

# Re-imagining Place with Filters: More than Meets the Eye

Marsha Berry

## Abstract

Smartphone camera practices are mediated by smartphones, smartphone apps, the physical environment including weather, and the affordances and assemblages of social media. Visual culture and objects such as photographs and videos have become part of our routine social interactions online. The popularity of faux-vintage apps indicates that people are endeavoring to capture more than an accurate depiction of what their eyes can see. They are using faux-vintage aesthetics to go beyond visual sense to capture dynamic and embodied aspects of what the whole sensorium experiences. This paper makes use of Derrida's notion of *hauntology* as a springboard to examine the popularity of faux-vintage photography.

**Keywords:** hauntology, social media, smartphone, iPhoneography, mobile media

## **Introduction**

I would like to commence this paper with an invitation to undertake a creative experiment with me using your smartphone camera and social media networks. Open your favourite photo or video application on your smartphone. Take a picture or a short video of a place you walk through every day, preferably an unremarkable place. Think about how you feel right now – are you comfortable, cold, content, edgy or perhaps preoccupied, or even bored? Choose a filter to evoke how you feel and share the image using one of your social media applications with a “geotag” specifying the location and a brief caption. Then select another filter and watch the meaning shift its shape. Perhaps you wish to create a noir effect with black and white or a low-fi effect with a pinkish tinge to evoke a faded 1970s colour photograph?

The opportunity to experiment in this way with photographs and video no longer requires the ability to use sophisticated software packages. Rather, it is readily accessible to everyone who has a smartphone and is evident in movements such as “iphoneography.” Social media offers people a myriad of ways to associate with various groups, friends and family, and has become enmeshed in everyday socialities. Visual culture and objects such as photographs and videos have become part of our routine social interactions online. People are using mobile and social technologies such as EyeEm, Vine, Snapchat, and Instagram to create new contexts to share visual creative expressions. Pink and Hjorth have theorised this as “emplaced visuality and geospatial sociality” (Pink & Hjorth, 2012, p. 153). The notion of emplaced visuality places the focus on a non-representational approach where photography and video making are viewed as a part of the flow of daily life and include the sensory, emotional, and imaginary.

Contemporary conceptualisations need account for smart smartphone camera practices and the socialities that both create and “emerge through them” (Pink & Hjorth, 2012, p. 145). This in turn has profound implications for ways of understanding photography and video. For example, Miriam Ross examines the controversial trend for vertical framing of videos for filmmaking experimentation. She concludes that a growing number of filmmakers “are interested in using the vertical mode for aesthetic reasons” (Ross, 2013) and that these challenge traditional thinking regarding horizontal framing. Her analysis is playful and draws on feminist theory to expose the normative and patriarchal opposition she encountered in social media to vertical framing. She reveals the tensions between ways of understanding video and what happens when traditional ideas about how a film should look are subverted. She draws extensively on social media discussions to support her points.

I suggest that not only is there communication about photographs and videos in social media environments, but also that it takes place through these visual expressions. This in turn necessitates a rethinking of how we conceptualise photography and video. In this paper, I draw on Derrida’s theory of hauntology and Benjamin’s elusive notion of aura to locate the emergent aesthetics associated with faux-vintage filters available in many smartphone camera apps. My appropriation of the term ‘hauntology’ may connote an in depth deconstruction of a physis/techne binaries, however this is would require a philosophical exegesis that is beyond the scope of this paper. My intention is not to provide a deconstructive and philosophical engagement with the aesthetico-ethical photographic frame as hauntology. Rather, I use hauntology as a springboard to begin

to understand the popular use of faux-vintage filters in observable contemporary everyday practices.

I explore smartphone photography practices, which create leaky and overflowing archives of often geolocated visualities from a practice turn approach (Cetina et al., 2001; Reckwitz, 2002). The practice turn approach contends that by focusing on the practices that make up arrays of human activity, rather than structures and representation, we can move beyond “current problematic dualisms and ways of thinking” (Schatzki, p. 10) towards a more holistic method. This practice can account for dynamic and “embodied, materially mediated arrays of activities centrally organized around a shared understanding” (Schatzki, p. 11) in nonrepresentational ways. Furthermore, activities that make up constellations of practices are embodied, and artefacts, hybrids, and natural objects mediate practices. Smartphone camera practices are mediated by smartphones; smartphone apps; the physical environment including weather; and the affordances and assemblages of social media.

