grösse der antiken Trümmer* [The Artist's Despair Before the Grandeur of Ancient Ruins] (Figure 1), and no less famous examples could be drawn from Giovanni Piranesi's influential works.



Figure 1.
Heinrich Fuseli, *The Artist's Despair Before the Grandeur of Ancient Ruins*, c. 1779

Buildings conceived and constructed as classical ruins, or romantic and Gothic decadent structures gave rise to a fascination that led, in the eighteenth century, to the coining of an *ad hoc* word in German—*Ruinenlust*—to indicate a taste for, even obsession with, or irresistible attraction to ruins (López Galviz et al.). Reframed within a plurality of contexts and interpreted as a fragment of processes ranging from the picturesque to the apocalyptic, the ruin also had the power to engender futuristic projections (Prica 24–25, 207–32). The contemplation on remnants of past events made the spectator aware of the existence of a time continuum, the last moment of which, in the present, is represented by them. Reflections on historical time as a linear dimension, the seat of cause-and-effect mechanisms, gradually gave rise to a new imaginary colonization of the future. The present—in which the traces

of the past were observed—was destined to become the past of observers to come.

The futuristic projection, the extrapolation—logical and imaginative at the same time—of a distant state of affairs derived from the present was nourished by a look backwards. American space and time, for example, became, in the eighteenth century, the backdrop for revitalizations of *translatio imperii topoi*. Greco-Roman classicism became part of the ideological, cultural, and rhetorical repertoire exploited to represent British power overseas and, later, in Britain's former colonies (Bradley; Malamud). Ancient history provided models for conceptualizing and understanding cultural differences, and for articulating an imperial discourse in its entanglements with ideas of monarchical power, expansion, and civilization, as well as for anticipating developments to come (Vlassopoulos). This is how Horace Walpole, in a letter written to Horace Mann in 1774, described this scenario:

The next Augustan age will dawn on the other side of the Atlantic. There will, perhaps, be a Thucydides at Boston, a Xenophon at New York, and, in time, a Virgil at Mexico, and a Newton at Peru. At last, some curious traveller from Lima will visit England and give a description of the ruins of St Paul's, like the editions of Balbec and Palmyra. (Walpole)

America as the cradle of future civilizations made an impression on some observers of the New World from across the Atlantic. A collection that appeared in London in 1780, attributed to Thomas Lyttelton (Cannon), claimed to contain the letter of an American traveler who wrote it, in the year 2199, from the ruins of St. Paul's porch to a friend in Boston, the capital of the western empire, enclosing his poetic compositions about the once prosperous city of London (Lyttelton; *The Critical Review*; *London Review*). The ruins of England whose greatness once illuminated Europe were observed from the west (Figure 2).

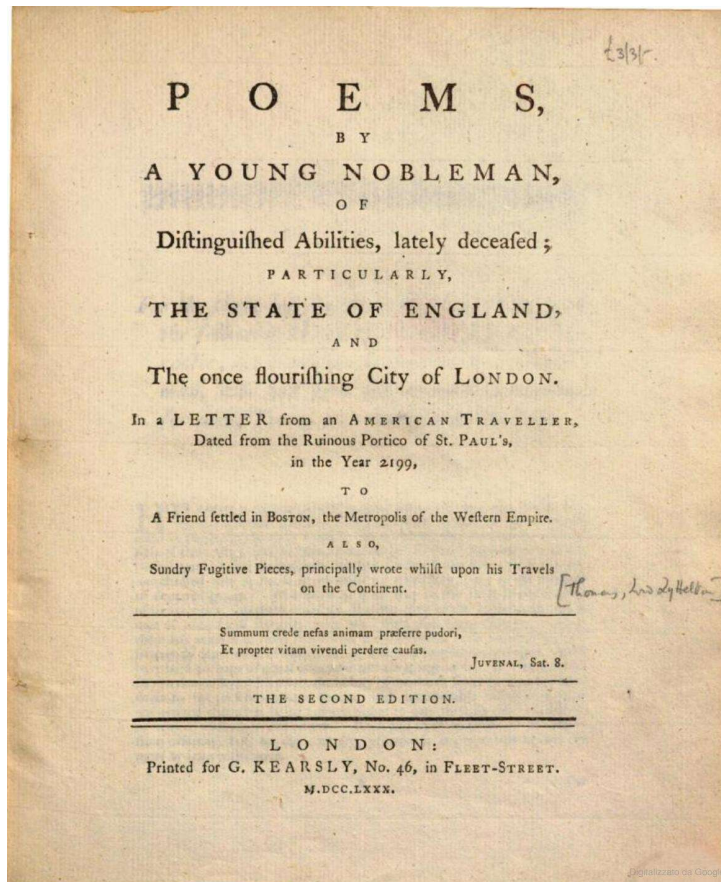


Figure 2.
Thomas Lyttelton, *Poems by a Young Nobleman*, 1780

Similarly, in Madame de Tessé's correspondence, Thomas Jefferson's memoirs were presented as a guide to the antiquities of the future for travelers who would visit the ancient vestiges of Paris, a new Babylon long since decayed (de Tessé; Gerbi 244–46).

The philosophical traveler in the letters of J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur at the end of the century looks forward to the tumultuous changes across the Atlantic (St. John). The spectacle of America as the site of a re-foundation of civilization is, for Crèvecoeur, more pleasing and philosophically productive than the melancholic and decadent ruins of Rome or Campania. The future of America and Russia are compared: while the Americans are the seeds of future nations, the Russians are new men insofar

as they are newly introduced to the progress of the arts and sciences (St. John 251). The foundation of American cities, whose youth was in the present so apparent, will one day be lost in memory, and will be an enigma for posterity. In Crèvecoeur's futuristic projection the streets of American towns, trodden by countless passers-by, are already overlapping with the ancient passageways still visible behind the buildings of Pompeii.

