# Art and Aporia: Imaging Place
## By Lythe Witte/Christy Dena

JC Fremont: I am considering your two pieces on the white cube (part 1 and part 2 ) and my feeling is that if it looks like art then it probably isn't art.

Lythe Witte: interesting!

JC Fremont: In RL but especially here in SL

I asked JC Fremont to elaborate via email:

"Well art that imitates art in the real world is repugnant. SL art that imitates RL art is irrelevant. Okay a painting served the ideology of 20th century consumer capital society. It became the ultimate commodity object. More profitable than gold or plutonium. Remember that art before the rise of commodity capital was sight specific. It resided in the cathedral or on the cave wall. No way to buy and sell. What could possibly be the purpose of making cartoon representations of paintings in a virtual environment? Art should be unrecognisable as such. In electrate culture the forms will change drastically. We don't know what electrate art will be yet. First, Electrate art will have no object, evade commodity consumption.  If it can be commodified then it is not good electrate art. Second, never finished it will always be in a state of becoming, upgrading. Art needs to disrupt."

JC Fremont, a new resident to SL, aims to discover just how art in SL can disrupt. His flesh counterpart, John Craig Freeman  is Associate Professor of New Media at Emerson College, Department of Visual and Media Arts in Boston. Since JC is a handy SL and RL acronym I will address him as such. JC and I met up recently to discuss his artwork, Imaging Place SL. It is a SL implementation of a real life artwork, Imaging Place  and contrary to the assumption you may have in light of the misleading introduction to this article, Fremont and I had actually met in SL through another common interest: the theories of Gregory Ulmer. Imaging Place is a project JC Fremont/John Craig Freeman has been "developing for over a decade, often in collaboration with Greg Ulmer who provides the theory for the work. It is an attempt to develop a form of place based virtual reality." The work, he explains on his website:

"combines panoramic photography, digital video, and three-dimensional technologies to investigate and document situations where the forces of globalization are impacting the lives of

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*individuals in local communities. The goal of the project is to develop the technologies, the methodology and the content for truly immersive and navigable narrative, based in real places."*

The real life implementation is a dark room with a nine by twelve foot screen with satellite maps the user can click on to zoom into a country, state, street and home. This street-level entry unlocks footage of residents sharing their memories of the area or interloper academics exploring notions as stimulated by the environment. The inclusion of academics is an attempt to "connect the abstraction of theory (it is really out there) with the visceral experiences of people on the ground".

The mode of interaction, ala Lev Manovich's "database narrative" and "soft cinema" , facilitates a place-based navigation where memory, location and hyperlink imbue a moment with the illusion of control over personal time and space gateways.

**'Electronic logic is commemorative.' (Ulmer, 1994, 47)**

The SL implementation is an attempt to bring the experiencer of this work even closer to this immersion in another's memory. It is also an attempt to bring the work closer to the manifestation it deserves.

JC Fremont: I have come to find the RL installations lacking in someway. In that I was never able to resolve the social of public dimension of the work.

Lythe Witte: Go on, what do you mean?

JC Fremont: The RL version is still very much anchored to the gallery. […] I have very specific political objectives for what I do as an artist. My earlier public work had political aims and results because it was interjected into the fabric of everyday life. If you want to achieve political results you must work within a social frame. I am interested in the migration of our notion of public into the Internet. My work here is an experiment to see if I can interject political substance into the play of SL. […] The decision to go to a gallery is one that defuses a political gesture.

Lythe Witte: And here you feel you're diffusing it more or less?

JC Fremont: I am not sure yet about whether the potential is greater or less. That is what I am testing. So far the results are promising.

SL has the potential too to facilitate a practice JC yearns, as he explains in an email:

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*"The Imaging Place work was conceived in the language of the network. The bandwidth issue always hampered my ability to post the work on the web and there was no good solution for populating the work with netizens. I have always aspired to make the work inhabitable. Rather than slowing my progress I continued to produce work and develop my methodology in the field. I have since amassed an enormous archive of material from around the world and SL is allowing me to implement the body of work onto the network where it was intended."*

So, how is Imaging Place experienced in SL? If you choose, the work begins with watching a movie of the RL implementation. This frames the work as an adaptation and outlines the theory that informs the project.



