A Vyrcanian Story: Materialising Alternate Histories and Geographies

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Abstract
The works produced along with this dissertation and presented as the result of my MFA consist of a narrative video, set in a fictional land, tracing the downfall of a secret society. This is presented alongside a looped photorealistic moving image of genderless, angelic figures blinking, smiling, and intoning a hymn-like monotonous chorus. These two videos are projected on two large screens in a dark room in which there is bench seating which has been decorated in the style of the fictional land to which the work belongs. These video works and the furnishing exist as outcrops of a larger whole. As they function as punctual materialisations of a set of geographies and histories—the Vyrcanian Federation—that I had been devising occasionally and randomly since childhood in my head, on scribbled bits of paper and on my computer; but the bulk of which has been developed during this MFA as fully realised artworks. As the result of this research, I also will install “behind the scenes” videos, maps and images relating to the construction of the Vyrcanian Federation, located behind the projection screens.

In the following dissertation I structure and expound the history of the Vyrcanian Federation, including the language in which the videos have been made; and I have composed this research following an encyclopaedic format. I include autobiographical details indicating the personal needs and proclivities that incited and guided to their creation, and discuss the cultural background inspiring them as well as the political questions they raise. For the latter I examine the works’ roots in cartography, archaeology and the history of esotericism; and their relationship to the aesthetics of spirituality and of totalitarianism; and the films and artworks that have provided inspiraiton.
Declaration

This is to certify that

(i) \textit{the thesis comprises only my original work towards the masters except where indicated in the Preface*;}

(ii) \textit{due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used,}

(iii) \textit{the thesis is 12093 words in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices.}

Guillaume Savy
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N. Introduction

The works produced along with this thesis and presented as the result of my MFA consist of a narrative video, set in a fictional land, tracing the downfall of a secret society; which is presented alongside a looped photorealistic moving image of genderless, angelic figures blinking and smiling. These works exist as outcrops of a larger whole, as punctual materialisations of a set of geographies and histories I have been devising since early childhood, the bulk of which is more likely to be encountered in my computer, on scribbled bits of paper, or in my head, than on the gallery circuit. This paper will therefore begin far below the surface of the works, in order to, layer by layer, formulate a geology of the universe that can be observed emerging in the video works, and without which the works wouldn't exist.

Rather than discussing the fictional lands as personal inventions, which would convey the illusion that they have been created *ex-nihilo*, or as whims of a transcendental imagination. I will often adopt the empirical—and thus well in line with our geological outset—flavour of the encyclopaedia in order to introduce them. A more honest strategy, as it is faithful to how I introduce these lands to myself, presenting them as pre-existent dynamical objects calling to be retrieved and revealed. The encyclopaedia will also be interspersed with elements of autobiographical contextualisation, which will provide departure points for theoretical incursions guided by semiotics, psychoanalytical theory, archaeology, anthropology as well as disciplines more often considered as fringe in order to unpack the clusters of cultural and psychological connotations invoked by the work. This approach parallels that of Borges’ *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, a story which, while it hasn't directly inspired my work, shares many of its strategies with my paper. These narrative strategies can be characterised as “slipstream”—a slippery term coined by Bruce Sterling, for which he gives a rather apophatic definition, hinting at a type of fiction transcending genres, on the periphery of fantasy and science fiction\(^1\); a term which we will understand in this case as situated in paired opposition to speculative fiction, which is interested in the “what ifs” of history. Thus, the “slipstream” adventure on which we are about to embark follows the general rules of history and geography (by which it is most informed), however its connections to the generally admitted body of knowledge of these disciplines are looser, sparser and more questionable. Like *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, Voltaire's *Micromégas* or Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, the use of fictional land also permits a playful distanciation which provides an easier setting for the allegorical—as well as more direct—

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The first and deepest layer to be discussed will be the earliest: the map, the childhood roots of which will be analysed as symptomatic of a compulsion towards the world as outline—a constellation of ideas and prominent concept in the work which will be problematised further throughout the paper. The second layer is history, which introduces the Vyrcanian federation and the cultural context in which the work is located. Third comes language (which can be heard in the works), and the rules pertaining to its emergence, the broader cultural ramifications of its structure. A conversation which will lead to the crystalline layer of Ideal, in which an examination of the supernal eroticism of transcending the world as outline, totalitarian fascinations and the aesthetics of unattainability, all prominent attributes in the work, will rule. Following on we will reach the organic topsoil of physicality—maggots and all—bringing forth a necessary, sobering reversal from the Apollonian pinnacles previously encountered, an irreversible ascent towards materiality and mortality to introduce the video's secret society and its story. Finally we will resurface into the rarefied atmosphere of the Institution, to discuss the eruption of this internal universe into the outside world, with particular attention to the problems involved in the need to share the contents of that universe as much as to obfuscate its more socially unacceptable aspects. In that final chapter we will also consider how the video works were produced within such constraints, to finally speculate, with a review of the works of several other artists, on how these video works can behave as art, in hope that, as the erupted material slowly solidifies in contact with the cool surrounding air, it creates new conceptual lands to be tread upon and explored.
I. On the Act of Mapping and the *World as Outline*

Having decided to structure our understanding of the work following a geological template, it is here, at the most primordial layer of its metaphorical body, that our journey must begin. We will thus be running counter to Jules Vernes' *Voyage au Centre de la Terre*, as we ascend from the centre back to the surface, a direction more adequately suited to the chronological description of the processes involved in the construction of the work. In order to reach this core without digging our way in, however, we must first travel back in time to the infancy of this body. To a time equivalent to the one in the history of our planet Earth, when, as a group of planetesimals—a compacted cluster of stellar dust of about a cubic kilometre each, it was at the brink of entering a state of runaway accretion. And so here we find ourselves: laying our eyes upon a suspended mineral chaos, arising, from vast obscurity, as sharp outlines in the harsh light of a nearby star; we catch our active, organising gaze as it sees a map.

An advocate of hollow earth theory would probably point out that their preferred world-view would yield a far more elegant metaphor for one who decides to place the map at the centre of their world. Nevertheless, as seductive as that sounds, in our case it cannot work. Our core map, rather than being interpreted as a projection of the world which it depicts, is more conveniently understood as a handy point at the horizon of memory, on a chain of causality reaching far beyond, into inscrutable recesses of its cosmos; and, more importantly, our core map's behaviour as object possessing sufficient gravity to compulsively attract to it the matter which will constitute its external body is what interests us here.

Who can remember their first encounter with a map? The first time they were taught how to decipher one? Perhaps it is due to my childhood coinciding with the 1990s, a decade which was certainly marked by the primacy of the geographical and spacial over the historical and temporal, that I assume most would also answer those questions with a “yes”. Thus Jean Baudrillard's distressed assertions that “the territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it” and that “it is the map that precedes the territory”\(^2\) are confirmed and embody by our experience of maps as self-evident, as the firstness of geography; henceforth relegating the labour of the cartographer and his exploration of the land to the status of myth, the dimming rays of which weakly emanate from beyond the horizon of memory. My childhood followed that same pattern, as the overwhelming majority of my knowledge of the world was mediated by maps. Atlases for children—unambiguously outlining the world's languages, climates, biomes, foods and peoples; painting them

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with the frank sweetness of ocular lollies; were my most prized possessions. The origins of my
fascination for geography however remain hard to trace; and I suspect range beyond a matter of
zeitgeist or a general Gallic, colonial-hangover-induced obsession for the exotic (although these
factors certainly cannot be discounted). It is more likely that maps promise that their referred object
can—in the current state of our technologies, and as opposed to images of outer space—be visited
for real, added to the gravitas of geography's seriousness and status as “grownup matter” are what
seduced my escapist inclinations (themselves directed away from my urban middle class
environment and fuelled by a distaste for other children). Still, I would like to propose another key
factor to explain that fascination and the compulsion to create my own maps, a factor that will
reappear frequently during our ascent, a certain inclination towards what we will call: *world as
outline*. This concept, instead of being a revolutionary new idea, is best approached as the
opportune delineation of the region in which I perceive several ideas to converge (and as such it is a
symptomatic extension of what it describes). I understand the idea of *world as outline* as: a
perspective transcending the distinction between iconicity and indexicality, encompassing both
drawing—*disegno* as opposed to *colore*—and map. Umberto Eco, referring to research by
Gombrich, describes outlines as “perceptual surrogates” that “serve as indicators of discontinuity
[…] , as anticipations of the parallax effect of movement”\(^3\), he points out that if one were to “take a
sheet of paper and draw the profile of a horse, the only property that the pictured horse has (the
continuous black line) is the only one that the real horse doesn't have”\(^4\). This anticipation of parallax
—a prophylactic against motion, like the outline of her lover's shadow that Boutades drew on her
wall in preparation of his absence, interrupts time and flattens the subject in an ultimate Medusean
glance. Furthermore, and not unlike a specular light—specular like that of the sun shooting through
the vacuum of space—that strikes our cluster of planetesimals and creates sharply contrasted
shadows around their edges, the outline offers a stronger illusion of discontinuity to the world it
describes. Thus divided and paralysed, the world surrogate contained in the outline becomes prey
for an easy conquest. This simulation of power—the power to discover, through close scrutiny of
the immobilised subject and the lack of ambiguity of its defining characteristics; thus the power to
re-arrange the world from the comfort of my childhood bedroom—this simulation of godly power,
in spite of my weak constitution (an embarrassment in my mother's eyes, a reason for ostracism and
bullying in those of my peers, a supreme sign of the deficiencies of materiality in mine) held a
magic, life-affirming allure.

