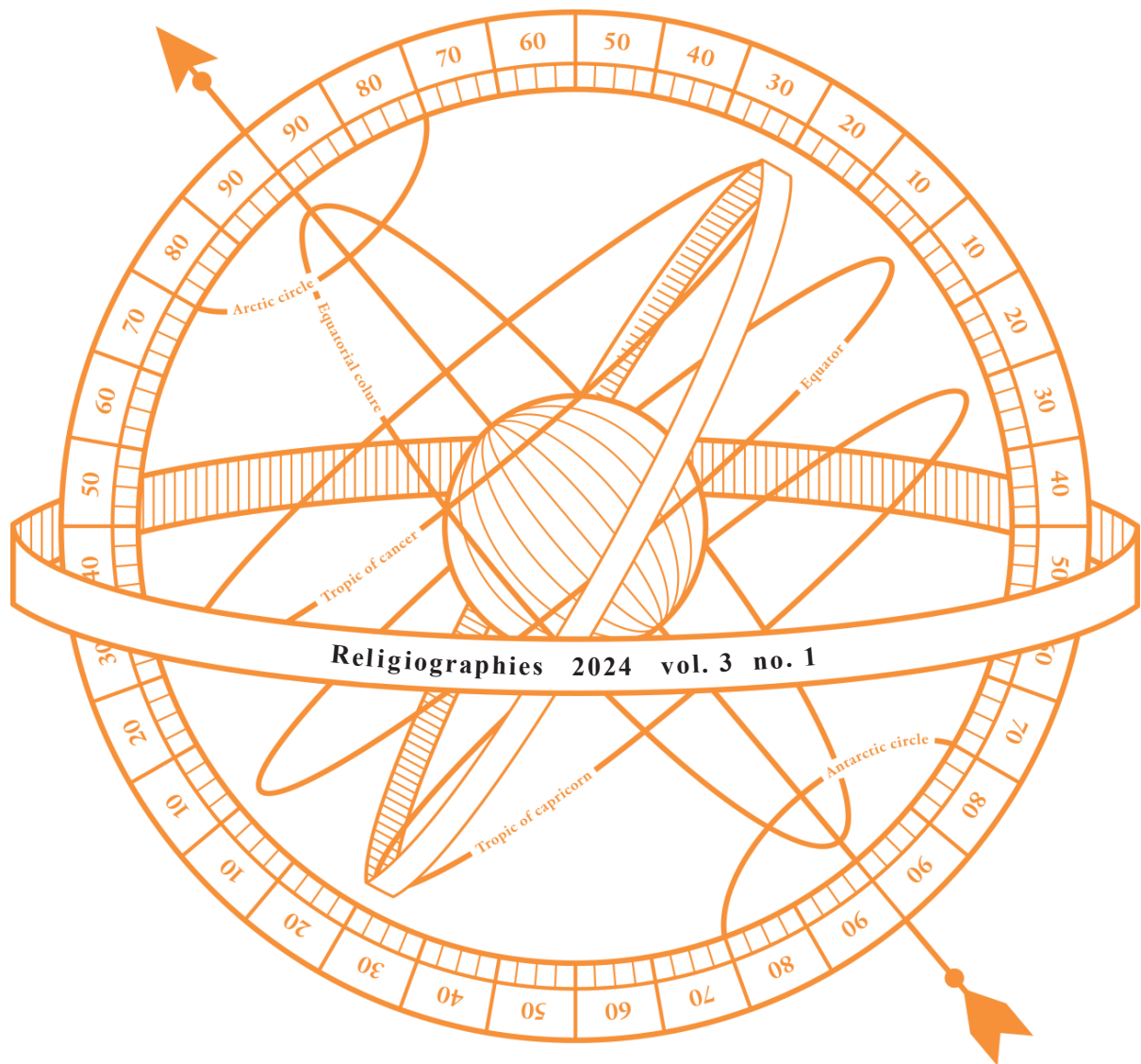


Religiographies



Special Issue

“Zoroastrian Esotericism”

edited by

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Heterography:

Zoroaster Superstar

Sara Ferro and Chris Weil
(ARTOLDO)



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Zarathustra or the ultimate taboo

In 2018, we, the creative duo of ARTOLDO (Sara Ferro & Chris Weil), went to a colloquium at the Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei in Rome to discuss our proposal of shooting a documentary about the so-called Verginelli-Rota collection, consisting of rare books and manuscripts from the fifteenth to the twentieth century, all inherent in hermetic philosophy. We had already moved ahead with the pitch, so it was a matter of meeting in person and actually agreeing on interviews and filming logistics. What remains of that particular morning is the remarkable memory of an audience with the scholar who just a few years later would be awarded the Nobel Prize in Physics—not that we knew this then; otherwise, we probably wouldn't have launched into a presentation of the enterprise, which started with Pindaric flights between quantum physics and alchemy, a chutzpah nevertheless welcomed, a sly smile gave the nod.

What makes the collection so special, in addition to the collectors themselves, is the catalogue, ironically titled “quite reasoned”—indeed, it is the first catalogue of hermetic books in Italy, initiated in the 1920s and curated for sixty years by the cataloguer himself, Vince Verginelli, an erudite high school professor of Italian and Latin, together with his brotherly “hermetic” friend, Maestro Nino Rota. Verginelli was also a brotherly friend and adept of the master of neo-Egyptian hermeticism, Giuliano Kremmerz, founder of the Schola Philosophica Hermetica Classica Italica, MIRIAM (or MYRIAM) Therapeutic-Magical Brotherhood, formed on the model of the ancient Egyptian Isiac brotherhoods and arcane mystery cults—and the collection extensively features this author.

All was fine until the arrival of a harried librarian who wanted to remind everybody that the collection also contains texts about Zarathustra and that, well, danger zone, it goes without saying how inept it was to think of offering them to a broader audience without prior scientific analysis. Maybe the honourable ladies and gentlemen didn't remember?

In our opinion, they had already been given enough time to ignite at least a spark of academic research, the bequest from 1987 totally disappointing Verginelli's expectations, namely that multitudes of scholars would immediately begin to study them. Go figure—one of the texts in question is the *Clavis Artis*, an illuminated manuscript purportedly of the Rosicrucian environment, in which the frontispiece, title page, and preface refer to Zoroaster as the text's author, naming him “the Rabbi and Jew.” The images paramouly display the magus, but Zoroaster also appears elsewhere in disguise, scilicet an illustration of the book entitled *Uraltes Chymisches Werk*, a sylloge of alchemical texts by the fictitious author Abraham Eleazar, otherwise unknown, or better known as Julius Gervasius of Schwarzburg, i.e., the editor as well. A book which incidentally happens to open the alphabetical part of the catalogue of Verginelli-Rota and which bears the image of Zoroaster “himself.” In any case, Rota's copy of the *Clavis Artis* was allegedly translated in 1238 from Arabic and is pretendedly from the year 1996—as can be seen in the inscription on the front page—and is also likely something from a Paracelsian milieu (as for all the other existing versions, illuminated or not, in Italy, Germany, or the Czech Republic). In librarian terms, a “pseudo-Zarathustra.”