As Gregory Ulmer, the provider of theory food for the artwork, states in the video:

*"What we're trying to do now in choral space, online digital memory, is to have movement through a space be an act of reasoning by which a person could think about and understand, reason, about problems and the world."*

Before we look at some of those problems, and about reasoning, I'll first describe what the artwork is like. At the first location you see on the ground a large satellite picture of Earth. Unlike the video in the RL implementation, you can now walk over Earth.
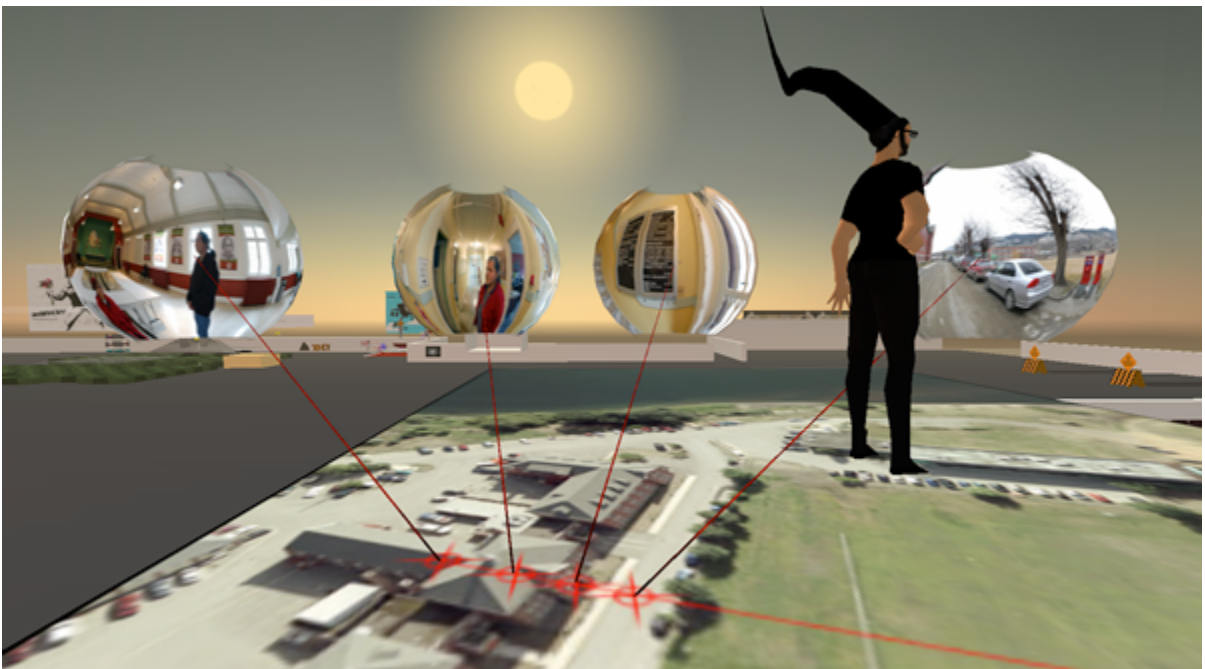
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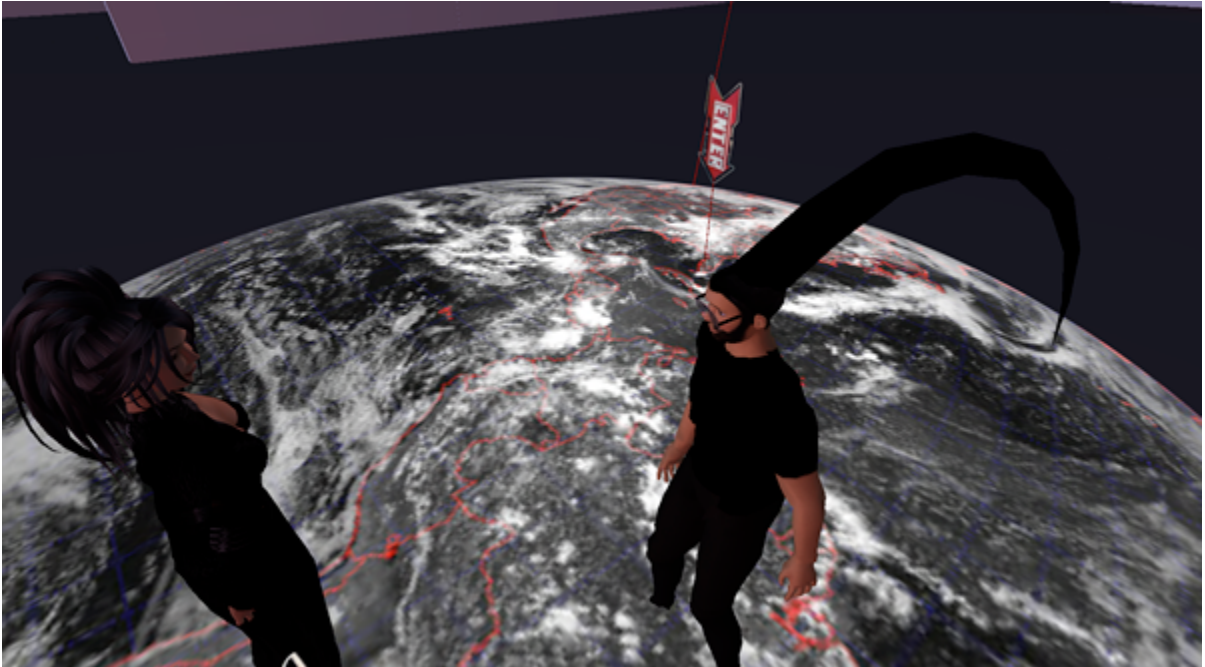