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The first unknown land I started mapping, at the age of six, is Wedzer-Nerin'g, a large continent-like island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. With an area of about 5 040 000 square kilometres, and a population approaching 380 000 000, Wedzer-Nerin'g had managed to remain “undiscovered” and uncolonised until the advent of satellite imagery due to the very rough seas that surround it and the lack of significant flight paths going over it at the time (“undiscovered” to the exception of a Spanish cruise ship that was thrown by a storm onto the Northwestern Anyol Island in 1953). Featuring the earth's highest mountain, culminating at 17 843 metres in the inaccessible province of Ledzen, the world's tallest tower (since 2010 supplanted by Dubai's Burj Khalifa) in the capital city of Bharyi, and the world's most populated city: Torash, with a population of 50 000 000; Wedzer-Nerin'g, with its many phallic peninsulas and yonic estuaries, is a land of superlatives, which perfectly suited my aspirations. I cheered upon the many successes of Wedzer cultural hegemony as I witnessed the integration of Marilaas, Spen and Varnamina into the Wedzer fold, between 1992 and 1997—a refreshing counter-current to the simultaneous dismantlement of Yugoslavia—leaving only the “rogue states” of Siyus and Tröch as sovereign remainders of the formerly powerful Traw-Da confederation. Even though the Traw-da had arguably kept Wedzer power in balance on the island for the past thousands of years. Instead of sleeping I prefer to dream of tourists and explorers.
encountering Wedzer Nerin'g foreboding jungles, strange deserts, ultramodern cities, ancient ruins and majestic volcanos.

Fig. 2. Comparison of a map of my primary school schoolyard (from memory) and a map of the Eastern part of Anyol island.
Much to my convenience, the patterns left by various layers of asphalt-concrete on my primary school's schoolyard as well as adjoining landscaping features were also remarkably identical to Anyol island's Northeastern coast, which allowed me to conduct many very satisfying cartographic surveys of that magnificent subtropical island.

While I remained mostly unconcerned with the physical anthropology of Wedzer-Nerin'gians, another form of geography, this one focused on the cartography of the human face, came to reinforce my weltgefühl of world as outline: morphopsychology, knowledge of which I gleaned from books on the topic that my mother (a student of morphopsychology herself) owned and failed to hide properly. Morphopsychology, like graphology, is considered to be a pseudo-science. Yet, in France, it maintains a certain popularity with those in quest of self-understanding, and, more worryingly, among a surprising amount of human resources professionals. Founded in the 1930s by Docteur Louis Corman, a French psychiatrist specialising in children, la morphopsychologie bears similarities with physiognomy and phrenology in its object: the deduction of mental traits from the examination of physical traits, mostly from the face (and its profile), presented in mugshot-like photographic portraits.

Fig. 3. Antoine Protopazzi, Variation du type Soleil. From: Corman, Louis, and Antoine Protopazzi. *Quinze leçons de morpha-psychologie: Avec 80 portraits de A. Protopazzi*. Paris. Edit. Stock, 1948

5 World feeling—a term borrowed from Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West*, which the author uses to describe the primordial, sensual and symbolic formulation of the world at the birth of a specific civilisation. Spengler's master narratives on the destiny of civilisations were very influential with my work.


It is primarily based on the “law of dilatation and retraction”, itself derived from observations by the now obscure Lyon doctor Claude Sigaud, who had noticed that patients with thicker, more “dilated” features behaved differently and had different immune patterns from patients with more “retracted” features. According to that law, wider faces and wider features are signs of a greater propensity to expend vitality, in contrast to retracted, caved in faces that demonstrate a tendency to horde and conserve vitality. From that law on, Dr Corman divided the face in three main areas where various dilatations and retractions can be observed: the instinctive/active zone, including the jaw and having for point of exchange with the external word as the mouth; the affective zone, including the cheekbone and with the nose as point of exchange; the intellectual zone, including the brow and with the eyes as point of exchange. Further specificity is brought on with notions of dynamism and apathy, observable in the tonicity of the tissues. With all these rules in its corpus, morphopsychology allows its practitioner to read a face feature by feature as a trait by trait index of the psychological inclinations of its bearer. Although it also encourages a more holistic approach to the face as a coherent whole, which can thus be related to various series of caricatural archetypes based on astrological or Jungian typologies. My mother had made a point for me not to read her morphopsychology, pointing out that it should not be misused; indeed all the books included a deontology page – the content of which I could not understand except for the bold sentence “Ne pas juger, mais comprendre”. Much like the sorcerer’s young apprentice that is irresistibly drawn to forbidden black magic, I would frequently return to the morphopsychology books—to analyse the clearly outlined, map-like caricature of the archetypes and, strong with my secret knowledge of the facial index, silently analyse and judge the faces of other children and grownups around me, reaching vindicatory conclusions about their attitudes and their perceived insensitivity towards me.

The internalised outline of human faces, like the patterns on the ground of the schoolyard, thus became a proxy through which I could safely navigate an otherwise treacherous social reality. Apparent in maps and the morphopsychological reading of the face, the world as outline offered, in virtue of its manoeuvrable bi-dimensionality, an open invitation to the accretion of simulacra. The outline’s gravity attracted and re-attached neutralised concepts of personality, understood as

8 Thomas, "La Morphopsychologie.", 1999.
14 “Do not judge, but understand”, itself based on a French translation of Baruch Spinoza’s “Do not weep. Do not wax indignant. Understand.”
narrative back to faces; just as it drove me to obsessively relocate images and sounds collected from encyclopaedias, documentaries and atlases back onto my maps. It is here that we witness the first layers quickly collecting onto our original outline, as the cluster of planetesimals has now grown around us to become our allegorical planet. It is at this point, amidst ancient, compacted memories of Wedzer Nerin’g and its childhood cradle—from which we will re-encounter often reencounter materials—that our ascent back towards the surface can truly begin.

Fig.4. Four maps of the Vyrcanian Federation.
II. On the Archaeology and History of the Vyrcanian Federation

My interest was first directed towards the Vyrcanian Federation one morning of September 1999. I was ten years old, my family had moved from France to Malaysia, and I had just integrated a new school there. I can still remember the large streak-like puddles of water, as they hurriedly evaporated into the already torrid and quasi-saturated air, forming constantly renewed outlines on the green concrete ground of the multi-sport courtyard—yellow lines for soccer, red for basketball, blue for volleyball perhaps. Blue lines for rivers, red for highways, and maybe yellow for train-tracks, along the large concentric streaks of altitude delineations—mapping a new land felt absolutely necessary, and while I didn't know its name yet, the Vyrcanian Federation was a perfect candidate, completely unknown to the general public, and in many ways reflecting the Malaysian experience, as it sits at the meeting point of seemingly incompatible cultural spheres.

This federation, which has been described as neither Eastern European, nor Middle Eastern or Central Asian but a Steppe in all these directions simultaneously, combines cultural and natural features of these various regions in its own idiosyncratic, and often surprising mix.

The Vyrcanian Federation is a country located in Central to Western Eurasia. It borders the Black and Caspian seas. With a population of approximately 73,560,000 and an area of 789,352 square kilometres, the territory displays an unevenly spread population density, in line with the striking variety of biomes that can be encountered within it. The North is mostly flat, belonging to the Great Eurasian Steppe, forming a gradient between the more populated and cultivated West to the windswept dry grassland of the East, interrupted only by the relatively more wooded slopes of the small Werkov massif (culminating by 1653m at mount Alōvkas) and the foothills of the Ural. The Northern plaines are separated from the more mountainous and densely urbanised South by the Muncopi and Gulge river, the two river almost meeting at the Hasatta isthmus before flowing towards their respective seas, the former to the Black Sea, the latter to the Caspian. The South consists of very fertile and populated valleys surrounded by heavily forested mountains ranges culminating at Mount Sočmas (6230m), the West featuring a humid subtropical climate and the East a transitional climate between Mediterranean and Semi-Arid. All cities of more than 500,000 inhabitants are located in the South—except for the capital Sodd (~13,000,000 inhabitants), which lies mostly on the Northern bank of the Muncopi, and Kiras (~7,800,000 inhabitants) at the mouth of the same river, incuding the Suwadžja-Madžjawur conurbation (~12,000,000 inhabitants) occupying a central strip of the Monsi Valley, and the Southeastern cities of Xenopor (~2,000,000 inhabitants).
inhabitants) and Viquv-Aśvārnā (~6 000 000 inhabitants) on the Tčekov river.