The French and American political upheavals at the end of the eighteenth century favored the semantic shift of *revolution* from a repetitive, cyclical circular motion—for instance, that of a celestial body in orbit in astronomy—to the sudden change of a political, social, economic regime, the acceleration of historical processes within a unidirectional time (Koselleck 136). Liminal in this sense was the use of the term in Constantin François Volney's *Les Ruines, ou méditation sur les révolutions des empires* [Ruins, or Reflections on the Revolutions of Empires] (1791), a text that codified the trope of the present as the site of future ruins by its synecdochal property.

The taste for the ruins of the present observed from a distant future is emblemized in the ruined Louvre as imagined by Hubert Robert in the well-known diptych exhibited in Paris in 1796 and in Joseph Michael Gandy's work depicting the Bank of England (Figure 3).



Figure 3.

J. M. Gandy, *A Bird's-Eye View of The Bank of England*, 1830

Gandy portrays the building completed by Sir John Soane after some forty-five years of work. The watercolor, *A Bird's-eye view of the Bank of England*, presents an axonometric section of the building, which combines elements typical of Renaissance aerial perspectives and Piranesian ruined landscapes. On closer inspection, it is not clear whether the building portrayed is in decay or not yet completed: commissioned by Soane, the image was meant to celebrate his work by making visible the architect's mastery of structural design, decoration, and the monumentality of the result. The building's future appearance suggests an early comparison to the iconic ruins of classical antiquity.

Future past disasters

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries a secularized future began to be pliable by human actions. As the examples offered so far have illustrated, the temporal vertigo engendered by ruins led writers and painters to assume the point of view of observers situated in a distant future. In the first decades of the nineteenth century, speculative narratives of post-catastrophic futures proliferated; cataclysms and extinctions to come entered the European imagination. Francophone and Anglophone literature became populated with last men, the melancholic incarnations of an individualized romantic subject. Influenced by Volney, Jean-Baptiste Cousin de Grainville published *Le Dernier Homme, ouvrage posthume* [The Last Man: A Posthumous Work] in the fourteenth year of the French Republican calendar (1805). Grainville's work exemplifies an apocalyptic imagination that re-functionalized a Christian eschatology on a secularized basis. Grainville codified the paradoxical role of the apocalypse in the emergence of a futuristic literature: apocalypse was in continuity with the Biblical tradition and, at the same time, was part of a post-French Revolution world, in which humankind had the power to shape the course of history (Alkon 158–60; Kupiec; Roberts 121–23). In *Le Dernier Homme*, the entire planet is in ruin, desertified and depopulated (Grainville II, chant VIII 85). The end of time is wrapped in religious symbolism: the textual and prophetic model of the Book of Revelation underlie the narrative structure, and the narrating voices, Omegarus and Sydera—the last man and woman—are presented as the new Adam and Eve. In the tale, there is also a Genius to whom God had entrusted the protection of the earth at the moment of creation.

Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826) marked the abandonment of the Christian mythological dimension. Here the last man before the ruins of civilization is fully disentangled from the parousia or apocalypse of the

Biblical horizon (Petitier 151–53). The narrator claims in the introduction to be printing the prophetic content of some of the writings of the Cumaean Sibyl, found in the prophetess's cave near Naples, but this frame is overtly part of the text's narrative invention. In the late twenty-first century envisioned in the novel, the English monarchy has been overthrown by a revolution, which marks a disconnection between time and progress, since in the heart of the republican empire misery still exists, and the world suffers the tragedy of war caused by a destructive competition between national powers (Sterrenburg). The pandemic that strikes this imagined twenty-first century is a scourge with no ulterior or transcendent meaning (Petitier), and the passage of time does not lead to any realization of humanity. There is no end to history in a metaphysical sense, only in a human sense: no one is left to update calendars. Shelley's work also calls into question our epistemological anthropocentrism (Lokke) and stands out against the backdrop of the vogue for "the last men," who, in the early nineteenth century, populated numerous literary narratives and poetic compositions (Langford; MacArthur), and inspired pictorial works such as those of John Martin (Murray II 714–15) (Figure 4).



Figure 4.
John Martin, *The Last Man*, 1849

Human diversity, remote times, lost civilizations

Speculative inventions around the ruin also developed as a consequence of the profound changes that characterized the conception of the history of humanity in the European mind during the early modern age. The possibility of imagining a very distant future was nourished by the new depth of time that started to characterize the conceptualization of the past. It was especially in the eighteenth century that a number of discoveries and reflections destabilized traditional biblical chronologies, according to which the world had been created some 4,000 years before the birth of Christ. Since at least the seventeenth century, challenges to the biblical chronology have been fuelled by the growth of knowledge on cultures remote from Europe, which had preserved traces of ancient times, or which could not easily be placed into the biblical account of world history. Egyptian dynasties, Chinese sources, and American peoples had cast deep doubt on the Old Testament narrative and the verisimilitude of the Mosaic revelation. There was a growing need for a computation of historical time that would enable different civilizations to be accounted for. The rediscovery of sources from Greco-Latin antiquity also brought about the need to renew chronology between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries (Tortarolo; Toulmin and Goodfield 141–70). Besides, the study of nature prompted a profound reconfiguration of the problem of time. The mystery represented by fossils and the study of the stratifications of the soil fuelled new questions about the past of the world, and about the possibility of making it the target of scientific investigation (Rossi, *The Dark Abyss* 3–6; Rossi, *The Birth* 164–74; Iannuzzi, *Geografie* 17–46). The cultural diversity encountered around the globe and the natural world both favored ideas of time and chronology different from those we were familiar with in Christian sacred history.