A thin red line leads from a red dot on Earth to an adjacent higher level. The red line is deceivingly easy to traverse and as you walk up the floor of the next level appears. It is zoomed in satellite image. Pouring from the image are some more red lines that pin down floating pods.



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These pods are panoramic photos that, once you enter them, surround you entirely so you are suitably present at the scene. Although not implemented yet, each pod will have audio of the person featured in the photo talking about their memories of that particular room. JC talks about the marriage of image, oral storytelling and this form of interaction that he has designed.

JC Fremont: I am very much interested in these types of one on one encounters where the act of story telling is assisted by these chorographic memory maps. So I am interested in the performative potential.

This first site is the Kamloops Indian Residential School, in British Columbia, Canada.

JC Fremont: Now this scene is a work that I did last year at the Kamloops Indian Residential school. Eventually I will have the audio working so that the story will unfold as you explore. This specific work tells the story across three generations of how the Secwepemc people were stripped of their identities as they were forced to attend the school throughout the twentieth century. They were forcibly assimilated by the Catholic Church and the Canadian government in the school.

This scene has particular resonance for JC, as it espouses his views on globalization.

JC Fremont: Well in order to understand globalization you must first understand colonialization. Globalization is nothing more that colonialization in new clothes. The nation state has been replaced by the corporation.


**'Electronic learning is more like discovery than proof.' (Ulmer, 1994, 56)**

Once you've spent time with each pod you can return to Earth and persist your experience of the work by clicking on the Enter signs. Uunlike the RL version, the click does not merely change the image on the computer but rather SL teleports your avatar to the location. The question here is, how is this different to the experience of a person clicking on a screen in a gallery? Of the many elements that distinguish an avatar experience from a GUI one is the 'work' that is involved in navigating space. I have to move my avatar along a thin red line, face the linked sign and click. It takes more action and therefore more motivation to follow a hyperlink than to teleport. But back to our next location.

The next has a similar map and pod design but this time of Sao Paulo and is in another part of SL.

JC Fremont: The work takes you from the drama unfolding in the streets of Sao Paulo

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Lythe Witte: so an event happens?

JC Fremont: This man had the cart that he used for recycling waste around the neighbourhood, which contained all of his few belongings, was confiscated by the city police. They would take it across town and sell it.

Lythe Witte: oh no.

JC Fremont: Anyway from social drama to...



JC Fremont: To this deep quite psychological space inside into the subconscious where Artur recounts dreams of wearing his dead friends pants with eyes coming out of the tears in the knees.