In any case, the bibliothecary imposed a very heavy and final veto.

Luckily, internet archives and online encyclopaedias remain open to the public, even when some cultural institutions restrict access to the original analogue source files—long live the digital “wisdom blowers.”

Needless to say, from that moment we have been haunted by the *Clavis Artis* and Zarathustra, who appears to us again and again as the very last taboo in Western society, and arguably beyond, let alone when Zarathustra feat. Kremmerz and all becomes Ur-political.

Zerdust, Zerdast, Zaradast In Zarathustra We Trust

(Voltaire’s entry in the Encyclopaedia regarding Zoroastrianism reportedly mentions Zoroaster’s older names, being “Zerdust,” “Zerdast,” “Zaradast,” or “Zaratustra”—the newest is *Ziggy Stardust* [1972]. Then there is a Z connecting rockstars via stage attire, and here we come in a “Flash” [1980] to Freddie Mercury. Voltaire is besides “zigzag Zadig,” linked to Casanova, and Casanova to Fellini, and Fellini, in turn, to Rota. And here the circle is rounded out—like an Ouroboros.)

From the epochal *And Thus Spoke Zarathustra* onwards, the descent (of the transcendent God?), the “rise and fall” to and from the mountain of the most outdated prophet, and *The Man Who Fell To Earth* (2012) have not been halted, instead the protagonist updating himself at every step, whereas pop icons such as David Bowie, alias Ziggy Stardust, have projected the prophet of the prophet, Nietzsche, into the new millennium; unsuspecting Zoroastrians like the missing more than the royal royalties, Sir, Queen of the Night and King of Queen, the rock star Freddie Mercury, with his stage costumes and emblematic lyrics manifested arcane symbols of his faith unbeknownst to a worldwide audience and to his awareness; undisputed geniuses like Federico Fellini and Nino Rota in their interpretation of Casanova, both spasmodic masters of all the most sublime arts; and together with the Maestro of the Love Art (ars amatoria), the art of all three of them, as great Maestri, followers of the Magician Maestro of the Magi, created new worlds or interconnections among them which are traversed by that magick that, in turn, in their own lives enchanted and bewitched each of them in their own exquisite ways, then recasting that magic in their oeuvre. Worlds that the artistic collective ARTOLDO brought to life in a virtual reality spectacle, inviting you to travel through Bowie’s universe, Mercury’s spiritual stage, and Casanova’s fantastic and magically staged Venice, to discover not only holograms of these gigantic personalities, but also hidden messages concealed in brands such as Tesla, Mazda, and Zadig & Voltaire, and other references to Zoroastrianism as the religion in the cultural matrix incorporating so much of the extant, revealing the intertwined threads of art, magic, and Zoroastrianism.

Our weave has developed itself from an instinct towards pop-culturally querying and pseudo-archeologically digging into the mysterium “ZARATHUSTRA” to unearth his remains sown and layered in such a diverse variety of trivial discourses and so rarely dispersed in a diffuse variety of cultural debris. An intuition: the persona in question cannot have disappeared so perfectly synecdochically from the earth’s

surface; he must have transformed himself into an overwhelming hologram, so highly settled in the extra-mundane that the rays from his rarefied presence hit hallowing personalities who are at the edges between different arts.

We identify Zarathustra's presence in some artists who, each in a peculiar way, were at that edge between the arts: Casanova between Traditional arts, ars amatoria, and rhetorical arts; Fellini between comic art and the seventh art and in search of the seventh heaven; Nino Rota, between the purest tonal music and hermeticism or Ars Magna and music and cinema once again; David Bowie, between pop music, performance, and visual art; and Freddie Mercury, between rock music, opera quality, and stage.

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Fig. 1. Zoroaster Superstar VR - Hologram — ARTOLDO (2023)

The virtual reality installation can be accessed on Desktop, Tablet and Smartphone running directly in the browser: [ENTER VR](#)

The project infused with the above said insight and developed in association with RedMagicBlue unfolds in a 3x11-minute virtual reality experience, offering a unique blend of music, fanpics, esotericism, occulture, and spiritualism.

How to play: The VR installation opens up with the holy Zoroastrian perpetual flame, the atar, which will burn for eternity—it will never be *Ashes to Ashes* (1996)—first visibly then invisibly; hence, after all the component visual elements of the installation have been loaded, allowing the viewer to enter each world—how quickly depends on your internet bandwidth, to build the scene, keep the faith. Last but not least, click the screen with your pointer to look around, once the music starts to play. Enjoy!

Bowie: Around Bowie’s supposed occultism a whole literature has flourished online, fed by his fans on one hand, and on the other, esotericists and conspiracy theorists—whose intuitions have nourished the former—but no solid evidence has ever been provided to definitively ascertain the consistency of its actual more-than-decidedly only sporadic, occasional, and above all superficial adherence to practices or theories of the occult milieu (White, 2019).



Fig. 2. Zoroaster Superstar VR: David Bowie — ARTOLDO (2023)

Bowie + **N**ietzsche: Anyway, while Nietzsche-as-Zarathustra in playing the prophet came to get himself accepted as one, Bowie-as-Ziggy-Stardust in playing, in parodying the popular image of the rock star turned himself into one, so that in doing so the historical figures have become displaced in the popular imagination by their avatars (Hill, 2007). Speaking of the devil, nay, of prophets in a realm between philosophy and religion, the two worlds, prophets who were themselves prophets of rock&roll or of teachings from the cosmic outer space, with the digital experience created, ARTOLDO fancied reproducing a Merton’s self-fulfilling prophecy by depicting Ziggy Stardust as a novel Zoroaster—despite the line or because of it: “I’m not a prophet or a stone age man, just a mortal with the potential of a superman” in *Quicksand* (1971), though in an interview he stated that “everybody was convincing me that I was the messiah.” For the traces are scarce and perhaps just philological—it may be just the Z the three of them (Ziggy, NietZsche, Zarathustra) have in common! Because as for Zarathustra/Nietzsche, it is all about making out of it a cult for being heard, “so softly a superman cries”; then Ziggy

Stardust is the larger-than-life persona who makes Bowie worthy of being heeded. To make him a rock god. His astral body becomes indeed an angelic presence (and in being so, androgynous as Ziggy), a star, a self-daemon, which as Koenig (1995–2023) asserts, is similar to the heavenly alter-egos of tradition men in Manichaeism and prior in Judaism; or to astral travel like in many of Theosophy’s books, with all the hints about outer-of-body-experiences and travels (Koenig 1995–2023; White 2019).