While the land currently occupied by the Vyrcanian Federation has been the site of several archaeological finds from the Palaeolithic onwards, all of them associated with primitive pre-Vyrcanian cultures, the actual origins of Vyrcania can be traced outside of contemporary Vyrcanian territory to a series of early iron age polities in the South and Southwestern coasts of the Caspian Sea, themselves founded by agriculturalist migrants from the nearby Fertile Crescent. In particular to the semi-legendary kingdom of Pawol (rendered as Παφωλία in Greek sources)\textsuperscript{15}, a maritime urban palatial civilisation founded some times around 2800 BC. Pawol, unlike its predecessors in the area, was a literate society using an abugida (an alphabet derived from Proto-Sinaitic via early Phoenician and ancestral to latter Vyrcanian script), of which only rare examples remain today; most of our knowledge of Pawolian history being relayed through later writings and oral traditions. It appears that around 2530 BC, under the reign of Muntrgas IV, Pawolian power over the region started increasing greatly, with the creation of colonial outposts as far north into the Steppe as the Gulge river, the polity asserting its dominion over nomadic tribes who had been surviving on the periphery of the agricultural world. These nomads, who had been converting to pastoralism from hunting and gathering for the past millenium (as testified by the recent findings in various tumuli along the Tǔčekov river), were identified in Pawolian legends as Kātūrmās—literally: four legs—barbaric creatures, akin to centaurs, with a human torso and equine or bovine body. The military superior Pawolians, owing to their mastery of bronze smelting, extracted taxes in the form of milk, hides and meat from the Kātūrmās. During the following century, copper ore was discovered in various locations of the pastoralist-populated colonies (with some particularly massive underground complexes recently discovered by Morgan et al. around the Grodklni massif)\textsuperscript{16} which lead to the enslavement of many pastoralists as miners for Pawol, while many others started migrating to the periphery of the city, working as intermediaries in the meat and mineral trade. Around the year 2216 BC, during the reign of Soktos XII, a revolt started growing amidst disgruntled miners and pastoralists, some of whom had settled permanently around the city, where they performed menial tasks and even outnumbered Pawolians in some districts. This group, naming themselves Vṛkani—the wolves—and styling themselves as descendants of the Kātūrmās, had acquired a great degree of metallurgical knowledge along with resentment towards their overlords. During the drought afflicted year of 2212 BC, on a particularly hot summer night and in an event that became enshrined as founding myth of Vyrcania, an army of 616 horse-mounted


copper sword wielding Vṛkani, naked except for a layer of sweat and patterned ochre that made their skins glisten in the moonlight, descended upon Pawol, their characteristic golden ponytails floating behind them as they furiously massacred their way into the palace and gang raped the king and his concubines under the horrified eyes of priests and scribes. This episode is recounted in glorious detail in the first canto of the Džiwordū as the realisation on earth of the marriage and nuptial embrace, in heaven, of the pastoralist blue-eyed sky-god Orsanas and the Pawolian queen goddess Tḷmani, the Vṛkani being the incarnation of Orsanas' equine phallus as it entered Tḷmani. The Vṛkani, in a strike of astuteness without which we probably would have lost all record of their history, decided to work in cooperation with the local elites as they assumed power. They offered the priestly classes, scribes and bureaucracy greater rewards to keep administrating under their aegis, and to participate into creating a new hybrid culture for Pawol. A new martial culture and its myths that were enshrined in the epic poem of the Džiwordū, according to which Orsanas and Tḷmani's union was followed by the birth of a new uniting god: Džiwas. Pawol was renamed as Kṃpor—the city of the united—and became the centre of a budding empire. Their fortuitous combination of the wheel (used until then exclusively as norias by the Pawolians, inspiring their most sacred symbol: the kākḷ) and the horse lead to the invention of the war chariot. The kākḷ gained legs and became the jō'ortṇd, literally “the ever turning”, a golden swastika, that adorned the chariots as they spread Kṃporian supremacy all the way to the Black and Mediterranean seas.

Philokranos of Sinope—a Hellenic historian from the late fifth century BC and the main remaining non-Vyrcanian source of knowledge about early Vyrcania—asserted, as he travelled extensively in Vyrcanian lands at the brink of their collapse under Achaemenid pressure, that Mycenaean Greeks and Trojans as well as Cimmerians were descendants of Kṃporian colonists, putting forward etymological similarities for the latter, while presenting the many similarities between the Vyrcanian and Greek pantheons: equating Orsanas with Uranus, Tḷmani with Gaia and Džiwas with Zeus, proposing Cronus and Rhea as later Greek inventions.17

The region of Sairima, located about 400 kilometres West of Kṃpor, with its high density of copper deposits became an important area of settlement, allowing Kṃpor not only to arm itself but also to trade extensively with its neighbours. The longevity and stability of the Kṃporian empire was remarkable; yet, towards the end of the sixteenth century BC, its central power had greatly diminished and its various colonies were now effectively behaving as fully-fledged independent states, often entertaining more favourable commercial relationships with growing powers in the region such as the Hittites and Assyrians than with their fatherland. In spite of a series of attempts at sparking more cohesion among its colonies, Kṃpor never recovered and was arguably the hardest

17 Philokranos, Hyrcanica, 88.
hit by the Late Bronze Age collapse; none of the once grandiose city with its palaces and gilded temples surviving it. Recent satellite images are opening promising trails for archaeological digs, although the countries on which the suspected sites are located show very little interest in allowing further investigation to proceed; an unjustified apprehension over Vyrcanian irredentism that is regrettably condoned by the international community.

Very little is known of the inheritors of Kṃpor during the millennium that followed. Philokranos and later Vyrcanian scholars argue that the inhabitants of Sairima later re-appeared on the global scene as the Sarmatians as well as the Sēžmi people from whom the contemporary Monsi and Gosu are descended. The Sinopian historian and geographer made the Σκιστοί (whom Strabo would later equate to the Scythians in an apocryphal review of Philokranos)\(^\text{18}\) one of the main subjects of his *Hyrcanica*, claiming to have spent ten years among them on the Southwestern shores of the Caspian Sea. Identified by Vyrcanian historians as the Skṣṭi, meaning “those who stayed”, the Σκιστοί are described by the author as living modestly off a hard land under the authority of petty feudal lords, inhabiting austere villages on a marshy plain dotted with looming overgrown ruins that attest to their once glorious past.\(^\text{19}\) While Philokranos laments the destiny of that civilisation at great lengths, thus informing the stringent pessimism in regards to the future of his Hellenic oikoumene that he is most famous for; he also notes that some segments of the population have still maintained a memory of their ancient past alive.\(^\text{20}\) The priestly class having devotedly retained its literacy, memorising the *Džiwordū* from a young age, they use the poem to oversee and inspire the spiritual needs of a fervently pious population. The author also reports about the existence of μυστήριο—secret religious orders existing on the fringes of the *Džiwordū*-centric mainstream religion, he identifies two main currents: the Orsanic Mysteries and the Cyclic Mysteries; in both of which he claims to have been initiated (in two fiefdoms distant from each other). He argues that the two orders were founded shortly after the *Vṛkani* conquest by conservative groups who refused to adhere fully to the new culture and spirituality, the Orsanic preferring to stick with the ancestral pastoralist beliefs, the Cyclic choosing to preserve their allegiance to memories of Pawol. He describes the Cyclic Mysteries as reminiscent of Pythagoreanism in their philosophy while sharing traits with the Eleusinian Mysteries; he mentions equality of genders within the order, a belief in reincarnation, vegetarianism, the consumption of cannabis, the wheel and circles as most sacred symbols, as well as an ultimately monistic understanding of the world; their rituals being


\[^{19}\text{Philokranos, *Hyrcanica*, 3-15.}\]

\[^{20}\text{Ibid.}\]
theurgic in nature, attempting to induce stages of collective henosis with the help of hoola-hoops and rotating coloured wheels. While Philokranos' testimony of the Cyclic Mysteries is generally accepted as genuine, his account of the Orsanic Mysteries has proven far more contentious. The author depicts the Orsanic order as exclusively male, recruiting its members, typically pubescent boys, via abduction; their initiation featuring shocking acts of mock coitus during which older members donned dildos shaped like stallion phalloi above their own genitals, with which they proceeded to hump through the neophytes' oiled thighs. Their calendar was filled with festivals taking place in secret glades among significant ruins during which they drank osmanthus wine and ephedra tea, role played epic poems, wrangled wild horses, fought bulls and each other in a spirit of jovial competition, occasionally sharing a village girl among the victors. Philokranos' chronicle is punctuated with surprisingly non judgemental allusions to the soul elevating properties of the camaraderie experienced in those ritualised moments of heightened intensity. Many have questioned Philokranos' report, pointing at the author's age at the time making him unlikely to have been inducted into the order as well as the low likelihood of being able to be secretly both part of the Cyclic and Orsanic orders; some even described his narrative as the result of Cyclic propaganda attempting to discredit their Orsanic rivals. During the last years of Philokranos' travels among the Σκιστοί, pressure from the expending Achaemenid empire to their immediate South (soon followed by Alexandre the Great's conquests) started forcing his subjects of study into a concerted migration, lasting over two centuries, towards the North, back into the original lands of the Kātūrṇmās and even further into territories occupied by their distant Sěżmi cousins as well other unknown groups. Some chose to return to their very ancestral semi-nomadic lifestyle, while the majority settled the upper Tčekov as well as the Muncopi basin, where they formed small fortified towns. During that unstable time the original text of the Džiwordū was lost. The book remained unrecovered until the extensive research work conducted by Mixēl Edras, a physicist, erudite historian and philologist from Tāsqand, in 1843. Edras wrote extensively about the profound impact that exodus had on the Skšți psyche and culture, highlighting how the writing system was changed to an alphabet more adapted to parchment for easy transport, the language being itself heavily modified; he also described how verses from Džiwordū were reshuffled into a seemingly nonsensical order and interspersed with new verses and canti to form the Udna, of which sixth widely different canons (Tāsqandi, Sođdi, Xenopori, Vāli, mountaineer and Cḷnevi) were created.