The future and past of human civilizations became the subject of new speculations. While the study of human history was undergoing critical methodological innovations, at the junction of historical writing and literary invention it became possible to imagine fantastic interpretations of archaeological evidence and ancient documents. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, theses such as those of Bernard de Fontenelle emerged from the study of the past, according to which ancient myths subjected to rational, critical, and comparative analysis could reveal information about the remote past of peoples. Myth could be used as a historical source, provided one knew how to read beyond the distortion operated by the imagination of ancient peoples, credulous and fond of the marvellous.¹ Thus, legends could provide fantastic representations and explanations of real phenomena and

answers to questions about the cosmos elaborated by a primitive mind, which reduced otherwise incomprehensible elements to known forms.

Between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the similarities of Christianity and pagan cults from different eras and areas were unraveled with a comparative method. All these elements, which were to bear considerable influence on later research in many fields of knowledge, from anthropology to the study of mythology, religions, and literature, can also be traced, much later, in the re-functionalization of material and the folkloric evidence provided by pseudoscience and clipeology (the reinterpretation of textual or material evidence from the past in search of evidence of the passage of extra-terrestrial visitors to our planet). Contributing to the roots of fantastic or mysterious archaeology is also the invention of lost worlds and races that took place between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. What made this subgenre recognizable was the belief that in unexplored parts of the world there might exist civilizations that had survived, in isolation, from pre-Mosaic times to the present (Langford et al.; Pringle et al. "Lost World"). Some of these civilizations were imagined to be more advanced than that in Europe.

Eighteenth-century travelers could believe they saw the hypostatization of past moments of the European development in distant peoples. Thus, the indigenous peoples of America or Africa could become "primitives"—paradoxical contemporary fragments of the past, and it was debated whether humanity was the product of the same creation as Adam and Eve, or whether it was, instead, a descendant of one of the lost tribes of Israel (Gliozzi). Against the backdrop of these geographies of time mapped by travel accounts, philosophical treatises, and encyclopedic compilations, novelists could easily imagine that countries were to be found on the globe that represented the future of Europe—countries more advanced, that is, politically, philosophically, or scientifically, which were shaped by independent histories. Other peoples, thus, served as distorting mirrors through which travelers reflected on their home societies.

Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) exemplifies a body of narratives in which fantastic civilizations were located just beyond the geographical horizons of the known world. In an age in which Australia was not yet known to Europeans, and large areas of the globe were not yet mapped, Laputa could be imagined east of Korea (Figure 5), Lilliput northwest of the Sunda Strait, and Brobdignac as a peninsula on the Pacific coast of the North American continent. As in an earlier utopian tradition, these were inventions in which geographical location was the spatial counterpart of "otherness" in a cultural and historical sense: these fantastic

nations were the result of histories different and independent from those in Europe. They offered a satirical image to comment on the mechanisms that governed the writer's society.

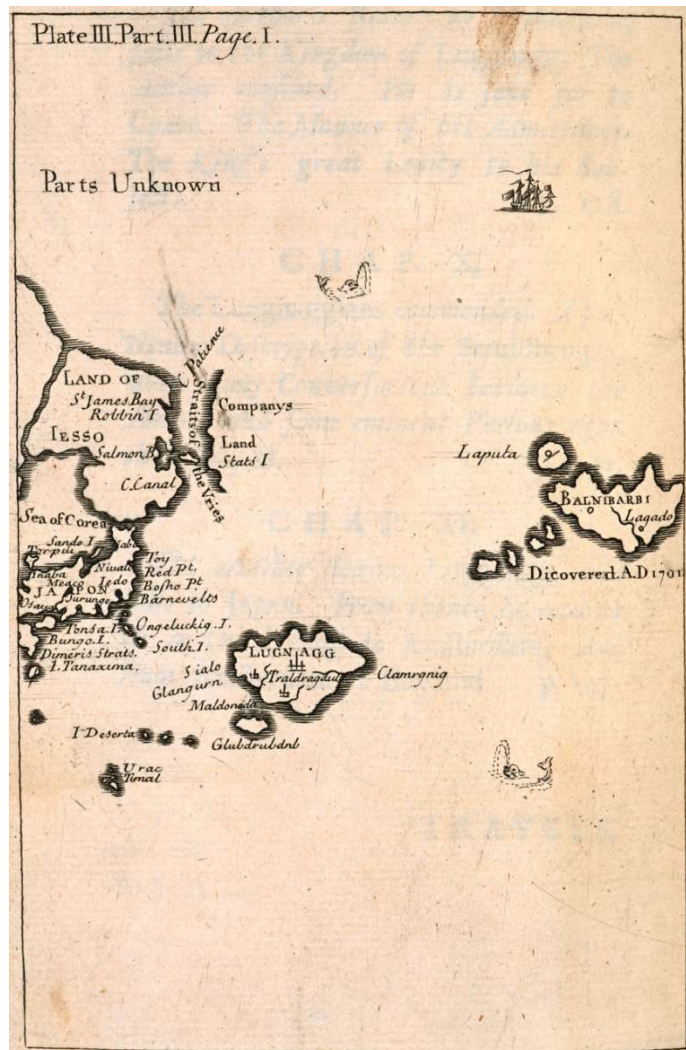


Figure 5.
Map of Laputa. Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, first edition