## **Emergent Vernaculars**

The convergence of smart phone cameras and networked technology is creating new socio-technical communication environments where the production and distribution of manipulated visual images are becoming increasingly ubiquitous practices on social media networks (Gómez Cruz & Meyer, 2012). Indeed, Gómez Cruz and Meyer identify a fifth moment in photography enabled by iPhones, where the need for “expertise in computer post-processing software” (2012, p. 216) is redundant. The aforementioned experiment illustrates this. Furthermore, Keep traces the short history and evolution of mobile media through his creative practice. He concludes, “camera phones have reconfigured our relationship with imaging and facilitated new modes of photographic practice” (MINA 2013, p. 18).

Amateur movies and photographs were once associated with the capture of special occasions and family archives (Hirsch, 1997), whereas now they are integral to practices associated with networked ICT assemblages and affordances we refer to as Web 2.0 and social media (Gibson, 1979/1986; Soegaard, 2003; Gómez Cruz & Meyer, 2012). Earlier studies of digital and camera phone photography (see for example, Van House et. al, 2004; Gye, 2007; Okabi & Ito, 2006) explored mobile phone photography as self-expression – technologies of the self. For instance, Gye proposed, “the kinds of photos that are most often taken with mobile camera phones are those that reinforce the user’s individuality rather than their ties to other groups” (Gye, 2007, p. 284). Arguably, there has a substantial evolution in practices since Gye’s (2007) observations. In 2013, posting photographs and video to social media to reinforce social connections is emerging as an important factor in the age of networked smartphones, and these creative practices operate within a broader context. The notion of mobile phone photography as mainly a technology of the self through which identities are constructed is somewhat reductive. This idea does not account for the nonrepresentational aspects of photography, which are embodied, material, and dynamic arrays of activities that are a part of emergent visualities and socialities in social media environments.

Instead, this broader context for sharing visual media is framed by the socialities evident in social media. Image making and sharing is a major component of network sociality,

which “is ephemeral but intense, it is informational and technological” (Wittel, 2001, p. 1). Camera-phone photography and video making and sharing, then, is an important part of an untidy constellation of practices in a messy web (Postill & Pink, 2012). As more and more people participate in conversations with, through, and about visual images, more and more idioms and memes such as “lol cats” are created as a shared form of communication. Faux-vintage filters as a standard feature of many smartphone camera apps are also an important part of emergent visual vernaculars.

## **Haunted Smartphone Footprints**

Many images that seek to capture and interpret a moment in time as a *lieux de memoiré* (Nora, 1989) often reflect a desire to show some continuity with the past. Nora points to a rupture between memory and history that is widening due to the forces of globalisation and migration. The break is aggravated by “our hopelessly forgetful modern societies, propelled by change” (1989, p. 8). Many of the images on Instagram timelines display characteristics of faux-vintage photography (Schutt & Berry, 2012). I suggest making use of Derrida’s notion of hauntology (Derrida, 1993) as a lens to examine the popularity of faux-vintage photography. Derrida refers to the spectre as a cipher for the unsettling of the present by unresolved, repressed or malevolent aspects of history in his landmark essay titled, “Specters of Marx: the state of the debt, the work of mourning, & the New International.” He argues in this work that history does not end and utopias are always doomed to failure. The neologism, hauntology, has traveled widely through various disciplinary contexts where it has shed connotations of deconstruction and continental theory. I appropriate it in this paper as a theoretical construct to unpack the popular aesthetics of faux-vintage smartphone photography.

As an aesthetic, hauntology is located in the notion of nostalgia as an unsettling sense of the intrusions of past imaginings of a utopian future into the present. Gallix noticed Derrida’s neologism in an article published in the *Guardian* in 2011. In this article, Gallix states “hauntology is, above all, the product of a time which is seriously ‘out of joint’” where “new technologies are dislocating more traditional notions of time and place.” They “encourage us never to fully commit to the here and now, fostering a ghostly presence-absence.” Furthermore, hauntology “is not just a symptom of the times ... it is itself haunted by a nostalgia for all our lost futures” (Gallix, 2011). I use this term to refer to the unsettling qualities faux-vintage smart phone camera apps impart to photographs and videos of contemporary life. Smartphones encourage people’s dislocation from physical surroundings. The spectral co-presence of others frequently disrupts face-to-face encounters. In turn, this fosters widespread nostalgia for a lost utopian future where there is no pressure for constant connection via networked technology. However, there is more at play.