In the Udna, Tḷmani has been captured by a chthonic demon—Daž; its books featuring many verses exhorting the faithful to bring about, through good deeds and prayers, the coming of a hero, given

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21 Ibid.
22 Mixel Edras, Our Ancestors, the River Scythians and Their Beliefs, trans. Guillaume Savy (Melbourne, 2014), 14.
from heaven, that will restore harmony to the world—the Ėrvrkan.

Now bearing a name that no longer rang true, betrayed by their land, uprooted and displaced in hostile country, the Skṭi were forced by providence to rewrite their character, [...] to unground their faith. [...] As they scattered the Dźiwordū, the grieving priests anchored their beliefs into the air—the great disperser, giddy element of mind and reckoning; away from the earth—that soiled mother of weapons, and her unforgivable treachery.23

Karl Jaspers coined the term *Axial Age* to describe the time period lasting roughly between 800 and 200 BC which he identifies as the temporal stage for a series of similar spiritual revolutions around the world. He includes Zoroaster, Siddhārtha Gautama, Laozi, Plato and Confucius among the major thinkers who contributed to that new order; their visions converging towards ideas of a purer reality transcending the material world.24 Although there are no major such thinkers from that time among the Skṭi, the creation of the *Udna* and its core ideas follow a similar pattern to those of other *Axial Age* belief systems. The anarchist historian David Graeber suggests that these thought systems emerged as a reaction to the development of coinage.25 This is something that I wish to extend to the apparition of iron-metallurgy as a whole, to the transformation of minerals into tokens of value as well as—corroborating Edras' understanding of the *Udna*—very deadly weapons. Edras argues that as a result of that spiritual shift—and not unlike how the road on which Jesus Christ treaded had been thoroughly paved by Plato and other *Axial Age* forerunners—christianity, as it was spread by Armenian missionaries, in Skṭi land around the early fourth century, found a very welcoming spiritual environment among readers of the *Udna*.26

26 Edras, *Our Ancestors, the River Scythians and Their Beliefs*, 45-47
However, unlike other regions where Christianity was adopted as a normative state religion, the Skṣṭi lands consisted of a series of small polities; this lack of unified central power, together with a geographical position away from Rome and Constantinople's eyes, led to the flourishing of independent, idiosyncratic Christian communities. Edras' research has showed that the existence of secret esoteric religious orders was not interrupted by the arrival of christianity, to the contrary even, it appears that many more orders were created around that time, incorporating the new doctrines in conjunction with older traditions from the Udna and older lost texts. He argues that the garbling and ungrounding of the Džiwordū as it was turned into the Udna, was a particularly key act of esotericisation of the religious corpus, creating a clearer distinction between those who had studied the texts enough to interpret them, and those whose only relationship to their sacred text was through the poetic rhythm and mystifying aura of abstruseness. A phenomenon that perdured after the introduction of bibles first in Armenian and then in Syriac—as chosen by the then ruler of Sodd Melekas II for its supposed greater authenticity. 27

In the centuries following the settlement of the Skṣṭi in their new land, two competing poles of activity and knowledge arose in two of the main fortified towns, as they started reaping benefits from their advantageous positions on the silk road: one in Tāsqand and one in Cîne, just outside of

Sodd's fluvial port. Several schools and monasteries were open in both towns during the fifth century. 612 AD saw the opening of the Člnē library, and 621 AD that of the Tāsqand library. The cities' positions outside of Constantinople's general sphere of influence also turned the region into a haven for heterodox believers and heresiarchs of all stripes. Člnē in particular, became the home in exile for many Valentinians, Marcionites and other gnostics; while Nestorians thrived at Tāsqand Academy. During the latter half of the seventh century, monasteries in both towns acquired various holy relics and started attracting not only pilgrims but also Constantinople's attention. A series of escalating edicts were sent between 715 and 723 by patriarch Germanus enticing those he called the river Scythians to iron out their beliefs and enter in proper full communion with Byzantium. An appeal which proved at least superficially successful as a patriarch for all river Scythians was set up in Kṃpordon, a new town on Soddian territory. Edras argues that this normalisation of official practices lead to a recrudescence in underground esoteric activities, although he believes that the main currents, and the distinction between Tāsqandian and Člnēvian beliefs long predate even the arrival of the Skṣṭi in these lands. As a result of extensive research he identifies Člnēvians as direct spiritual descendants of the Cyclic Mysteries and Tāsqandians of the Orsanics, stating in the same stride (and against everyone at his time) that Philokranos' account of both Mysteries was most certainly valid. He further identifies the core characteristics of the two belief systems which he believes can be found expressed in the thought and practices of every more or less secret order in each location. (cf: Appendix I.)

In the centuries that followed, the River Scythians' lives adopted a regular boom and bust cycle, as various invading hordes descended down the steppes upon their increasingly well fortified and defended polities, alternating with periods of wealth derived from the growing silk road trade. However, during the XVIth century, a greater threat to their independence materialised in the person of Ivan the Terrible. As the pressure from the Russians to the North started increasing, the then king of Sodd started forming alliances with other River Scythian polities as well as neighbouring Sēžmi states with whom relationships had so far been hostile. The alliances grew and a general confederation was officialised in 1561 under the name of Vyrcanian Federation, a name—which acknowledged the Sēžmi and Skṣṭi's shared Kṃporian heritage—that some Člnēvian detractors argue could have only been suggested by his Tāsqandian concubine. Russian imperial forces were kept at bay, and the federation was maintained and cemented into a centralised state, with its capital located in Sodd's Kṃpordon neighbourhood.

While the rest of Europe was swept by the enlightenment and the industrial revolution, entering the modern age, the Vyrcanian Federation only maintained a superficial intellectual connection with it.
If Kmpordon with its embassies and university came to be called the Vienna of the Caspian, as reflected by its embrace of Central European neo-classicism, as well as the alignment of its thinkers to their Western counterparts; the rest of the country remained in a state of superstition, blind piousness and rural feudality, reports as recent as 1803 describe mass hysteria in Tāsqand over suspected black magic attacks from Cļne, amidst a climate of mysterious abduction and banditism on the roads connecting the two cities.

Much like the neighbouring Russian Empire, that had also lagged in regards to its adoption of Enlightenment ideals and industrialisation, the rise of the proletarian revolution was swift in the Vyrcanian Federation; and by 1932, the Vyrcanian territories had been incorporated in the USSR. A ruthless program of indepth cultural reforms was imposed by the general secretary of the Vyrcanian SSR Tātoras Zajer (who quickly Russified his name to Fyodor Zajerev, and encouraged his Vyrcanian comrades to imitate him), which was particularly intent on discarding the “obscurantist superstitions that have kept the Vyrcanian proletariat in a state of ignorance and subjugation under the hegemony of a dark age feudalism”. The Zajerev reforms were well received by some urban segments of the population, in particular among the Kmpordonian youth, while strongly antagonised by its main targets in Cļne and Tāsqand. While the general population was aware of the existence of occult orders among them, few however new much about them, or about their members; still, the Zajerev reforms instilled a state of paranoia and witch-hunt that had never before been seen in Vyrcania which was only interrupted by the ravage of World War II. The 1950s saw the downfall and public exposure of two major secret societies from Tāsqand—Präcerдон Wānas Kṛšik Zaxši (the Order of the Bright Cassiopeia and Little Dipper) and Präcerдон Džūs Svulkes (the Order of the Heavenly Furrow)—as well as several minor groups from Cļne and some from the countryside between the two cities, including Präcerдон Šimūnes Cṃ Ogmās (the Order of the Dark Stone of Simon) the significance of which as sources for my studio project we will soon come to.
Following our review of Vyrcanian history, and in following the chronological progression of our *anamnesis* of the land beneath the work, we reach the layer of language. The type of linguistic inquiry in this chapter is the one that exists in conversation with archaeology and history rather than concerning itself with the nature of language in itself. It is in particular strongly rooted in the linguistic palaeontology of J.P Mallory, and his methodology for the reconstruction of Proto-Indo-European. This process of linguistic reconstruction will then be analysed as symptomatic of a wider pattern which feeds the creation of the video works; it also helps give background knowledge to the language heard in the narrative video.