Drawing on theories about the earth's internal structure such as the one proposed in Athanasius Kirchner's *Mundus subterraneus* (1665) and astronomer Edmond Halley's hypothesis in the 1690s to explain the earth's

magnetic fields, novels about extraordinary journeys to subterranean realms were published in several European languages. The anonymous *Relation d'un voyage du pole arctique au pole antarctique* (1721) [Report of a journey from the Arctic to the Antarctic Pole] and *Nicolai Klimii iter subterraneum* (1741) [The Journey of Niels Klim to the World Underground] written in Latin by Ludvig Holberg (Figure 6), *The Life and Adventures of Peter Wilkins* (1751) by Robert Paltock, and *Icosameron* (1788) written in French by the Italian Giacomo Casanova hinged on these scientific notions (Bleiler and Langford; Fitting; Standish).

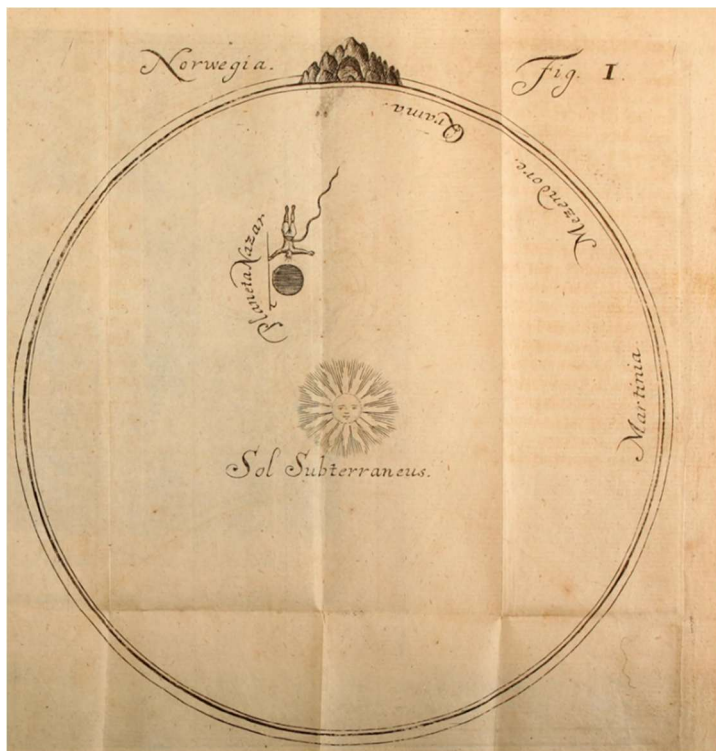


Figure 6.
Ludvig Holberg, *Nicolai Klimii iter subterraneum*

These subterranean worlds—sometimes entire universes lodged in the inside of our planet—functioned as socio-political experiments and often as backdrops for incredible adventures.

The European protagonists encountered civilizations that, characterized by certain values, manners, or laws, functioned as

demonstrations of given philosophical and socio-political theses, in a utopian or dystopian sense, or as an ironic commentary on the travelers' home society. The origin of these civilizations sometimes preceded the known history of Europe and had developed independently, demonstrating the pliability of a history that looked to the future as a motivating horizon, suggesting the consequences of given choices made in the present.

During the nineteenth century, lost civilizations continued to be imagined underground, exploiting theories that assumed that the Earth was hollow—an idea canonized by Jules Verne's *Voyage au centre de la terre* (1864) [Journey to the Center of the Earth]—as well as in places on the Earth's surface that were still uncharted, such as the poles, the Amazon rainforest, the interior regions of the African continent, or the peaks of the Himalayas. Far from waning, during the nineteenth century, the trope of the "lost race" underwent a refunctionalization in the context of European imperial expansion and the hierarchization of racialized difference (Rieder 34–60). Everett Bleiler's bibliography of pre-1930 English-language science fiction lists three hundred works that employed the trope of the hollow Earth, with a marked growth towards the end of the century (*Science-Fiction: The Early Years*; see also Rieder 34, 159 note 4). Between 1926 and 1936 some three-hundred-and-fifty stories made use of the trope in science fiction pulp magazines (Bleiler, *Science-Fiction: The Gernsback Years*). Lost places and lost civilizations, however, tended to lose their connotations as philosophical-political and satirical mirrors. They increasingly functioned as adventurous devices, pivots of fantastic tales of exploration, discovery, conquest of resources (Rieder), or were charged with esoteric connotations, as in Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Coming Race* (1871). In the novel by the English writer and politician, an underground race has existed since before the Flood and is more advanced than human civilization thanks to its ability to master a particular form of energy called Vril, which gives them telepathic abilities and other extraordinary powers. The fictional nature of the work did not prevent it from influencing later occult and theosophical circles, testifying to the permeability between textual genres and the ease with which in late modern and contemporary times ideas circulated across the boundaries between seemingly distant epistemic genres (Blavatsky I: 18, 614; Pauwels and Bergier 265–72; on the cultural history of Vril in esoteric Nazi circles see Galli 45–57). Hollow earths, subterranean worlds, portions of the planet still unknown as the dwelling places of legendary lost civilizations reached Peter Kolosimo's twentieth century by this route. Kolosimo's globe still teems with possible unknown life, from places beneath the surface accessible through waterfalls

in the Amazon, to entire civilizations possibly hidden beneath the icy surface of Antarctica (*Non è terrestre* 170, 109).