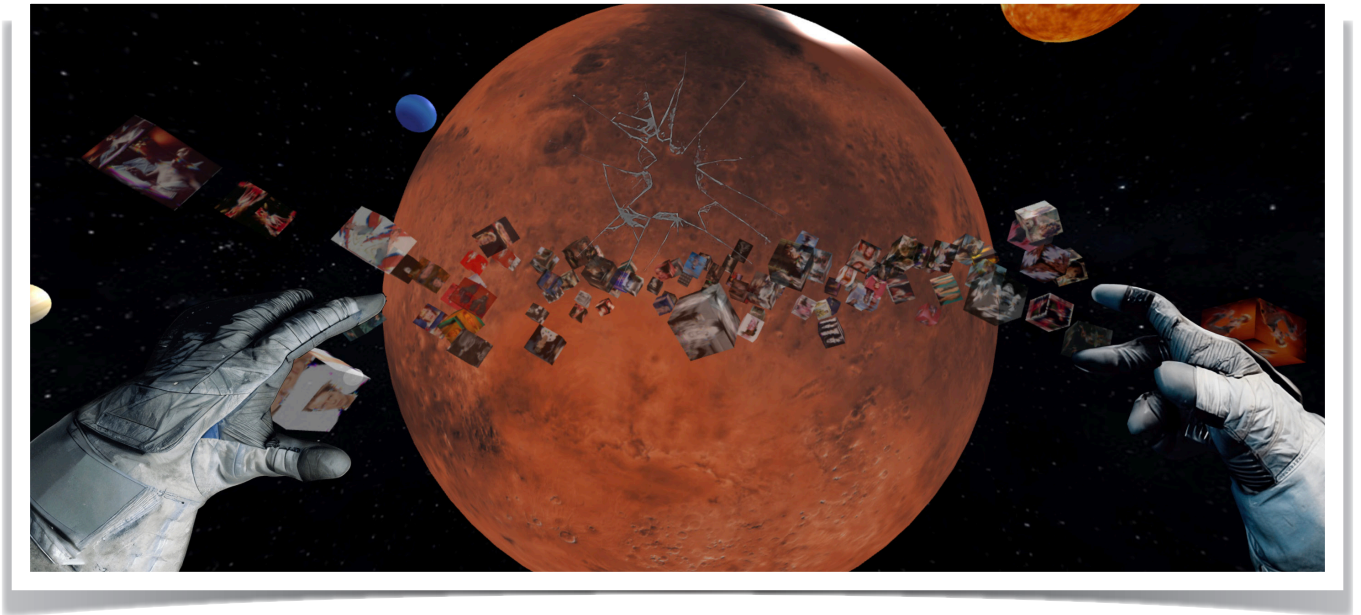


Fig. 3. Zoroaster Superstar VR: David Bowie - Mars (Red Planet) — ARTOLDO (2023)

Far more interested in plastically conveying the idea of such a reception of Bowie’s work and artistic figure than in providing evidence as befits historical work, with an approach similar to the average fan searching for hints in his lyrics, winks in his photos, and symbolism in his stage clothing—clues in the interviews of his partners and companions and at large in his life lived according to that scene—ARTOLDO has chosen to put on a show and reenact a Bowie whose imagery is assumed clearly informed by that semantics. Moreover, supposing that his creative rendering of the wide symbolic apparatus that adorns and substantiates everything esoteric was so original and sui generis precisely because it was that of a highly heterodox personality that couldn’t strictly adhere to such, by definition, strict, severe traditions, due to what was erratic in his nature and thus, was just temporarily “fanatic” about it.



Fig. 4. Zoroaster Superstar VR: David Bowie - David Bowie Straße — ARTOLDO (2023)

In the installation, we look through the broken glass of an astronaut’s helmet, “a crack in the sky” (in “Oh! You Pretty Thing!,” 1971, or was it *The Crack in Space* by P. H. Dick, 1966?)—maybe Bowie’s “Major Tom” or an Elon Musk space tourist or his Mars colonist (does Musk’s beloved X stand for that sixth sense which Colin Wilson in *The Occult: A History* [1971] states as a sign of an allegedly “superior man”? We noticed that the book cover bears such an explanation on it. A book that Bowie might have read, according to Koenig). Anyway, a Tesla prototype still crashed against a space rock, another is flying to the Red Planet, querying, “Is There Life on Mars?” (1971). Would that spaceship know like Major Tom, “Which way to go”? Anyway, “far above the Moon/Planet Earth is blue,” the same Earth from which the cubes with Bowie’s apotheoses on them are departing. What showmanship!



Fig. 5. Zoroaster Superstar VR: David Bowie - Tesla feat Major Tom — ARTOLDO (2023)

And “There is a Starman waiting in the sky” (1972) (for descending on Earth like a novel “leper” messiah? A second coming of Christ? A novel Gnostic Gospel? Meanwhile, “let the children boogie”)—in Manichaeism, all men and women were once stars (Koenig, 1996-2023)—with an alien worldview on humanity, telling us, “Don’t blow it, it’s all worthwhile.” In the cosmic battle between the good god Ahura Mazda and the evil god Angra Mainyu, humans had to help the good god in this battle (Harari, 2014): may that Starman be a reminder, a token standing for that religious principle? Anyway, as White (2019) states, as Bowie explored alternative religious traditions in the 1990s he might have read *The Gnostic Gospels* by Elaine Pagels (and in the *Nag Hammadi Gospels*, Zoroaster is traceable, see Lütge, 2009), a reading later on indicated, among his 100 favourite books, together with the famous *Transcendental Magic, Its Doctrine and Ritual* by Eliphas Lévi and *Zanoni* by Edward Bulwer-Lytton—where Zoroaster is indirectly mentioned “to have discovered the arts which your ignorance classes under the name of magic.” Hence, Bowie might have been somehow exposed to the “spell” of Zoroaster through his general interest in magic and attraction to gnosticism, upon which Zoroastrianism, according to Harari (2014), exerted its influence like on almost all subsequent Middle Eastern and Central Asian religions. As the lines: “Homo Sapiens have outgrown their use/You gotta make way for the Homo Superior” can allude to.