Vyrcanian (*Vṛkañov Dṇkō*) is an Indo-European language spoken by approximately 45 000 000 people (including 29 000 000 native speakers) primarily in the Vyrcanian Federation. It can be subdivided into main dialects: Western Vāli, Central Vāli, Dļvinask, Soddži, Tāsqañi, Central Highland Vyrcanian and Tčekovi (the most conservative, and by some standards, a separate language). Standard Vyrcanian, which has been devised in the late XIXth century, based on the Dļvinask dialect—chosen as a neutral ground between rival Tāsqand and Sodd as well as for its relatively simplicity—has become a vehicular language throughout the Vyrcanian Federation and is taught besides local native languages throughout the country.

Vyrcanian is a highly inflected nominative accusative language (as opposed to its ergative-absolutive Sežmi cousins) featuring three genders—masculine, feminine and neutral (the additional fire and water genders of Classical Vyrcanian having been collapsed between the three), and seven grammatical cases—nominative, vocative, accusative, dative, ablative, genitive and locative. It's sentence structure is universally subject-object-verb (SOV). The language possesses an artificially low number of irregularities (the majority of which have progressively been ironed out during several language reforms). It's phonology is moderately complex, frequently using consonant vocalisation and displaying an extensive *sandhi* system. The language is usually written in a modern romanised version developed with the official standard following phonetic rules, although most native speakers can read and write Classical Vyrcanian which can still be found in many older documents and on many buildings, the Tāsqand academy recommends the learning of the Classical Vyrcanian alphabet for new learner as a key to understand the structures underlying the phonetic idiosyncrasies of the official standard. During the Sovietic occupation, a Cyrillic alphabet was also used.

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28 The fusion and alternation of sounds across morpheme boundaries, such as “gotcha” in English or the *liaison* in French.
developed to transcribe Vyrcanian languages—which was arguably better suited to it than the current romanisation, although that system was quickly abandoned after the Vyrcanian Independence.

The Vyrcanian language is part—along with the Dapri language of the Tčekov delta as well as the now dead Scythian—of a unique branch of the Indo-European family, and its descent from proto-Indo-European can be traced through a series of regular sound changes via Classical Vyrcanian (cf. Appendix II. And III.).

Based on the close resemblance of Classical Vyrcanian to Proto-Indo-European as well as the near absence of non-Indo-European words in basic Vyrcanian vocabulary, numerous Vyrcanian and international scholars have argued that Proto-Indo-European was most likely the language of Kṃpor, and that the Indo-European languages was subsequently spread by Kṃporian warriors and colonists throughout Eurasia, in line with Marija Gimbutas' Kurgan hypothesis as well as Frederik Kortlandt's proposition that proto-Indo-Europeans display a hybrid linguistic influence of Uralic languages (Hunter-Gatherers) as well as North-Western Caucasus (Neolithic agriculturalists). Classical Vyrcanian, however, features many Aramaic (in particular Syriac) as well as ancient Greek and Armenian loanwords, in particular in the semantic fields of religion and spirituality. More recent versions of Vyrcanians have also been enriched with Latin, Arabic, Russian and Turkic loanwords, although the last decades have seen active efforts to replace loanwords (in particular Russian ones) with purely Vyrcanian neologisms.

The language's principal authority and the publisher of the official dictionary is the Dḷvina Language Council (Dḷvinā Dṇkojes Grom) located in the small rural town of Dḷvina, 80 km Southeast of the Vyrcanian capital.


IV. On the Ideal, Morphing Softwares, Ancient Indo-Europeans and Transcendence of the World as Outline

Constructed languages, also known as conlangs, can be classified into categories based on where they derive their vocabulary: *a priori languages*, that create their new vocabulary without reference to pre-existing languages; and *a posteriori languages*, that are based on pre-existing languages.\(^{31}\)

The remapping of images gathered from documentaries, photo-books and later the internet, onto maps of Wedzer Nerin'g or the Vyrcanian Federation in order to obtain an image of the land can be paralleled to the creation of an *a posteriori language* like Vyrcanian. These parallel processes can be schematised along the following lines: the fitting of an existing body—Proto-Indo-European/images of the world/cultural patterns—onto a new outline—the regular sound changes (and shifts in grammatical rules)/the map. By being submitted to this anamorphic translation of its content, the source body acquires new properties to the point of becoming only vaguely recognisable; through this process a new world is revealed in its fullness, the outline is transcended and a new, unique and multidimensional reality emerges. The sentences that are composed using the series of phonological shifts and grammatical alterations that I have devised as outline, appear as new and foreign and enticing to me as that of another pre-existing human language. The product of internal processes and subjective rules thus carries the aura of an external, objective entity. This recomposing of the safe and familiar *world as outline* of childhood into a seemingly independent entity, this endlessly reproducible process carries within its operation an obsessing appeal akin to that of magic. The repetitive and menial labour it requires, spreadsheet line after spreadsheet line, hours after hours, as Vyrcanian is progressively unveiled under my eyes and on the surface of my tongue as I attempt to pronounce it and taste its rough physicality, is gripping and appeasing like a mantra in the pallid light of the computer screen.

The appeal of this process also manifests itself in my interest in population genetics, under the amateur guise of which I collect large amounts of genetic information from various research papers or projects in order to manually remap them or turn them into PCAs; the hours of repetitive work—which could easily be avoided through an automatisation that I refuse to consider—thus yield sudden graphical revelations of patterns and areal manifestations otherwise hidden within the tedium of discrete data units.

My interest in philology and linguistics as vehicles for the recovering of the Vyrcanian tongue, and more specifically Indo-European studies lead me back to the geography of the human face, but this time under the microscope of another science often discredited—yet very much alive in some

circles today: physical anthropology.\footnote{The proliferation of blogs and online forums dedicated to the topic of physical anthropology and its contemporary extensions into population genetics attest to this. See bibliography for further references.}

Marija Gimbutas' Kurgan Theory is currently the most widely accepted with regards to its location of the Indo-European \textit{urheimat} in the Pontic-Caspian steppe; even if also widely criticised for making unfounded conclusions regarding the cultural practices inferred from the archaeological finds. This theory opposes the equalitarian, gender-balanced agrarian and goddess-worshipping cultures of \textit{Old Europe}, with the ruthless invading forces of macho semi-nomadic pastoralists,\footnote{Ibid.} who were said to go into battle naked high on soma and horseback, who inspired the mystical nucleus of Hinduism via the Rig-Veda.\footnote{While Gimbutas sees the proto-Indo-European invaders as Barbarians, 1930s German archaeologists like Kosinna were more likely to see them as a great civilising force. As explained by David W. Anthony.} The Aryan archetype expressed in that theory, packaged with concepts of glory and heroism, possesses a powerful romantic magnetism, that has attracted many who were in quest for a golden age on which to anchor their disappointment with their own time; it has operated as a beacon of idealism to motivate warrior nationalists to submit to discipline and authority and to take arms. Formulated by Guido von List during the first decade of the twentieth century, Ariosophy is an anti-christian esoteric ideology obsessed with racial purity and rooted in Theosophy, with its Hindu and inherently elitist gnostic inspirations, as well as Germanic paganism and Nietzschean morals. This was one of the crucial ferments for the mythology which
fed the SS and Nazi propaganda in general and continues to infuse the fantasies of contemporary white nationalists like controversial Black Metaller Varg Vikernes. My erotically-charged teenage fascination towards Tolkienian Elves, (like Legolas with his long light hair, refined features and tight outfits), Grecian mythology and sculpture, Vikings and Heavy Metal also found a compelling synthesis in the form of the Aryan archetype as perfect humanity that I aspired to equal and to which I dedicated a pious onanistic worship. Thus, and like many other European nationalists before me, I was eager and delighted to locate proto-Indo-Europeans as the forebears of Vyrcania; forebears who would have left their genetic imprint on the typical facial and somatic features of Vyrcanians. Nordicists like de Gobineau and Hans Günther—who believe in the supremacy of the tall, fair complexioned, dolichocephalic people of Northern European stock over the rest of humanity—identify the proto-Indo-Europeans Aryans with Hyperboreans of the Nordic race, arguing that their progeny can be seen in the lighter complexion of upper-caste Indians, or that ancient Greek gods and aristocracy were blond and blue-eyed. I was also tempted to locate the archetypical Vyrcanian look in the stereotypical features of Greek statuary. In particular the large and heavily hooded eyes—traits to which morphopsychology ascribes a propensity for intuition and passive perception (ie. a perception not defined by a focus on the functionalist, prosaic outline, but by a holistic absorption of the poesy as primordial feature of the thing observed), the straight profile and high cephalic index—including well develop cognitive processes, harmoniously carried into action just as the profile forehead blends seamlessly into that of the nose—as well as the curly pouted lips of self-conscious superiority that such perfect human could not avoid displaying.

My adoption of morphing software lead to an important breakthrough in my formulation of Vyrcanian physical anthropology. In order to average out a selection of faces, they require the assignment of diagrammatic dots and lines following the key points on the outline of the ideal face onto the image of the individual faces. This process, when it involves many faces, proceeds with the same tedious repetitive labour as the previously described retrieval of the Vyrcanian language from proto-Indo-European; partaking of the same magic, which sees the repetitive application of the formula, of the outline, yielding a similar new whole—more than the sum of its parts. Averaged facial morphs are particularly striking because of their eerie and unexpected attractiveness, a beauty derived from the erasure of specificity inherent to the process of averaging. Indeed, the invisible outline, underlying the sfumato transition between features on the morphed faces, surreptitiously

structures them while it is being transcended into the continuity of the picture. Like the fascist ideal of the individual becoming fulfilled by merging into the collective, and like the transcendental $\pi$ number arises from the rational outline of the circle's perimeter and radius; the disciplined hours of work spent into facial morphing gave me access to an Olympian Ideal form and bliss-inducing apprehension of human perfection.