The widespread popularity of faux-vintage apps indicates that people are endeavoring to capture more than just an accurate depiction of what their eyes can see. They are using heritage aesthetics to go beyond visual sense to interpret aspects of what the whole sensorium experiences as well as nostalgia for a strong sense of place. This desire to recreate the poetic dimensions of the auratic experiences we associate with analogue media is evident in popular smartphone app filters. Walter Benjamin made the term *aura* famous in his influential essay “The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction,” where he mourned the loss of the *aura*. He predicted that the age of

mechanical reproduction and the advent of photography and film would result in a shift in the way representations were viewed and would cause diminutions of auratic experiences. He claimed that photographs could never carry the aura of a painting. Benjamin wrote this article from a Marxist stance on historical materialism and expressed his fears about mass production and the dehumanizing effects of factory production lines. He explains aura as the associations that a particular object will bring to mind in his essay, "On some motifs in Baudelaire":

*Thus, technology has subjected the human sensorium to a complex kind of training. There came a day when a new and urgent need for stimuli was met by the film. In a film, perception in the form of shocks was established as a formal principle. That which determines the rhythm of production on a conveyor belt is the basis of the rhythm of reception in the film (Benjamin, 1968, p. 31).*

Benjamin constructs a dialogue with Baudelaire's commentary in the Salon review of 1859 about the creative situation of the artist in the age of photography and mechanical reproduction. The latter argued for the need to keep photography separate from the domains of the imaginary. Bolter, MacIntyre, Gandy & Schweitzer (2006) suggest, "what Baudelaire regards as the realm of imagination is for Benjamin the aura" (Bolter et al, 2006, p. 25). Baudelaire (1988) himself warned, "If photography is allowed to supplement art in some of its functions, it will soon have supplanted or corrupted it altogether, thanks to the stupidity of the multitude which is its natural ally" (Baudelaire, 1988, p. 125).

The ambivalence with which both Benjamin and Baudelaire viewed emergent technologies during the mechanical reproduction period resonates deeply in the age of social media and participatory culture. Baudelaire's questions about the artist are just as pertinent today as they were in 1859, similarly nostalgic and have resonance with the discourses of hauntology and nostalgia. The aura then is impalpable yet capable of hooking the imagination into realms beyond the materiality of the present moment. The aura is at the same time, the state of mind or feeling that a viewer experiences when looking at a work of art or nature, and it emanates from the object itself according to Benjamin. This interplay between the viewer and the expression or object makes the aura a concept that is intersubjectively understood as intangible, yet distinctive.

If Benjamin's essay is read against Derrida's spectres of nostalgia for imagined utopias, it can be argued that Benjamin's lament about the loss of the aura is an example of hauntology because it contains echoes of Romanticism as a response to industrialisation and mass production. We look back at old photographs with a sense of wonder and sometimes nostalgia. For us, living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, old photographs do have an aura. Depending on the context, they can create a ghostly presence-absence of people and landscapes, which Benjamin failed to anticipate. I suggest that the use of smartphone filters draws on the aesthetics of hauntology with a ghostly presence-absence yet at the same time generates emergent forms of visualities in new contexts.

Visual practices that capture embodied and emplaced moments have become routine. They are entangled in the evolving socialities and emplaced visualities of social media, which are growing exponentially. Smartphone cameras are critical to this growth. For example, there are over 150 million people using Instagram as reported on

their blog September 9, 2013, which represents a growth of over +900% since Instagram's inception in October 2010 (Totem, n.d.).