Nietzsche's portrait becomes Bowie's as on the cultic album cover *Aladdin Sane* (1973), the one with the red z-formed flash and a blue outline—Aladdin, the next persona into which Ziggy shifted.

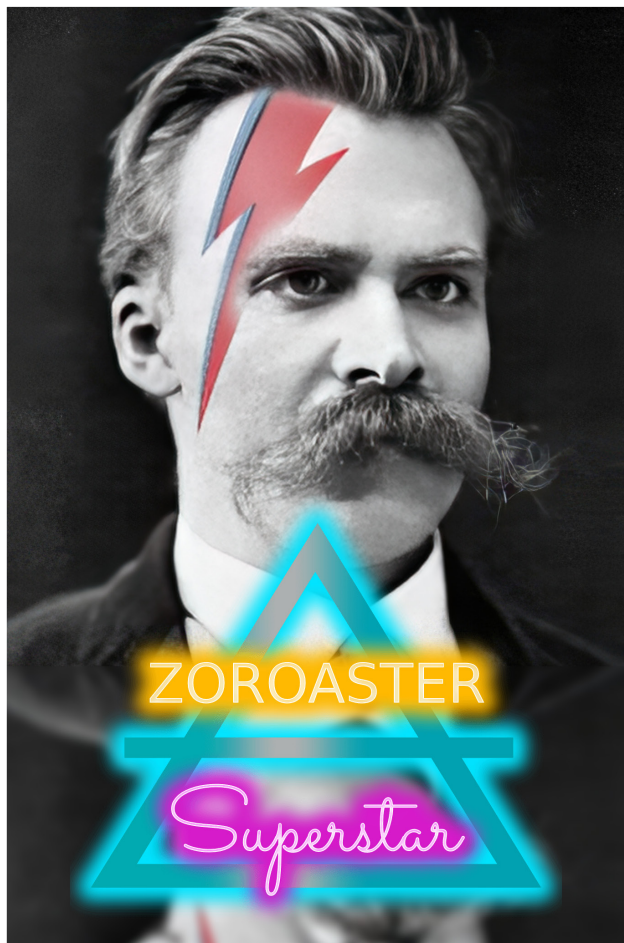


Fig. 6. Zoroaster Superstar VR: Poster — ARTOLDO (2023)

Two Bowie's signs of life: the street sign with which the city of Berlin paid homage to him, *David-Bowie-Straße*, in the phase he went “straight,” and the Londoner plaque at the Trident Music Studios, as well his Hollywood red star on the Walk of Fame and the *Black Star* (2016), “how many times does an angel fall?” The soundtrack includes the pop songs “The Superman” (1970) and “Major Tom” (1969) by David Bowie and refers to the tone poem “Also Sprach Zarathustra” by Richard Strauss (1896), used in the *Clavis Artis Video Art installation* (2023) by ARTOLDO and made famous by Stanley Kubrik for the theme of his film *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

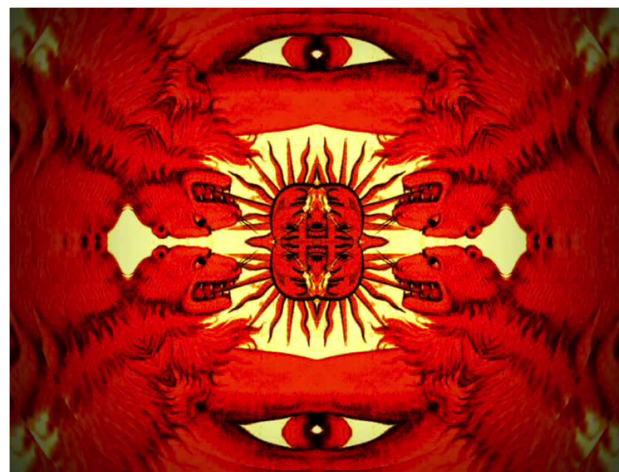


Fig. 7. Clavis Artis - Video Art — ARTOLDO (2023)

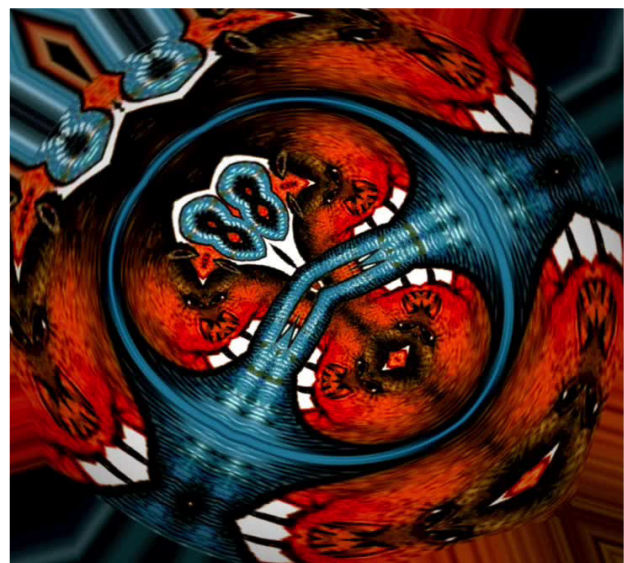


Fig. 8. Clavis Artis - Video Art — ARTOLDO (2023)

Clavis Artis: algorithmic recombination of more than 800 video artworks created by ARTOLDO based on the alchemical Clavis Artis, inspired by Zarathustra, reunited in more than 700,000 possibly different video loops of seventy-eight minutes each.