Creating morphed still images, however wasn't enough. The urge to use that technique to create moving images of the perfect humans became a priority. One of the two works displayed in the graduate exhibition is the outcome of this process. I sought out to create a vision of a perfect pre-(or post-) gender humanity. I chose a series of twelve models, six female and six males, of an average age of twenty-four, selected for their youthful and graceful features among my circle of acquaintances, to be filmed nude in the studio in a formation and lighting inspired by the glory-infused cinematic visions of Leni Riefenstahl as they sing and smile ecstatically towards a heavenly future. I placed the models in groups of three that I would film each three times, with each models in each group assuming each possible position in the triad. I then turned the three footages into stills (twenty-four per seconds) that I then morphed image by image two by two until I obtained a morph including all twelve images, and photoshopped onto a morning sky backdropped, before reassembling the resulting images back into a footage. The process took approximately 8 hours of morphing and photoshopping per seconds of resulting footage. Like a digital version of a sacred yoga demanding unwavering focus, the process yielded its glimpses into the beyond where these perfect humans dwell. However, while resulting from a process inspired by my first research into the average Vyrcanian face, the figures in the video are more in line with the reassuring angelic figures that graced the lives of mystics and poets like Rumi than the imperious proto-Indo-European Vṛkani; still they share many characteristics with the androgynous, youthful and unrealistically flawless physique (very unlike that of actual ruthless steppe warriors) that I associated to them in my fantasies, thus offering me a magically gratifying and fulfilling viewing experience.
Fig. 6. Assigning datapoints to key places on the body's outline using Morpheus. This is a first level 2 by 2 morph of a frame. Screen capture.

Fig. 7. Outcome of a first level 2 by 2 morph, ready to be morphed with another second level morphed. Screen capture.
Fig.8. Outcome once all layers are morphed in (4th generation of the morph). To be repeated frame by frame. Screen capture.
V. On Matter and Encountering Physicality and Mortality

After having journeyed through the aseptic crystal cathedral of ideal forms and its captivating illusions, it is due time to regain the actual surface of the earth—the humus that sustains real life and enforces real death as necessary to its function. A brown night of the soul necessary for the production of any actual artwork. This is the realm of materiality, the physical that, with my childhood focus on the outline and later devotion to its digital and spiritual transcendence, I have so militantly denied. As I have described earlier, I have had my reasons to not accord to the physical the attention it normally gathers from the vast majority of life forms on earth. Having been a generally weak and pathologically clumsy child, the contingencies of the material world had always felt like assaults on my fragile ego, the world's resistance to my needs to inhabit it fluently were perceived as treasonous offenses. It was therefore easy and expected that I sought refuge in parallel worlds that obeyed my will, in the company of beings who, in their perfection, trumped the genius of mother nature and highlighted the deficiencies of the demiurge's creation. The elitist theories of gnostics and traditionalists like Julius Evola—decrying modernity and materialism as the signs of a decadent age or *Kali Yuga*, and recommending for the spiritually Aryan elite to *ride the tiger* and
weather the onslaughts of a broken world with his sacred knowledge intact; sat particularly well with me and gave me an unwarranted (yet oh so gratifying) sense of superiority in my perceived lack of adaptation to the cosmos. Confrontations with Marxist theory along with some necessary soul-searching, however lead me to re-assess my relationship with matter. The story of the narrative video-work in my graduate exhibition recounts that encounter with the significance of matter in allegorical term.

The story behind the video narratives concerns itself with a secret Vyrcanian society, located in the countryside between Tāsqand and Dļvina during the 1950s. Its founder, a Tāsqandian cultist, hit his foot on a black stone while on a meditative walk. This insolent gesture from the material world, manifested in its most primary forms—a silent black mineral and unreasonable pain—marked the sudden trigger of his ideological reversal. Now aware that matter trumped spirit, that the stone would always win, and feeling that the web of narratives that constitute cultures and belief systems were nothing more than attempts at coating the silence and resistance of matter and mortality into a more digestible format, he left his original order and decided to create a new one, which would hold his revelations at the core of its esoteric doctrine. The founder picked up the black stone and invented a mythology for it: Simon Cephas aka. Saint Peter, as he died—crucified upside down—would have turned into a stone, following from Jesus Christ's announcement that Peter would be the stone upon which his church would be built. This stone, a most holy relic, being the true anchor of Christ's heavenly kingdom on earth, would have been kept secretly by an order of monks who travelled to Vyrcania where they eventually settled, and founding this specific secret order there as they felt safe from persecutions. Among their rituals, one would hold particular importance—the worship of the stone. The members of the order would have to kiss the stone daily, in its dedicated shrine. A prophecy was also created, which asserted that once the stone has been eroded enough by the worshipper's many devotional kisses of it for the light on the other side of the stone to shine through, judgement day would arrive upon the Earth. This prophecy standing for the founder's hidden hope that perhaps, the weight of narrative and symbolisation could indeed transcend materiality. However in the 1950s Soviet Republic of Vyrcania, the cultists' life is harder than ever before, their once idyllic homeland is victim of a pollution, and government militia are on the constant hunt for esoteric and spiritual societies to dismantle. One of the cult members, whom I incarnate in the video, decides to go against the traditional rules of the order and hasten the coming of a salvatory apocalypse by biting the stone repeatedly, managing through much effort to chip off little pieces of the mineral, while also damaging his own teeth and mouth. Because of this injury, he

is not able to hide his secret practice for long, and his rebellion against the rules is heavily punished as his co-religionists vote to have him killed. The leader of the cult crushes his head in the river with the stone. The order survives on until the already aged leader reveals the esoteric secret of the cult's foundation to the other member he believes to be most worthy of taking the order over. This chosen heir, still unhappy about the decision to kill the millenary rebel for which he had not voted, is horrified to find out that the order in which he had invested so much spiritual energy is actually a sham. As the old leader dies, he flees the order, discards his attributes, and goes to denunciate the rest of the order to the authorities, who come to destroy the shrines and send the remaining worshippers to a “reeducation” labour camp.

The creation of culture and ritual as an escapist consequence of confrontation with the harshness and violence of the material world is paralleled by Teofilo Ruiz's “Terror of History”, echoing Mircea Eliade's eponymous concept. Ruiz gives the example of the Black Plague as arch traumatic event in Western history to illustrate the various responses of the population to the confrontation of imminent death— including escapism into religion, material pleasures and escapism into the creation of narratives as exemplified in Boccaccio's Decameron. Eliade posits traditional religious rituals as being constructed as cyclical repetition of hierophanies—mythical moments in which a distinction between the sacred and the profane (and by extension the worldly, the material) was revealed and realised—constructed in opposition to the linear curse of history. He finds this cyclical interpretation of history to be accompanied by a view of cycles being of decreasing quality as time passes, falling further away from the original, ideal event; as demonstrated by the Greek myth of the Ages of Man, deteriorating on from the Golden Age, or the Vedic yugas, which—in sharp contrast to the modernist view of history as positive linear progress—can be seen as the intuitive extension of the certainty of death and decay from the individual to the collective scale.

The metaphysical importance of the ritual is also evident in mystical Judaism. While the Aristotelian teachings of Maimonides, posit a completely transcendent, unchanging and essentially unknowable god and understand the performance of rituals, the mitzvoth as having impact only on earth. Jewish mysticism, as epitomised in the Kabbalah, postulates a fluctuating godhead whose immanence in the world depends on the proper performance of rituals. Rabbi Shai Cherry notes that the Kabbalah gathered importance as the political power of Jews in Spain decreased, pointing that “as political and physical control of the Jews diminished in Spain, their control of the metaphysical

47 Eliade, Cosmos and History, 112-119
realm increases as a way of compensating”. A phenomenon which can arguably also be observed with Walter Benjamin, who Ruiz also mentions when introducing the “Terror of History”, and who turned to mysticism in the dark times that preceded his suicide. The figure of the Angel of History from On the Concept of History, who attempts to piece back broken vessels that keep on piling up while he is being blown away by the wind of progress recalls (alongside its ultimately pessimistic disavowal of historical materialism) the notion of tikun—the mending back of vessels that were shattered by the divine light in the world of tohu. Rabbi Moshe Miller indicates that this shattering was however necessary and beneficial as “[it brought] about a state of separation or partition of the light into distinct qualities and attributes, and thereby introduce diversity and multiplicity into creation”. The etymology of the word symbol can be traced back to the ancient Greek sumbolon, which can be translated as “tally, i.e. each of two halves or corresponding pieces of an astragalos [a clay knuckle bone] or other object, which [...] two contracting parties, broke between them, each party keeping one piece, in order to have proof of the identity of the presenter of the other”. Thus, the original symbol, like the broken vessels of Kabbalah, is the outcome of a shattering allowing distinction; as such it can be likened to the marking of outlines, which create discontinuity as much as they indicate it. The act of tikun—the mending through ritual—thus becomes very similar to the repetitive formulaic labour necessary for the transcendence of the world as outline and the improved immanentisation of the higher realms that it aims for.