Ancient civilizations, pseudo-science, and comparativism

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the myth of Atlantis—the lost continent and ruined civilization *par excellence*—underwent a new chapter in its history, perhaps the most popular one. Rediscovered by Angelo Mazoldi in his work on the history of mankind in the Mediterranean as early as 1840, it found wide international acclaim especially with the publication of *Atlantis: The Antediluvian World* by Ignatius Donnelly in 1882. By reading archaeological remains, geological evidence, and comparative observations on a number of ancient cultures and languages, Donnelly argued that Atlantis was in fact the cradle of civilization. Already in classical times—Plato (419–502)—and in early-modern times—Roger Bacon—Atlantis was often imagined as more advanced than known societies both on a socio-political and a scientific level. In Plato, the story of Atlantis and Athens—which had defeated Atlantis nine thousand years before the dialogue takes place—presents two contrasting models of political organization. Plato’s narrative invention expands known horizons, temporal (backwards) and geographical (westwards), and embodies, in the topographical and physical features of the two cities, the connection between human communities and their environment (Gill 1–48).

In Bacon’s *New Atlantis*, Atlantis is identified with the American continent; “New Atlantis” is a secret island, called Bensalem, at an unspecified point in the Pacific Ocean west of the Peruvian coast. These places serve as images of a geographical and historical otherness: Bensalem’s civilization, more advanced than Europe’s, is a virtual experiment in the relationship between science, religion, and power. Bacon was interested in the problem of origins, causal processes, and historical depth: what laws and customs could yield in terms of collective organization. The Bensalemians know the history of Europe and America better than the Europeans and Americans themselves; they guard a global history from the earliest times, the memory of which had been lost in Europe (Bacon 163). The construction of the utopian society in Bacon is based on a profoundly temporalized idea of civilization. The Bensalemian society is presented as the product of a historical process and of precise causal mechanisms over time. The *New Atlantis* functions as a virtual utopian laboratory, set within a fictional narrative framework.

Ignatius Donnelly epitomized the transition of Atlantis from a narrative device to philosophical-political reflections, to an object of pseudo-historical treatment (Figure 7). Starting with Donnelly's work, Atlantis became a recurring motif in speculative fiction, and, above all, omnipresent in twentieth-century pseudo-science. It came to symbolize the vertigo of ruin—a temporal short-circuit that imagined the planet's distant past as containing civilizations that, according to the logic of linear progress, should have belonged to the future. In the latter guise it will also be widely present in Kolosimo's books (De Camp; Bleiler *Science-Fiction: The Early Years* 852; Feder 28–35; Pringle et al. "Atlantis").

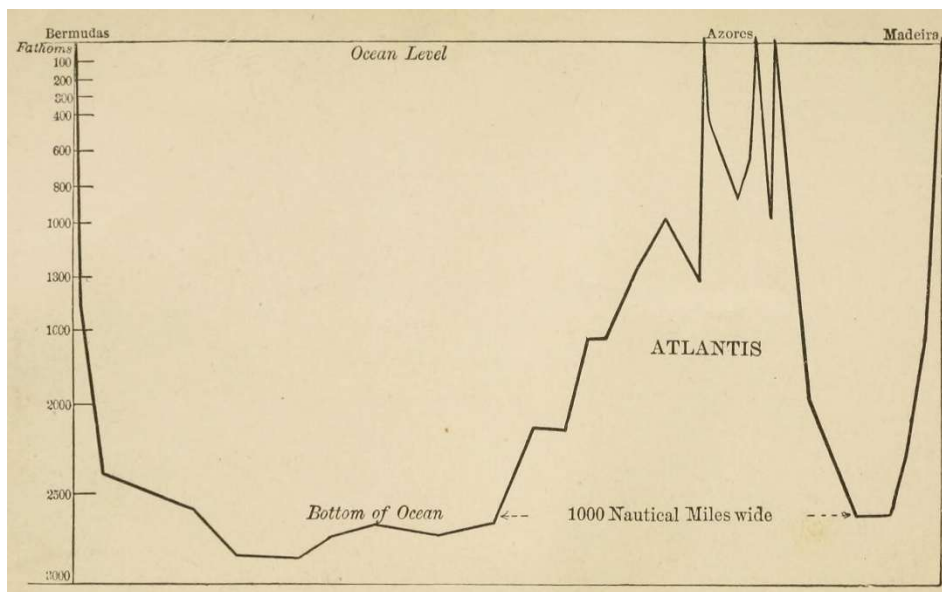


Figure 7.
Ignatius Donnelly, *Atlantis: The Antediluvian World*, 1882

Donnelly's *Atlantis* differs from other seminal texts on pseudo-scientific themes and fantastic archaeology for the absence of occult or supernatural elements. An eloquent comparison may be made *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), the work with which Helena Blavatsky gave fundamental impetus to the theosophical movement by elaborating her own theory concerning the birth and structure of the cosmos, the Earth, and mankind. To argue the historical truth of Atlantis, Donnelly amassed scientific "data" related to the conformation of the seabed, the continental plates, and the geological strata of the Earth, and compared "evidence" drawn from

archaeological remains and texts of various ancient civilizations around the globe. Thus, Donnelly arrived at his (fanciful) conclusions using evidence and rational reasoning although methodologically far removed from the contemporary scientific standards of archaeology, geology, and linguistics. Through elements of its textual and rhetorical construction, *Atlantis* claimed to be a scientific essay. In this sense, it played a seminal role in the codification of subsequent pseudo-science.