Along the inclination to occultism, in the distinguishedly Westernised fashion originally enhanced by Asian religious traditions, paradigmatically in Thelema, in Bowie's case it's peculiarly another cultur-



Fig. 9. Zoroaster Superstar VR: Spiders from Mars — ARTOLDO (2023)

ally alternative movement that flourished in the late 1950s, i.e., ufology, forming there the cosmic space of “Space Oddity” (1969), outer space above all, round trip between the ascent to Mars, apprenticeship there and return to an earthly pop stardom under diverse cyberzoological forms. *Heteropoda davidbowie* (Zuckerman, 2017), the Spiders from Mars, apostles of the orange-haired alter ego, Ziggy Stardust. If the baby-boomers were the first who, to a certain extent, massively experimented with spiri-

tual ideas capable of rewriting the code of the search for the divine, the holy, and the metaphysical beyond the depleted dogmas and weary forms of faith and believing that within Christianity, the partaking in such beliefs on Bowie's side was hardly odd and distinctive in its inception, but very much in his artistic interpretation. Yet, what is peculiar is that we are looking for clues and subsequent confirmation that he was really deep “into.” However, nearly every verse in his lyrics that could resonate with broader occult reference is never really and fully replete, rather a weak hint that possibly refers to or is a strategy to hit(ting) a particular public of the occult scene or to mimic and emulate the Beatles or Led Zeppelin in their genuine involvement with Indian spirituality or Thelemaic strains or other Brit pop bands as well as, in general, the climate and zeitgeist of the counterculture that is, again, his very audience (White, 2019). Definitely, he took an interest in Zen and Mahayana Buddhism and Tibetan black magic throughout his life. All the same, at times he even dismissed all that could sound close to an alternative spiritual quest towards occultism, as satanist, as “bad trips” aguishly recalling to him his periods of alienation due to drug consumption. He didn't precisely differentiate this but was simply more interested in the ambience than in distinguishing an esoteric current or stimulus from the others. White (2019) points out the presumptively juxtaposing elements drawn from occultism with material from Tibetan Buddhism and with references to Nietzsche and, likewise, that he used esoteric sigils, some sephirah (“Station To Station,” 1976), and the Tree of Life (as in a famous photo-shoot by Steve Shapiro), alongside magic circles, also just for protection, and with apotropaic undertones and overtones mostly. Bowie enhanced his originality by widely using the cut-up method, and the arcane was a part of the puzzle; it could originate from conversations, encounters but also from fantasy literature and films, fiction, science-fiction (e.g., by Olaf Stapledon and John Bloodstone, interspersed through many of his lyrics), common discourses, and folklore. Furthermore, Koenig (1996–2023) states Bowie crafted his public persona by assimilating different aspects of contemporary occultism, “adding another layer of complexity to his artistic vision.” Anecdotes in interviews with his pals reveal that, to overcome the angst that someone could harm him out of envy or revenge due to his popularity, he was used to utilising tools like penta-grams, hexagrams, candles, grimoires, and circles, depicting them on walls and the floor, and a kabbalistic apparatus used for summoning cosmic powers to combat demons. For the rest, if it's an alluring joke, some titles really made it possible to believe that there is indeed even a gnostic inspiration—for instance, “The Man Who Sold the World” (1970)—or that he was in circles prone to ritual magic; see “The Width of a Circle” (1970).

Because Bowie sourced from the rhizomatic influences of the occult milieu of his time, mainstream in some subcultures, he has also been sourced in turn by that milieu that has grown up beyond expectations out of a wild concoction whose basic ingredients are somehow focused on matters as the flipside of science, religious heresies, holistic medicine, alternative life modes (ancient or totally unprecedented), and the paranormal; in brief, the quest for suppressed and radical belief systems and non-conformist weltanschauungen. It was, in fact, the Age of Aquarius and against that backdrop, to make his mark as kindred soul for fan folk who desperately fancied finding some figure to identify with in pop culture, one so charismatically calling for outer life, another life horizon already extant in Eastern spirituality, paganism, spiritualism, supernaturalism, theosophy, and analogous underground currents under the umbrella of the Western esoteric traditions. A praxis of “a pick and mix” of rejected narratives, self-experimenting, invented traditions and radical, or to some extent revolutionary, life forms, for the sake of an aestheticising fashion in which that seeking, querying, and crafting took shape.



Fig. 10. Zoroaster Superstar VR: Freddie Mercury — ARTOLDO (2023)

Mercury: The question is often formulated as to whether Freddie Mercury’s Indian Parsi roots and his parents’ Zoroastrian faith had an influence on his character, worldview, career, and persona. Even more than his lyrics, his stage clothing has been scrutinised, so that brightly evident evidence have also been found out and pinned down. Colours and symbols mostly, but also the very shapes and fashion, have all been indicated as a “smoking gun.”

**“Flash, aha, saver of the universe,
he’ll save, everyone of us.”**

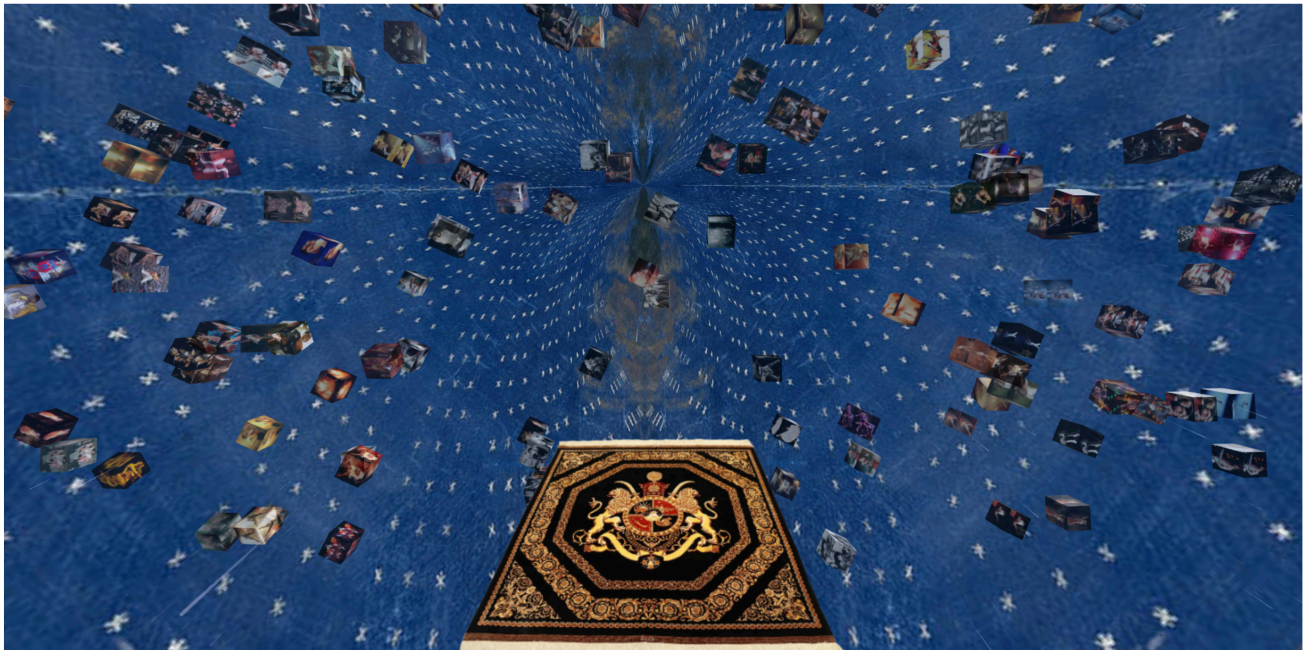


Fig. 11. Zoroaster Superstar VR: Freddie Mercury - Night Sky — ARTOLDO (2023)