Lythe Witte: oh my.

JC Fremont: Very intense.

Lythe Witte: he uses the blindfold to help take him into the same in himself?

JC Fremont: Yes

Lythe Witte: I guess you all end up feeling there too.

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**'While chorography as a term is close to choreography, it duplicates a term that already exists in the discipline of geography, thus establishing a valuable resonance for a rhetoric of invention concerned with the history of "place" in relation to memory.' (Ulmer, 1994, 39)**

After entering the mind of a blind-folded man, we clicked on another part of Earth and were teleported to the Miami River site. There are three levels to this work and it is an expression of a project that has been explored fro many years by the [Florida Research Ensemble](). JC has collected hundreds of scenes and hours of narrative.
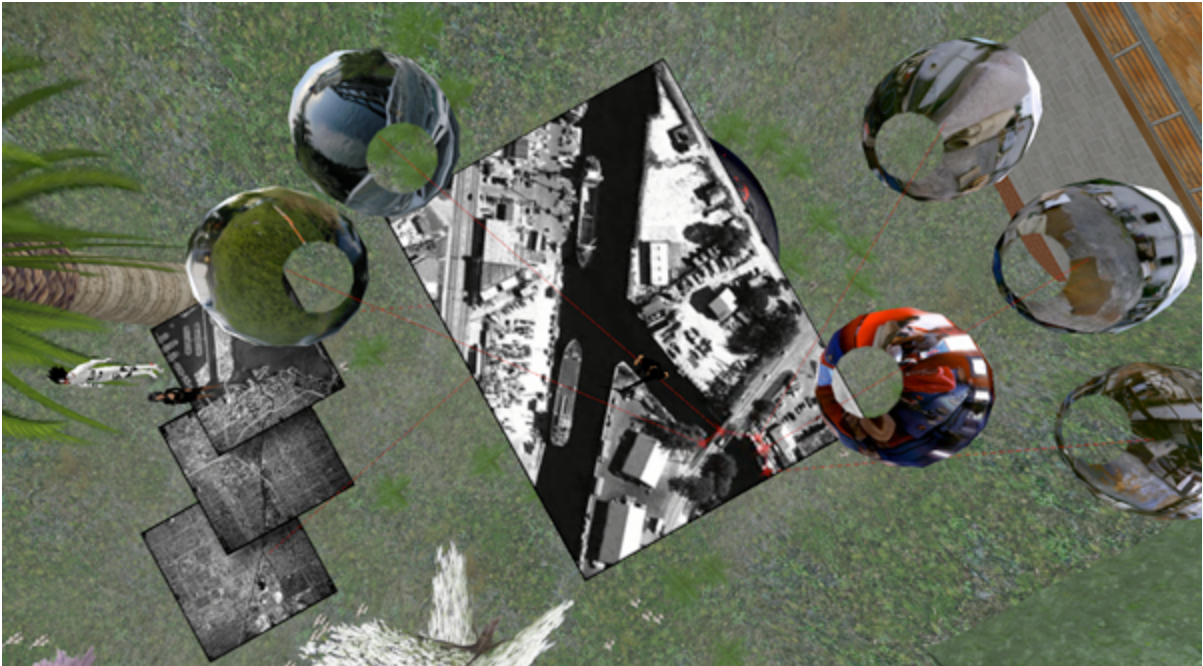


JC Fremont: So this is Simon Lubins' boat. He had been stranded on the river for a year and three months. So the coastguard, working on behalf of the developers some would say, instituted what they called the Caribbean Safety Code. They would board the vessels when they came into port and inspect the vessels for safety on the high seas.

JC Fremont: Simon said of course this vessel is safe it has a siren painted on the side. So the coast guard with their loose-leaf binders full of problems and solution came to represent Western rationality. Simon represented a possible another way, a relay for designing and internet practice.

JC Fremont: you can see the safety violation posted?

Lythe Witte: yes

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JC Fremont: Simon had been stuck for a year and three months. He could not fix his boat until he returned to Haiti and he could not return to haiti until he fixed the boat. Classic impasse: the aporia. He payed $100 a day in docking fees until he lost every thing. Aporia constitutes the catagorical image. That is an image that resonates with something in the innerpsyche. We are all stuck sometime.