Blavatsky asserted she was writing under telepathic dictation from Himalayan “Masters,” mixing in elements from Kabbalistic traditions, branches of the Hindu and Buddhist religions filtered through contemporary occult currents and spiritualistic notions. These include, for example, the existence of immaterial beings and astral bodies, as well as lost continents such as Atlantis, Lemuria, and Hyperborea. Of the seven “root-races” of which, according to Blavatsky, mankind is the fifth, the third was a race of telepathic beings with a more advanced scientific system than that of human beings due to their mastery of occult forces. This third race perished in remote times in a natural catastrophe, but a few survivors gave rise to the fourth race: the inhabitants of Atlantis. The Atlanteans were a highly developed civilization devoted to black magic practices that brought about its downfall. The history of mankind is characterized, according to Blavatsky, by cycles of advancement and regression, the memory of which is lost in modern times. More advanced beings watch over mankind and, from time to time, reintroduce fragments of lost knowledge into the world.

Blavatsky’s treatise, too, claims to be a study and not an invention, but a mixture of pseudo-scientific, mystical, esoteric, and occult elements visibly characterize the work. Blavatsky’s doctrine, however chaotic, obscure, and bizarre in its exposition, would also contribute to the popularization of ideas widely reused in science fiction, such as those concerning hyper-evolved civilizations in the past and the existence of a higher knowledge inaccessible in the contemporary world (Bleiler, *Science-Fiction: The Early Years* 851–52).

Textual genealogies and pseudo-science in Kolosimo

Peter Kolosimo’s writings, mainly the ones published between the late 1950s and the early 1980s, represent a twentieth-century outcome of the methodological and thematic lines referred to above. They gather the comparative and pseudo-scientific suggestions of these textual genealogies, updated to suit Kolosimo’s own cultural-historical context, that of Italy and Europe during the Cold War and the space race.² Particularly in the late 1960s and 1970s, Kolosimo’s books achieved exceptional popularity, with millions

of copies sold in Italy and translations into numerous languages. Early translations of titles such as *Non è terrestre* [Not from Earth], *Ombre sulle stelle* [Shadows on the Stars], and *Il pianeta sconosciuto* [Unknown Planet] came out in German, French, English (with editions in England and the United States), Dutch, Spanish (first in Spain and later also in Mexico), Finnish, Portuguese, and Japanese. *Non è terrestre* enjoyed particular success in the Anglophone world: it was translated as *Not of This World* in 1970 and went on to have reprints and new editions in 1971, 1972, 1973, 1974, 1977, and 1987. Other titles translated in English in the 1970s were *Terra senza tempo* [Timeless Earth] in 1973 and *Astronavi sulla preistoria* [Spaceships in Prehistory] in 1975. During the 1970s, versions in other languages included Turkish, Croatian, and Greek; in the 1980s and 1990s, Catalan and Korean, while editions in other European languages were also frequently reprinted. In Kolosimo's work, the ruin and its fantastic interpretation takes on new meanings in the space age. Thus, the material remains of ancient cultures become the basis for imaginative hypotheses not only about hyper-evolved extinct civilizations, alien visits to earth, and the extra-terrestrial origin of mankind, but also about space technologies known to such civilizations (see also Bigliardi "The Stellar"). The fortune and circulation of Kolosimo's works in translation exemplifies and in part prepares for the wider circulation of pseudo-archaeological texts in the English-language publishing market, and the emergence of academic studies dedicated to this type of cultural expression, with the appearance of terms and expressions such as "pseudoarchaeology" and "alternative archaeology," which appeared as early as the 1960s but have only been widely used since the 1980s. It is also because of this role in the English-speaking publishing market that we can now offer a few observations on the content and (pseudo-) methods of Kolosimo's work, with examples mainly from the text that has circulated most in English: *Non è terrestre*.