Mercury: Under “The Hall of Stars in the Palace of the Queen of the Night,” Karl Friedrich Schinkel’s 1815 set design for *The Magic Flute*, two cylindrical sections moving in opposite directions, one featuring the Zoroastrian Fire Temple in Yazd, the other a string of different coloured banknote denominations Switzerland had dedicated to him—for sojourning in Montreux. On the bottom, a traditional Zoroastrian flying carpet, cubical placeholders showcasing Freddie Mercury on stage, and classical Zoroastrian imagery, a car by the Japanese Mazda Motor Corporation, the Mercury self-crafted heraldic image for the band Queen itself, and the coloured globes from the album cover of *Innuendo* (1991).



Fig. 12. Zoroaster Superstar VR: Freddie Mercury - As kid and on stage — ARTOLDO (2023)



Fig. 13. Zoroaster Superstar VR: Freddie Mercury - Mazda — ARTOLDO (2023)

The musical score includes Queen tracks, such as “Bohemian Rhapsody” (1974–1975) and “A Kind of Magic” (1986). “Bohemian Rhapsody” bears witness to Mercury’s respect for his parents’ beliefs by incorporating a distinctive phrase—“good thoughts, good words, good deeds”—directly from the “Three Good Things” principle in the Avesta, the sacred text of his family’s faith (Lee, 2018).

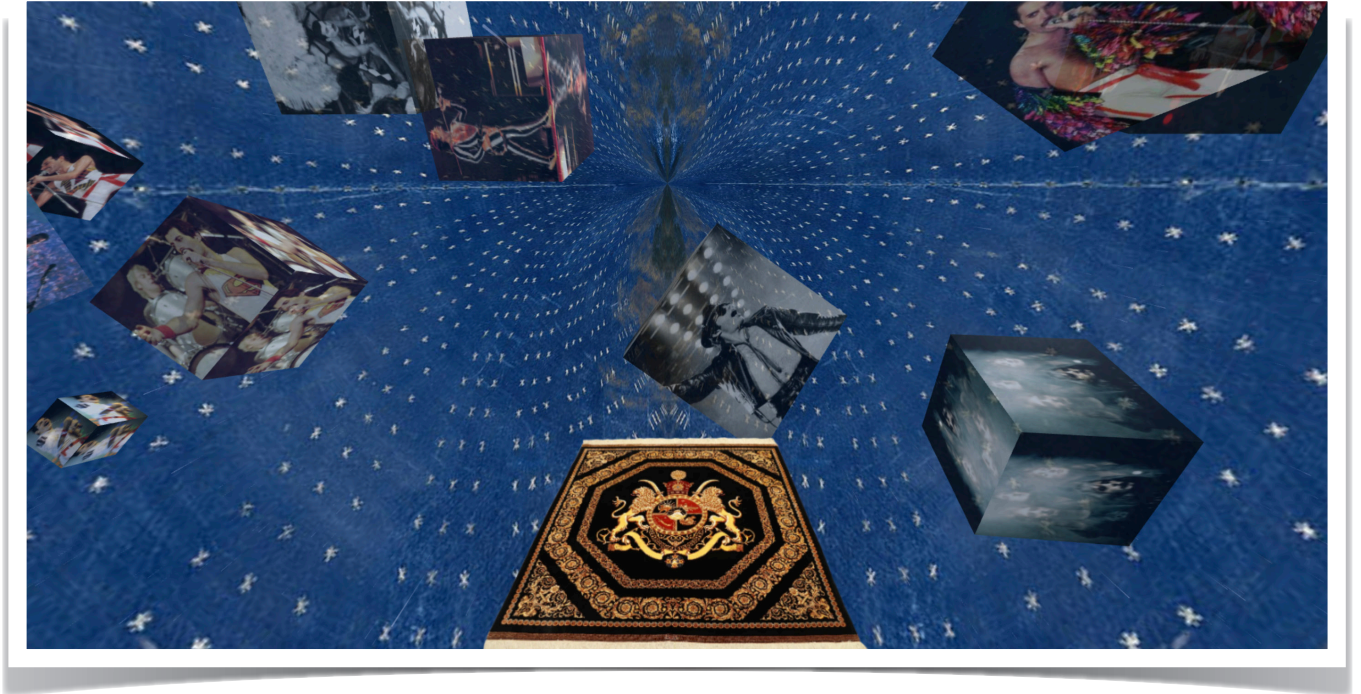


Fig. 14. Zoroaster Superstar VR: Freddie Mercury - Flying carpet — ARTOLDO (2023)

A speculation is that he refrained from revealing the hidden significance of his stage attire, aligning with Zoroastrian beliefs that prioritise discretion; while he privately embraced his faith, he chose not to publicly practice it, a sentiment echoed by his mother in interviews. Under the lens there are: 1) favourite colours, all of them significant in Zoroastrian rituals and with a strong symbolic reference: white (purity and truth), yellow (sun), red (warriors, fire, in Persian *athra/atarsh/atah*), and blue (sky, spiritual life); 2) symbols like lightning (one of the “Five Fires or Energies” as referenced in the Avesta and earlier Zoroastrian texts), arrows (like *tiwaz* runes, “*tir*,” the name for the planet Mercury in ancient Persian; in the Anglo-Saxon and Proto-Germanic context: the spiritual fighter-god for order, equilibrium, justice, faith, will; his arrows jacket as exemplar, analogous to Mozart’s Papageno), panthers, and roses (pursued perfection); and 3) garments traditionally worn during rites of passage, like the *kushti* (Mercury, aged eight, participated in a *Navjote*, a Zoroastrian coming-of-age ceremony [Lee, 2018]), the *sedreh vest*, on stage and in his private life, or the *gaunacka/gauna* fur coat; accessories like the bull-horned cap (in the “Book of Creation” or *Bundahishn*, the bull is created by Ahura Mazda and killed by Ahriman; “The Praise of the Holy Bull” serves as the introduction to “In Praise of Water”). Moreover, Mercury’s bare chest is linked to that tradition, relating vulnerability, analogous to the salamander on his t-shirt, bought for a Superman, yet in Persian mythology stands for righteousness and faith overcoming the flames of passion.