The narrative of the video attempts to reflect my questions and investigations regarding the creation of culture and ritual in opposition to materiality; and it is structured following a very standard understanding of plot, with punctual scenes displaying key moments of discontinuity in the flow of the order's life, thus inherently partaking to the world as outline.

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Fig. 10. Still from video. The millenarian character that I incarnate is about to be killed.

By being an actor as well as director, producer and cinematographer in that video, biting the stone as hard as I could and performing my own death on the muddy banks of Merri Creek, I sought to experience another kind of desublimation of the world as outline, of the symbolised world. This time “downwards”, towards matter, the earth, the Real. In the course of making the video, I realised that the elements of the video that were derived from some of my erotic fixations—the form-fitting costumes and the männerbund—as I enacted them, brought back peculiar childhood memories of the martial arts classes my mother had sent me to, and which I hated. The agony of the locker room (another locus of my erotic fantasies), where, as an inhibited child surrounded by boisterous boys, I donned the white kimono, suspiciously nappy-like in its whiteness and texture—that garment of shame that seemed to highlight my weakness. And there returned the shame of never graduating from the white and yellow belt after several years, as I was always defeated on the tatami, held down by the stronger ones—crushed. It was made ever clearer that my retraction from the material world had also taken an other, more murky parallel course, and had, from its perverted fount, nonchalantly irrigated my spiritual crops. Teofilo Ruiz warns us that Goya's El sueño de la razón produce monstruos, might very well have meant “the dream [rather than the sleep] of reason produce monsters”, the very monsters that bestow its terror to history;52 confirming to Theodor

52 Ruiz, The Terror of History, 6
Adorno's claim that the Third Reich was a direct progeny of the Enlightenment. It became obvious how I—clumsy dark haired and dark eyed mischling—stood erect at the call of Marija Gimbutas' impetuous aryen steppe warriors, when I would have fared a lot better in the equalitarian, matriarchal rural Old Europe she opposes to them. My whole engine was running on treacherous fuel.

VI. On the Vyrcanian Federation as Artwork

Evelyn Underhill anatomises the mystic's experience in a sequence of five stages: beginning with the "awakening of self", followed by the "purification of self", which leads to the third stage of "illumination", giving way to the "dark night of the soul". If we have unwittingly arrived at this point following a similar pattern, our encounter of the fifth stage of the sequence—the mystical union—in the form of our emergence into the aseptic gallery space—hoping for work and audience to connect; it is clear that our path must have diverged from its mystical template early on. Yet, I wouldn't be the first one to point out the similarities between esoteric cults with the art world, with its shibboleths, founding myths and arcane texts. It is therefore time to examine how the videos produced, and the Vyrcanian Federation in general, can fare within the gallery's orthodoxy.

I had previously attempted to materialise the fictional geography of Vyrcania, its visual universe and its narratives through installations and photographs, which led me to realise that "cinematic" video is the most appropriate medium. The immersive potential that can be attained in cinema, the medium's power to invite its audience and trap within its universe has always appeared as the mode in which I experience my fictional countries and their stories myself. Walking around Melbourne and its park and suburbs, I will stumble upon a view, a corner of sky, a few plants that when appropriately framed take me to Vyrcania. In the first year of masters, I decided to cherry pick many of these frames and locations, film them and compile them into a promotional video for a fictional town (reminiscent of Vyrcania in some aspects). The video was named—Discover Cheripik! That video presented a rather drab city under a humorous, parodic light; and will be part of a secret "behind the scenes" display, located behind the projection screens of the main videos, which will also feature maps and other elements of Vyrcanian construction present in this dissertation. In order to tell the story of the Black Stone, I chose to take inspiration from the narrative cinema I enjoy watching the most, drawing in my low budget and arguably amateur way, from the films of Pasolini, Fellini, Kurosawa, Kiarostami and Jodorowsky; this time with utter seriousness. Yet this will to display and immerse, is counterbalanced by a will to obscure and confuse some aspects of the narrative and its context. The use of dubbed dialogues in Vyrcanian allows me to let the characters discuss matters that should remain secret; it also creates a distancing effect placing the audience as both insider—through the immersive quality of the medium when projected on a large screen, and through the aesthetics emotive charge of the musical score and conventional

cinematography, and through the use of a traditional plot structure—and as outsider—through the linguistic alienation, the slippery effect of dubbing and the cultural uncanniness of a Vyrcanian order. I decided to combine the morphed figures and narrative videos in an awkward cohabitation on two screens positioned to conjoin at a 130 degrees angle. The idealised, and glabrous figures on the right, locked in an endless self-fulfilled groove ignore the bunch of mad bearded men to their left who so strive for a transcendence. This division mirrors the duality of Clnevians and Tasqandians.

I identify the work of Russian Collective AES+F and their work *The Feast of Trimalchio* (2009-2010) as bearing strong visual similarities with the morphed figures on the right screen, which is a result of treating visual devices borrowed from classical painting as well as propaganda art of the twentieth century with the hyper-reality of digital media, as well as the focus of representation on an idealised vision of youth and health. AES+F's works can be interpreted as a commentary on the unattainable and skin-deep ideals that permeate advertising in our late capitalist globalised society, exposing their interrupted filiation to the propaganda of totalitarianism. A thesis that I also find interesting to explore, especially considering what I perceive as being my own strong suggestibility when galvanised by that type of imagery.

When combined, the two videos also carry visual as well as conceptual kinship with the work of Yael Bartana. Although Bartana's recent works are more oriented towards speculative fiction, proposing visions of potential futures: A return of Ashkenazi Jews of the world to Poland in *And Europe Will Be Stunned* (2007-2011), or the Rebuilding of Solomon's Temple in Brazil in *Inferno* (2013-), the use of visual tactics borrowed from totalitarian propaganda, the unavoidable references to religious imagery, the costumes, as well as the cinematic affect and in its inherent suspension of disbelief involved in her work all resonate with my videos. Bartana's concerns with “the imagery of identity and the politics of memory [...] meanings implied by terms like “homeland”, “return” and “belonging”” investigated through “the ceremonies, public rituals and social diversions that are intended to reaffirm the collective identity of the nation state”, are also ones that I feel close to. Having grown up in France and Malaysia, two countries dealing with their multiculturalism in very different ways, and still observing the ways in which people construct and resurrect identities in these countries and around the world, expressing a cultural tourist's interest in the growing nationalism I perceive around Europe; I find that these themes permeate my mindset as I create my work. And while, in my work I don't attempt to outwardly resolve or even expose such

56 In part inspired by the practice of post-dubbing dialogues in Italian films of the 1970s, in particular as it appears in Federico Fellini's *Satyricon's* where the Italian dialogue overlaps the non-Italian speaking mouths of the actors
58 Ibid.
complicated questions per se, I find that they allow me to perceive from a new perspective and to understand them more intimately.

If it is hard to diagnose these themes with the same clarity in my work as clearly as they have throughout Bartana's, this is in part due to my interest in slipstream rather than in speculative fiction, and also because Bartana's work is intimately rooted in her Israeli heritage, while my work isn't anchored in any recognisable national narrative, evoking themes of identity and nation in a more subliminal way. The role of escapism (a strategy that sustains many nationalist fantasy) is also unavoidable in my work, and needs to be acknowledged; and as such many of the devices used in the video are reminiscent of blockbuster escapist fictions like the series Game of Thrones—which also uses conlangs—and The Hunger Games for its dystopian recycling of Neo-Classical and fascist imagery.

My exposition of the Vyrcanian Federation has fully occupied the two years of the Masters project. Of course, for such a fictional world to interweave with the geography, history, archaeology, culture, theology and linguistics of the real world (and not remain a separable fantastic, or alternate, world) required scholarly research as much as it required aesthetic imagination. The main drive behind my MFA work lies in locating the raw materials for such an encyclopaedic fiction, as well as the means of production for constructing that complex set of fictional history with its geography and anthropology, its languages and cultures. My dissertation is the report on this mining operation and an exposition of the methods for the materialisation of my fictional world. Throughout this research, I have been particularly interested in turning an amorphous set of existing disparate narratives, diverse maps along with variously reliable and hypothetical or allegorical visions of exploration and discovery into a coherent topography, and making an episode of that world into a video work. Thus, this dissertation exists as the backstory I have had to produce in order to deliver it in the dramatic, historical and symbolic versions of my videos. For these two years I have developed the Vyrcanian language from a loosely structured handful of words into a fully-fledged conlang, with its own grammar, syntax and featuring a vocabulary of more than 1000 words. At the same time, I have extrapolated from similarly fragmented inventions (using a methodological rigour for this dissertation comparable to that of linguistics), to not only this imaginary country’s cartography, but also its philosophy, its arts, its religions, its politics, in order to articulate a Vyrcanian history. As such, this is a conclusion, but also a beginning. With this fragment of the encyclopaedia of the Vyrcanian Federation, I intend to continue materialising and performing more of its elements, its

59 It looks like High Valyrian, one of the Game of Thrones conlangs will soon attain the level of notoriety that Star Trek’s Klingon and Tolkien’s Quenya, who now boast speakers hundreds of speakers.
documents, its knowledge systems, and its view of the world it truly and untruly lives in. Perhaps this dissertation in the first intrusion of this virtual world, which in the long run, in the way of Borges' Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius, might contagiously materialise itself, infiltrating our reality, supplementing and supplanting it.