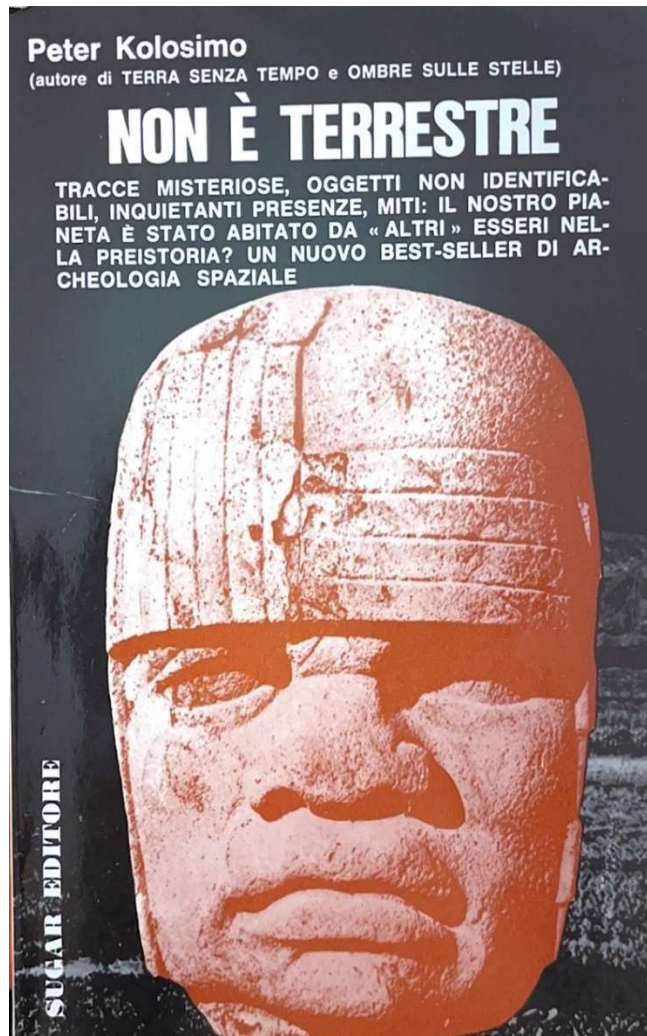


Figure 8.
Peter Kolosimo, *Non è terrestre*, 1969

Despite the antipathy that Kolosimo openly expresses towards exponents and sympathizers of theosophy such as George Adamski (*Non è terrestre* 26–33; Gramantieri 26, 27, 48–59), others he mentions as explorers and writers of interesting reports. These include, for example, Henry Steel Olcott, president of the Theosophical Society, who Kolosimo quotes on mysterious explosions in the Brahmaputra region of present-day Bangladesh, suggesting the thesis that they were the engines of spacecraft

(*Non è terrestre* 135; Blavatsky I: 2, 3, 136). In *Non è terrestre* (Figure 8), reference is also made at several points to James Churchward, whose relations with the Theosophical movement are complex, but whose theories on the lost continent of Mu overlap with the Theosophical theses on Lemuria (Colavito “The Naacal Tablets”; Tumminia 6). Kolosimo introduces Churchward as “the puzzling English scholar whose research is anything but negligible when it does not border on theosophical speculations” (53) and again as “a bizarre figure of a traveller and scholar who certainly has considerable merit in the field of science, but whose theosophical digressions cannot be taken into account in the slightest” (208). Churchward’s theses on Mu are taken up extensively (206, 208–11, 298–301), citing the discovery of the so-called Naacal tablets, which Churchward claimed to have found in India and interpreted as evidence of the existence of the lost continent (228, 231; see also *Astronavi sulla preistoria* 382–85). The tablets were purely fictional, just like the ancient *Stanzas of Dzyan*, the text that Blavatsky’s *Secret Doctrine* claimed to comment on. Kolosimo also mentions Churchward’s ideas about the legendary civilization of Baalbek and the cataclysm that interrupted its growth (*Non è terrestre* 248–49), and on the interpretation of the Quiché sacred text *Popol Vuh* (274–76).

The reuse of Churchward in Kolosimo is an example of a cultural comparativism that looks to non-European traditions in search of archaeological and textual evidence to substantiate the legendary existence of civilizations annihilated by ancient catastrophes. Kolosimo’s fascination with philosophies and religious texts such as those of the Hindu tradition or Buddhism, or those of the indigenous peoples of South and North America, is the result of pseudo-scientific and pseudo-doctrinaire elaborations such as those of Donnelly and Blavatsky, albeit often indirectly. On the subject of Atlantis, Kolosimo favors, for example, the founder of Soviet atlantology Nikolaj Žirov,³ who was in turn a reader of Donnelly (*Atlantis* 30, 40, 51, 52, 106, 375, 381), according to the dissemination of information on Soviet science that Kolosimo fostered since *Ombre sulle stelle* (1966), and which culminated in *Fiori di luna* (1979).

Kolosimo’s works are compiled through amassing evidence from different cultural traditions and through European secondary sources. The fascination with the idea of a hyper-evolved past that engenders speculations on legendary civilizations and on the existence of beings superior to humankind is nourished by a proto-ethnographic curiosity rooted in the age of European explorations and colonial expansion, and in the upheavals that these processes brought about in the conceptualization of historical time.

Since the late eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, the epistemological and methodological tools of a number of disciplines related to the study of the past, including geology and archaeology, had been increasingly enriched and defined. The agglutination of these disciplinary fields and of a modern scientific paradigm allow us to account for Donnelly's or Kolosimo's works as "pseudo-science." The appearance of the expression "pseudo-science" in European languages is recorded from the end of the eighteenth century, preceded in the seventeenth century by other expressions, such as "science falsely so-called" or the Latin phrase *pseudo-scientia*, through epistemic and linguistic clarifications (Thurs and Numbers; "Pseudoscience"). It is a complex and controversial notion; its boundaries depend on the negotiation of what does (or does not) fall within a recognized epistemic paradigm.⁴

Constructed as a review of scientific research, studies, and hypotheses, the bulk of Kolosimo's writings falls into the epistemic domain of pseudo-science or pseudo-scientific popularization.⁵ In particular, the series *Universo Sconosciuto* [Unknown Universe] by the publisher Sugar (later SugarCo), comprising ten books by Kolosimo between the late 1960s and 1970s,⁶ presents his works as "overviews of the scientific enigmas of our time," "*research*" with "adduced evidence," "reported data . . . supported with meticulously analysed evidence" (*Ombre*, tenth edition, back cover and *Non è terrestre*, first edition, back cover). Fantastic archaeology is described as a "science," whose "findings and . . . shocking analogies" meet with opposition from "sceptics," but whose documentation proposed by Kolosimo is such as to support hypotheses about the development and past of the human species that contradict and invalidate the "hypotheses that official and evolutionary science has so far elaborated" (*Astronavi*, third edition, back cover). The presence of overtly fictional elements and compositional strategies, such as the insertion of narrative passages, on the other hand, invite one to approach these writings as fiction rather than essays (Camilletti 7–8).