In this regard, here we find Mercury akin to Bowie's adagio, "I'm just a mortal with the potential of a superman."

Some symbols glimpsed in his outfits precisely refer to that cultural frame of things related to ancestors and the concept of ancestry and, apparently, Mercury wanted to allude to them not blatantly but by means of a symbolic "Innuendo" (1991), as can also be seen in the album cover from J. J. Grandville's piece "Juggler of Universes." The creation of the planets is then visualised in the VR installation. "It's a kind of magic" that things linked to Zoroaster have remained so disguised.

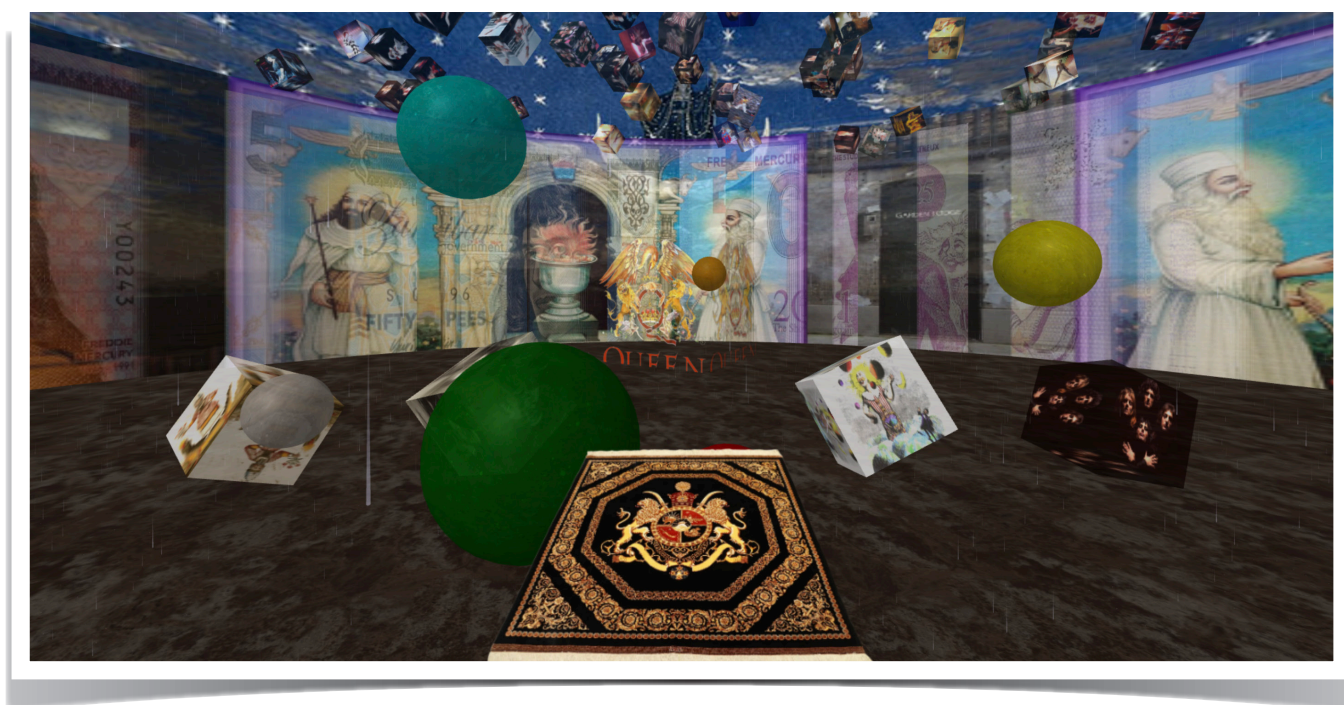


Fig. 15. Zoroaster Superstar VR: Freddie Mercury - Innuendo cover: Juggler of Universes — ARTOLDO (2023)



Fig. 16. Zoroaster Superstar VR: Casanova — ARTOLDO (2023)

Casanova: The Count of Seingalt met both the Count of Saint-Germain and Cagliostro, emblematic figures of the eighteenth-century—its esoteric side with a penchant for the more intelligible rationalising and enlightening facet, a brilliant hyperstition; indeed, obscuring more than a Momentary Lapse of Reason—acquaintances he later attacked publicly, an attitude that of demeaning, once by himself highly regarded subjects (he did it again and in turn against the once-esteemed Voltaire), thereby endorsing the interpretation that, to him, the arcane sciences were just other means for scheming to gain the mesmerised attention of the powerful on whom his whole life depended. Even so, taking into account the power of fascination of those “means,” he was somehow subjected to their charm, he who never shied away from seduction, but rather invoked and evoked it. Therefore, his practice of occult sciences and his interest in Freemasonry, esoteric brotherhoods, and, furthermore, encounters with their members (he also knew Mozart through his helping with the libretto of *Don Giovanni* [Stefanovska, 2020]) could not be missing either: although he preferred not to underline the issue too much, Casanova practiced an abundance of forms of “theurgic” and “cabbalistic” mantic magic (Catalano) and absorbed ideas and rituals disseminated through Masonic lodges or gleaned in notorious treatises and manuals like the *Salomon’s clavicula* (Stefanovska, 2020).

Often a penniless conman, he was also forced to indulge in other manipulations, of a chemical nature and coinable, whereas he took classes in chemistry with a certain interested regard for alchemical experiments whereby he then duped his affluent subsidisers, be they, in turn, the Marquise d’Urfé—notably an alchemist herself—the Signor Bragadin, or others. Alchemy thus served to create the invented belief in Casanova’s magical capabilities or phony knowledge in the cabbala, worthy of a trickster, a make-believer of his rank. This is how to read the short reference he makes in his memoirs, translated into English by no

less than the weird fiction writer and occultist Arthur Machen (an author much beloved by David Bowie, a significant sympathy here, which manifests the logic of this project), writing about Zoroaster with a style marked by an uncommon and astute nonchalance: “Next comes Mercury, then the Moon, then Jupiter, and then the Sun. It is, you see, the magic cycle of Zoroaster, in which Saturn and Mars are omitted”; an arcane which for sure intellectually seduced the Marquise. Stefanovska (2020) also noted the many mercurial aspects of Casanova: He had to cure his syphilis with mercury without the metal causing him acute poisoning, a notorious side effect of this dangerous medicine; he temporary embodied professions traditionally associated with Mercury/Hermes as a god, as he was often a quasi thief, merchant, traveller and pimp; “his relationship with Mercury is only one example of such a ‘mutual trade’ between chemistry, magic, alchemy, medicine and the other alchemy—that of the verb, as Mallarmé called poetry” (Stefanovska, p. 95), a constant communication between and transcending disciplines, as expedient in his life and disparate narratives, where boundaries are much more criss-crosses and roundabouts.