JC elaborates in an email:

*Aporia and epiphany are quintessential to the creative process. The artist block always precedes the creative breakthrough. We tend to forget about the block a soon as we achieve breakthrough. Most people never recognise the pattern. Old synaptic connections must be turned off before new ones can form.*

Ludologist Espen Aarseth explored this notion too in his 1997 book, *Cybertext: Perspectives in Ergodic Literature*:

*"In contrast to the aporias experienced in codex literature, where we are not able to make sense of a particular part even though we have access to the whole text, the hypertext aporia prevents us from making sense of the whole because we may not have access to a particular part. Aporia here becomes a trope, an absent pièce de résistance rather than the usual transcendental resistance of the (absent) meaning of a difficult passage.*

*Complementary to the trope stands another: the epiphany. This is the sudden revelation that replaces the aporia, a seeming detail with an unexpected, salvaging effect: the link out. […] Together, this pair of master tropes constitutes the dynamic of hypertext discourse: the dialectic between searching and finding typical of games in general. The aporia and epiphany pair is thus not a narrative structure but constitutes a more fundamental layer of human experience, from which narratives are spun." (91–92)*

For JC and Ulmer, the state of Simon, indeed, the image of the impound notice is a metonymy of the Miami River. A pictorial outcome that they were in fact searching/hoping for.

**'Chorography as a method of invention writes directly the hyperbolic intuition known as the eureka experience. It is first of all a means for simulating this experience, for transferring it from the living body to an apparatus, whether print or electronic, for "writing" or artificially performing intuition "outside" the organic mind and body and entrusting this process to a machine (both technological and methodological). (Ulmer, 1994, 102)**

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As JC and I travelled through his artwork we where joined by two of JC's colleagues: Abaris Brautigan (fellow academic and co-narrator in Imaging Place: Richard Smyth  and Rain Coalcliff. Rain Coalcliff, an SL artist herself, donated the SL land for the Sao Paulo and Miami sites. Another SL artist, i7o, has offered JC Fremont to share his SL studio. This community approach is endemic to the artwork, JC points out, since it is "important to me that communities I work with both in RL and in SL see value in what I do and invite me in." JC wants to distribute Imaging Place SL across many sites in SL and is relying entirely on donated space. He comments that he is "something of an itinerate artist here in SL. I have no home."



Our conversation continued, then, with all four of us.

Lythe Witte: JC, how does this work change in the SL iteration?

JC Fremont: The social component is very exciting…these encounters with individuals. I can get instant feedback and collaborate with likeminded people. When I put on an exhibition people come to the opening and shake my hand but the response is mostly cordial.

*Jack Daniels Whiskey whispers: watch that third sip*

JC Fremont: Here feedback can be quite candid.

Rain Coalcliff adds in an email:

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*"Second Life is a "Safe Zone" for expressing ones opinions and feelings. The anonymity, the absence of disapproving body language, no real social standards and the ability to 'Poof' if uncomfortable all contribute to why we can be more candid here than in real life.*

*The exciting social component that JC speaks of...I think it is present as the result of a '6th sense' that the residents of SL develop in the same way a blind person develops a 6th sense. In the absence of real world visual and vocal contact with our SL companions, we tend to reach far beyond our normal limits to communicate and understand each other."*

JC Fremont: The RL work served its purpose to develop a language but it is incomplete without the network, it is an attempt to create a truly electrate form of expression. Don't know if I will succeed yet but it must live on the net.

Lythe Witte: and this is living!

Abaris Brautigan: electracy suggests a different kind of thinking opposed to literacy

JC Fremont: supplementing literacy, not opposed.

Abaris Brautigan: yes--agreed

Lythe Witte: isn't it the z-axis of literacy?

Abaris Brautigan: that's a nice way of thinking about it...

JC Fremont: lol

JC Fremont: Z-Axis of literacy that is great

Lythe Witte: :)

JC Fremont: This place is what the internet is becoming.