Literary fascinations

The content (and success) of Kolosimo's books owes much to the literary materials that accompany the citation of pseudo-scientific written and visual sources, and the oral testimonies of "experts" reported with formulas similar to those of a journalistic investigative report. In *Non è terrestre* (95–96), for instance, *Le Comte de Gabalis ou Entretiens sur les sciences secretes*, published by Nicolas-Pierre-Henri de Montfaucon de Villars in 1670, is used as a source (Latimer; Seeber; Nagel). The work, which had a wide influence on

subsequent European literature, as well as on occult and esoteric circles, contained dialogues in which the count discussed immaterial beings, Paracelsus's theories, and Rosicrucianism. The works of H. P. Lovecraft—especially *At the Mountains of Madness*—provide materials on lost Antarctic civilizations and ancestral cults of alien origin. The fictional nature of the source highlighted in some passages is overshadowed in the English translation.⁷ Kolosimo constitutes an Italian chapter in the history of the Providence writer's influence on later theorists of "ancient astronauts." A number of pseudo-scientific Anglophone works found in Lovecraft's cosmic horror story their inspiration to imagine an archaeology harbinger of disturbing discoveries about the past of the planet and the human species (Colavito, *The Cult*). Lovecraft's own work is part of an intertextual network in which ideas about an alien past circulated between literary imagination and pseudo-scientific theories, drawing inspiration from theosophical theories (referred to particularly, albeit not exclusively, in *The Call of Cthulhu*). Lovecraft's characters read books such as Donnelly's *Atlantis* and the works of Charles Fort—also known and relied on by Kolosimo (*Non è terrestre* 65–66), alongside fictional volumes such as Abdul Alhazred's *Necronomicon* (Lovecraft, *The Descendant*).

In tracing the cultural history of the mysterious themes to which each chapter is devoted, *Non è terrestre* exploits an ideal library which includes folkloric materials used by William Butler Yeats,⁸ Murray Leinster's *space opera* (169–70), the moon as seen by Plutarch (194–95), Lucian of Samosata (201) and the classical sources of Camille Flammarion (194–95), and twentieth-century science fiction rich in adventure elements and archaeological suggestions by authors such as Pierre Benoît (234), Charles Henneberg (268), and Donald Wandrei (200). Hoaxes and forgeries from the past also find their way into the history of certain fantastic ideas. Stigmatized as such, famous journalistic mystifications and frauds are nevertheless mentioned to give literary substance to legends and beliefs such as the existence of giant human beings in remote places or times (173, ff.).

Concluding remarks

The ruin and its fantastic interpretation engender a disconnection between progress and temporal linearity, making it possible for fantastic archaeology to imagine visits by hyper-evolved aliens in remote past eras, and lost civilizations predating known history. In exploiting the ruin as a catalyst of temporal cognitive estrangement, Kolosimo's writings function as collectors of long-lasting textual genealogies, re-functionalized within the

editorial and literary context of the second half of the twentieth century. Against the backdrop of the Cold War and the space race, his books satisfy a widespread interest in space themes, with attention not so much or not only to scientific popularization, as to fostering a sense of wonder in the reader. Kolosimo's speculative archaeology combines scientific and historical-comparative curiosity with references drawn from literature and folklore, testifying, with its success, how widespread in the late twentieth century the desire is to look at the past and the future with feelings of mystery and wonder. Kolosimo's work exemplifies a broader international popularity of the subject of mysterious or fantastic archaeology, which in the same years saw books such as those by von Däniken and Hancock become bestsellers on the European and North American publishing markets. This essay has framed these cultural trends in a longer-term history, highlighting literary and visual precedents that employed the representation of the ruin as a creative means of estrangement and fantastic manipulation of time and history.

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Notes

1. Feldman and Richardson 7–18; 10–18 for the English translation of de Fontenelle, *De l'origine des fables*, written ca. 1691–1699, first published in 1724.
2. Kolosimo is the pen name of Pier Domenico Colosimo, 1922–1984. Bigliardi "Peter Kolosimo"; Ciardi and Labanti; Russo.
3. Kolosimo, *Non è terrestre* 253–261. Kolosimo does not indicate from which work the extensive quotations given here are taken; a plausible source may be *Atlantida*, one of Žirov's best known books.
4. Central in any discussion of "pseudo-science" are the (lack of) falsifiability, aspects of methodological inadequacy, tendentious motivations of the investigator, up to the expression of feelings of encirclement and ostracism, and conspiracy theses directed against "official" science (Cioffi). In Kolosimo we find for example the notion of a "conspiracy of

silence” (*Non è terrestre* 276); and, referred to Adamski (33), the discrediting arguments that others might apply to Kolosimo himself, see Colavito, “Review.”

5. On Kolosimo’s fiction: Iannuzzi, *Fantascienza* 87, 107, 131–32.

6. Kolosimo, *Terra; Ombre; Il pianeta; Non è terrestre; Astronavi; Odissea; Polvere; Fratelli; Italia; Fiori; Viaggiatori*.

7. Kolosimo, *Non è terrestre*, 101–3: here mentioning the source as a “hallucinating novel”; 110, 137–39: here as a “hallucinating fantastic reconstruction”; 151, 187: here with a generic allusion to “certain tales.” Compare for example with *Not of This World* 80; on the ambiguity thus created: Colavito, “Review of Peter Kolosimo’s ‘Not of This World’ (Pt. 2).”

8. Kolosimo, *Non è terrestre*, 115–16, here two quotations from a play mentioned under the title “Cathleen.” These are two lines spoken by the character Shemus in “The Countess Cathleen” (1892), scene I.

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