Under the aegis of Mercury, as Freddie and Casanova



Fig. 17. Zoroaster Superstar VR: Casanova - Fellini + Roll — ARTOLDO (2023)

Fellini's *Casanova*: Immersed in a Canaletto's postmodern diorama, an artist coeval with Casanova, in the embryonic waters of the initial scene of the film *Fellini's Casanova*: Zoroaster sits on a gondola—as he appears in the Verginelli-Rota's *Clavis Artis*—then, a display of books by or on Casanova, such as his memoirs, “*Historie de ma vie*,” the novel *Casanovas Heimfahrt* (Casanova's Homecoming) by Arthur Schnitzler (1918), Casanova's half fairy tale and half ante-litteram science fiction prose, “*Icosaméron*” (1787), Casanova's translation of the libretto by Louis de Cahusac for the *tragedie en musique Zoroastre* by Jean-Philippe Rameau (1747–1749), the tragicomedy “*Zoroastro*” by Carlo Goldoni (1760)—Casanova and Goldoni lived in roughly the same times and lodges—and the commodification (in nothing less than a seductive perfume) by a fashion brand of Voltaire's novella and work of philosophical fiction “*Zadig or, The Book of Fate*” (1747), which tells the story of *Zadig*, a Zoroastrian philosopher in ancient Babylonia. Voltaire was a pivotal presence in the life of Casanova, who aimed to be recognised as a man of the Republic of Letters, and a figure he actually happened to meet once thanks the contributions of Marquis d'Urfé (who is quintessentially depicted by Fellini in the eponymous film).

On the superior hemisphere three rings orbit: one is the frontispiece of *Histoire de ma fuite des prisons de la République de Venise qu'on appelle les Plombs* (1788), the central display cases showing iconic pics of Federico Fellini, Nino Rota, and Gustavo Rol, the higher, and the pediment of the Saint Magdalene Church in Venice, which was built by the theorist architect Tommaso Temenza of Masonic creed (Rampazzo, 2023; Favilla and Rugolo, 2009)—legendarily initiated by none other than Casanova, according to rumours—and there are several hovering icosahedrons. The soundtrack is “*O Venezia, Venaga, Venusia*” by Nino Rota (1976).

Fellini +
Rota:
The life-long collaboration between the two maestri—Federico Fellini and Nino Rota—might also be deep-rooted in their mutual fascination with esoteric or alternative spiritualities, whose many anecdotes recur, recalling the figure of the former via many intellectual personalities of his time and for the latter, indeed: the coventured *Bibliotheca Hermetica*, authored together with Verginelli, may be a hint.

As a matter of fact, Rota authorised other masterpieces of hermetic inspiration; for instance, the *Oratorium Mysterium* (1962), with texts again by Verginelli and influenced by the so-called apocryphal and Gnostic Gospels of the Nag Hammadi library—Rota also set to music a fairy tale about Aladdin by his alchemical friend.

Fellini's interest in paranormal and mediumistic phenomena and in the mysteries of the arcane pivotally flows together with the missing but undisputed masterpiece *The Journey of G. Mastorna*, whose screenplay exists, yet not the final film (it seems the clairvoyant Rol suggested that he halt the project), with his *Juliet of the Spirit* (1965) and with *Tobby Dammit* (1968) inspired by Poe's novel and from the trilogy *Spirits of the Dead* (Santoro, 2020). Even Fellini's professional reflections were influenced by consultations

with mediums and psychics, which, although neglected by academic insight, might bear witness to his curiosity for the forces of fantasy over reality and his awe for the supernatural dimension of life (Pacchioni, 2020). Three figures were decisive for his unfolding of this tendency: the “magical friend” and composer Nino Rota, with their lifetime collaboration, and the medium and seer Gustavo Rol—and the former has been captured by the latter, together with Fellini’s other close collaborators from the art world, like the magical realist writer Dino Buzzati. But first and foremost, the psychoanalyst Ernst Bernhard (Pacchioni, 2020), who “blended Jungian theories, mystical Eastern traditions, and a cabalistic vision of the universe by which every event is endowed with a symbolic meaning” (Pacchioni, 2020); he also led therapeutic sessions enhanced with LSD with the Freudian psychoanalyst and parapsychologist Emilio Servadio (Kezich, 2007).

The technology we used for the 360° journey through those artists, intellectuals, and prophets and their esoteric tendencies made it possible to look around in a circular way, as emblematic of the eternal return of such a quest, for it is in all respects, human, all too human.



Fig. 18. Zoroaster Superstar VR: Casanova - Fellini + Rota — ARTOLDO (2023)

A few words about ARTOLDO

ARTOLDO (est. 2015) is a creative collective featuring Sara Ferro (M. A. in Sociology of Media) and Chris Weil (ARD.ZDF Media Academy) with a focus on esoteric arthouse movies, cinema XR, documentaries, experimental and essay films, moving images arts, poetry film, video art, and virtual reality.

Notable works (esoteric films): *All Is One* (2024), *Embassy of the Free Mind* (2024), *Secropolis* (2024), *C. G. Jung on Alchemy* (2023), *Clavis Artis* (2023), *Black Sudo Rising 360°* (2022), *The Luther Blissett Legacy - Satanic Panic* (2022), *Hauntology of the Retrodromomania* (2021), *Frammenti di una Festa Furiosa: Furio's Furious Fragments & Friends - Furio Jesi* (2021), *Vespertilio Spillover* (2020), *Timor Panicus* (2020), *MicroGnosing* (2019), *WhimSeaCall - Nocturnal Sea* (2019), *Ugo Dossi - Art and Space* (2018) and *The Ritman Library - Amsterdam* (2017). Publications: "But Who Was Bernus?" (*Anthropos & Iatria* | Anno XXIV no. 1 [pp. 86–98]). Translations: *La Pagana* (2024) + *Venere in Pesci. Romanzo Astrologico* (2023) (*Bella Germaniae*). Poetry: *Sineddoche Torino* (2024) (Kurze&Pos - poismetto).

Official website: <https://artoldo.com> | Permalink: <https://artoldo.github.io>

Project link – Zoroaster Superstar VR: <https://artoldo.com/zoroaster>

Permalink (Use this link to embed or share online): <https://artoldo.github.io/zoroaster>

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