In the introductory video Ulmer speaks of 'movement through a space be an act of reasoning '. I asked JC to elaborate in email:

*"The example we sometimes use is that of aboriginal dreamtime. The walkabout. During the walkabout an individual drifts across the landscape making up a song. The song is mnemonic not just a pretty tune. Every detail of the journey is encoded in the song. When individuals meet at the*

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*crossroads, at the plateau tourne, at the vortex, They would exchange songs. Very reasonable, especially in the desert."*

And Abaris continues the notion in an email:

*"For the Greeks, the act of moving through a space was LITERALLY an act of reasoning for them, if you consider their use of the "[memory palace](#)" as a method of organizing their speeches, their argumentative acts of reason.  As the fourth step in a rhetorical act, "memoria" was their way of remembering the "topics" (literally "places" in Greek) in their speech:  they would put images which would trigger their memory of the speech topic into the places of their memory palace (the imagines loci).  Craig also points out that the movement through a space is/was an act of reasoning in oral cultures as well.  In aboriginal walkabouts, details of a journey are encoded in a song.  And I remember reading in [Bruce Chatwin's Songlines](#) that the aborigines would embed stories in the landscape so that, as they walked about, stories were stored in a kind of pre-literate version of the Greek's memory palace.  So what we are doing in SL/VR when we speak of moving through space as an act of reasoning is nothing new.  The question is this:  how does the electronic medium change the way that we think spatially?  If oral culture's primary mode was narrative (i.e. using space to tell stories), and literate culture's primary mode was argumentation (i.e. using space to make arguments), then what is the primary mode of "electracy"?  We might say "using space to make patterns" (a.k.a. artwork, aesthetically pleasing constellations of meaning: "The wide image is an emergent pattern…. a constellation that appears within a field of relationships" Internet Invention 276).  I think what Ulmer is trying to work out is the codification of creativity, the actual in-corp-oration of discovery into the act of reasoning (this is actually the first step of rhetoric:  invention, which means "to come upon, find, discover")…."*

What JC's work inspires in me (indeed the essence of his work is based on the chorographic method which is rhetoric designed to inspire invention) is the desire to augment, to participate, to persist the work just as JC is in SL. My peripherial-vision tool of creation play is a book by Sam D. Gill called [Storytracking: Texts, Stories and Histories in Central Australia](#). On the cover are footprints over dot paintings, creating tracks that are stories of Australia's past. This got me thinking. [Snapzilla](#) is a storytracking system for SL. It allows you to take screenshots whilst inworld and upload them online for all to see. What is applicable to this storytracking notion too is the fact that each picture links to the spot the picture was taken inworld. So someone reading at Snapzilla can teleport inworld and…walk in my footsteps. Not only can people track my stories, but my comments are my memories, placed online, in parallel to those in the location of the pods, and the streets they represent.

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Inline with Ulmer's notion of _Heuretics_, I see with storytracking a multi-faceted method for SL. The system facilitates a pictorial and textual record of my explorations in SL. It also records a journey during a session and over the whole experience within a world. The object of investigation is, like almost all nowadays, dynamic. It is not static. This time-based record not only captures various slices of time but also acknowledges development and progression. Academic discourse and audience response is often delivered from a posterior perspective: presenting an argument or assessment after it has been investigated, proven or experienced. Readers are privy to the process after it has been resolved, not during. Storytracking reveals the process of discovery, a trait Ulmer ascribes to 'electracy'. This sharing of growth is quite intimate.

Here is an example of some _impromptu storytracking_ I did not too long ago. I encourage those who do experience JC's work either alone or with him to track their experience in some way and let JC know (and me too so we can link to them from here).

For those who are keen to talk now! Head to the _forum thread_ set up for this article.

**Locations of Works**

Kamloops Residential School (_SL link_)

Sao Paulo Castelinho (_SL link_)

Miami River Swing Bridge (_SL link_)

**Join The Techno-Grammatologist's Collaborative** group in SL for those artists and theorists who use both art and theory to create art and theory...

**References in this article**
Aarseth, E. (1997) _Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature,_ Maryland, The Johns Hopkins University Press.

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**Find out more about Heuretics** here too:

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John Craig Freeman has video snippets of Ulmer explaining some of his theories.

Michael Jarrett has put some notes online as well.

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