Cherry, Shai. Introduction to Judaism, Course 6423. The Teaching Company.


Muscat, Frédéric. "Journal D’un Astrologue: Morphopsychologie De Louis Corman." *Journal D’un*


A. Mixel Edras' account of Čňevian and Tāsqandian spiritual systems, and their spectroscopic parallels.

The Tāsqandians—ungrounded Orsanics—derive their strong reading of the world as outline, their interests in talismans, algebra, astronomy and strong trinitarianism from their spiritual ancestors. The Čňevians—ungrounded Cyclics—on the other hand, are characterised by their gnostic edge, their unique diagrammoclasm, geometric and alchemical interest and monistic worldviews. Edras, having worked on the development of spectroscopy and in numbers theory finds two allegories from these disciplines to frame the opposition between the two branches. ⁶⁰


Spectroscopy seeks to identify the atomic properties of gases and proceeds in two possible ways: Absorption band spectroscopy is obtained by projecting white light (that is, containing the whole visible spectrum) through a cool gas; in virtue of the quantic properties of its atoms, the gas absorbs some specific wave-lengths within the visible spectrum of the light; the light then travels through a slit which puts into a focused ray; the ray is driven through a prism which maps the light into a spectrum. The dark bands on the spectrum revealing which wavelengths are being absorbed by the

⁶⁰ Ibid.
mystery gas, helping to identify it.\footnote{61} \footnote{62}

Emission band spectroscopy, however—instead of requiring an external source of white light to project through a cool cloud—uses the radiation produced by a heated, which, being heated, emits the same wavelengths it would absorb when cold. That emitted light is then driven through the same series of slitted screen and prism onto a projection screen. This time with the bright colourful bands appearing on the dark spectrum as indicators of the mystery gas' identity.\footnote{63}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>spectroscopy</th>
<th>light</th>
<th>gas</th>
<th>slit</th>
<th>prism</th>
<th>projected spectrum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>metaphysics</td>
<td>god/will/etc</td>
<td>logos/thing-in-itself</td>
<td>structure/symbolisation</td>
<td>subject</td>
<td>phenomenon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>object of study of</td>
<td>mysticism</td>
<td>science</td>
<td>linguistics</td>
<td>psychology/ethics</td>
<td>aesthetics</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig.13. Table correlating the spectroscopic model to other disciplines.

\footnote{63} \textit{Ibid.}
Edras—being, like many in Tāsqand an early supporter of Georg Cantor's continuum theory—further correlates the spectrum with the totality of all real numbers, identifying the discrete light bands of emission spectroscopy with integers and other rational numbers, and the wide rainbow bands of absorption spectroscopy with the continuity of irrational and transcendental numbers that coexist between them. A parallel he also extends to the Aristotelian distinction between *muthos*—the specific plot points of the tragedy as integers/emitted bands/outline, and *ethos*—the character's personality and abilities with his or her tragic flaws standing out as the dark lines on the continuity of real numbers/absorbed bands/content.
The writer thus correlates the Clneuvian worldview with absorption band spectroscopy, noting that their monistic view can be easily calqued onto the experimental schema, with their hardly accessible pleroma as the original source of light, and the prism and dark bands as the shadows as consequences of the demiurge's deficient creation. While the Tāsqandian outlook is best fitted to emission band spectroscopy, with its clear focus on outlines and discrete rituals as stalwarts of the communities they create, along with a lesser focus on an original logos, deemed inaccessible by mortals (much like the original source of energy that heated the gas in emission spectroscopy is no longer accessible within the system). Edras also suggests that the Bogomils were a group originally from Clne that moved West to Bulgaria; expressing doubt at the Western accusations of sodomy on the Bulgarian order on the basis that sodomy and pederasty were definitely a Tāsqandian practice that the Clneuvian themselves had always frowned upon.

### B. Sound changes from Proto-Indo-European to Classical Vyrcanian:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>short vowels</th>
<th>medium vowels</th>
<th>long vowels</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>*a → ā</td>
<td>*ē, ē → e</td>
<td>*ā, *ā → ā</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*e, *h → ē</td>
<td>*i, *ei, *i → i</td>
<td>*ēi, *ēi → ē</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*i, j → ĭ</td>
<td>*ō, *eu, *ō → o</td>
<td>*ēu, *ēu → ō</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*o, *u, *i, *m, *w, *h₂ → ŭ</td>
<td>*ū, *ū → u</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*n → ň</td>
<td>*r → ri</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>consonants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>*m → m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*b, *p → p</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*bh (before consonnant) → ph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*bh (before vowel) → bh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*n → n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*gʰ, gʰ → kh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*k → k</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*g, *h₁ → g</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*kʷ → kǔ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*gʷ → gũ</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig.15. Table displaying Edras' allegorical equivalencies.
*t → t'  
*gʷʰ → khǔ  
*d (before long/med vowel) → t  
*h₃ → v  
*d (other cases) → d  
*dh (before long/med vowel) → th  
*dh (other cases) → dh  
*s → s  
*r → r  
*l → l  
*k', *g → k'  

C. Sound changes from Classical to Modern Vyrcanian:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>before c₁ vowel/cons.</th>
<th>before c₂ vowel</th>
<th>before c₃ vowel</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>m</td>
<td>m [m]</td>
<td>m [m]</td>
<td>m [m, mʲ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bh</td>
<td>w [w, β]</td>
<td>w [w, β]</td>
<td>š [ʃ, ɕʲ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ň</td>
<td>nd [nd, ŋ]</td>
<td>nd [nd]</td>
<td>ň [n]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>n [n]</td>
<td>n [n]</td>
<td>ň [n]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t'</td>
<td>t [t]</td>
<td>c [ts]</td>
<td>ĉ [tʃ, tɕʲ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t</td>
<td>t [t]</td>
<td>s [s]</td>
<td>ĉ [tʃ, tɕʲ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d</td>
<td>d [d]</td>
<td>z [z]</td>
<td>dž [dʒ, dʑʲ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>th</td>
<td>t [t]</td>
<td>t [θ]</td>
<td>ĉ [tʃ, tɕʲ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dh</td>
<td>d [d]</td>
<td>d [ð]</td>
<td>dž [dʒ, dʑʲ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>s</td>
<td>s [s]</td>
<td>s [s]</td>
<td>š [ʃ, ɕʲ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>r</td>
<td>r [ɾ]</td>
<td>r [ɾ]</td>
<td>dž [ʒ, ʑ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>l</td>
<td>l [l, ɬ]</td>
<td>l [l, ɬ]</td>
<td>l [l, ɬ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>k'</td>
<td>k [k]</td>
<td>q [x, q]</td>
<td>ĉ [tʃ, cʲ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kh</td>
<td>k [k]</td>
<td>x [χ, ɕ]</td>
<td>ĉ [tʃ, cʲ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>k</td>
<td>k [k]</td>
<td>k [k]</td>
<td>ĉ [tʃ, cʲ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g</td>
<td>g [g]</td>
<td>ģ [ɡ, ɣ]</td>
<td>j [j]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v</td>
<td>v [v, ʋ]</td>
<td>v [v, ʋ]</td>
<td>v [v, ʋ, j]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a → a [æ] c₁  
ā → a [œ] c₂  
ũ → e [ɛ] c₁  
e, ěč → e [ɛ] c₂  
lũ → e [ɛ] c₃  
ěž → i [i, u] c₂  
i → i [i, u] c₃  

50
o, ūè → o [u] c₁
eū → o [u] c₂
u, ūū → u [u] c₁
ā, ūé, oē → ā [a:] c₁
eū → ā [a:] c₂
ē → ē [e:] c₁
eī → ī [i:] c₂
ō, āu, ūa, ūā → ō [o:] c₁
āū → ō [o:] c₂
ūū, ūō, ūo → ū [u:] c₁

exemples :
-stone *h₂ek-mon → ūekm-ūn → ogmas
-house *domh₂-o → dümē-o → dmi
-tree *deru → dērū → dr
-blood *h₁esh₂-r → gēsūr → ǧsr
-woman *gʷnh₂ → kūnū → kni
-name *kelh₁mi → kēlgmī → klmi
-creek *gʷdhō → khūtho → kto
-fire *peh₂w-r → pēūũ-r → pūr
-secret *ruh-nā → rūēnā → ronāj
-white *hzelbhō → ūelbhū → olū
-black *h₁eh₂-tro → gēu'ru → ǧotr

Author/s:
Savy, Guillaume

Title:
A Vyrcanian story: materialising alternate histories and geographies

Date:
2014

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File Description:
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