The Instagram platform is increasingly becoming a giant repository of poetic lieux de memoiré documenting people's responses to their lived experience. The cultural geographer, Tim Cresswell, developed the term "leaky archives of place" to describe sites such as Maxwell Street in Chicago where there is "a contested set of valuations concerning which objects count as worthy and significant" (Cresswell, 2011, p. 164). Cresswell argues that:

*While it is generally accepted that formal archives (usually of documents and images) are leakier and messier than might be expected, we have been slow to consider the utility of thinking of other kinds of collecting and other kinds of space as archival, including places themselves (Cresswell 2011, p. 175).*

Whilst Cresswell refers to particular geographic places through his conceptualisation of leaky archives, I would like to extend his argument to include online social media spaces given that many images are geotagged with location coordinates. An example of such a media space is Schleser and Turnbridge's project *#24Frames24Hours*. In this project they explored the making of an online documentary using mobile phones and point to the "shift from a visual to a participatory aesthetic in mobile filmmaking" (MINA 2013, p. 24), whereby emergent socialities and visualities flow together to create new forms. Their documentary titled, *#24Frames24Hours*, forms an informal archive of collaborative emplaced filmmaking.

Furthermore, social media timelines are spaces where people bring together their visual expressions of encounters with what the anthropologist, Ingold (2010) terms the "weather-world" in his essay exploring the relations between "ambulatory knowing, pedestrian movement, and temperate experience" (p. 122). He claims "the experience of weather lies at the root of our moods and motivations; indeed it is the very temperament of our being. It is, therefore, critical to the relation between bodily movement and the formation of knowledge" (Ingold, 2010, p. 122).

Our experience includes documenting our movements with smartphone cameras and sharing them online in various repositories. These online repositories are also spaces where a sense of a future past haunts the present. In this context, time capsules or lieux de memoiré are created with a nostalgic aura for future generations. Not only are the world's moments and landscapes captured and shared through photographs and videos, but they are also haunted with a sense of impermanence. Indeed, as Schwartz proposes in his study of image consumption among Israeli youth using mobile phones, "images, not unrelated to those of mass media, are consumed by teenagers in order to evoke nostalgia and other emotions, as a technology of self" (Schwartz, 2009, p. 348). Palmer suggests "a dynamic visual timeline enables users to supplement their own photographic memories with fragments from the mass media, thereby aiding memorialization and personalizing history" (Palmer, 2010, p. 155). Kelly explores "the mobile video format's ability to engage in thoughtful and reflective media creation" (MINA 2013, p. 18) in the context of making films using social media platforms such as Vine, Instagram, and Korsakow. His film, made up of fragments randomly assembled by the Korsakow platform, is an evocative attempt to capture the aura of what it was like to be in a

particular place in Melbourne at a specific time. The work reveals strong connections to the weather-world.

To illustrate further how such emergent forms of visuality operate, I refer to a blog post by John Constine, a technology journalist for *Tech Crunch*. The following blog entry, in which he describes his first Instagram photo sharing experience, may be seen as evidence of this phenomenon. Arguably, Constine's intention is to create an auratic image that seeks to communicate a multi-sensorial and heightened experience:

*my most vivid "eureka" moment with social media happened while I was walking in Golden Gate Park at sunset. Before me, creamy cloudflare reflected off a pond. It was so beautiful it felt selfish to keep it to myself. I wanted all my friends to see what I saw.*

*But I was no photographer, and held just a crummy early-generation iPhone. The shot lacked the vibrancy and emotion of being there. Yet with Instagram's filters I could return the essence of the moment to what I captured with my camera. And with time, a community grew around the ability to be transported (Constine, 2013).*

Places can transport us so that we cease rational interpretations to experience simply being there during a particular moment in time. We want to share these experiences with others. Mark McGuire uncovers the "conversational nature of networked creative practice" (MINA 2013, p. 22) through an analysis of cases studies. The discussion includes his use of Twitter and Instagram for creative practice in own project *140 Illustrated Haikus*. In his abstract, he argues that the constraints of the technology offer new opportunities for creative practice. His piece, *140 Illustrated Haikus*, may be viewed as a part of his routine interactions online. It works as an example of non-representational photography where the sensory, emotional, and imaginary are communicated through emplaced geospatial visuality (Pink & Hjorth, 2012). An impulse to create the haunting poetic image of a dynamic sense of emplacement can trigger social media and smartphone camera moments.

## **Placing Haunted Visualities**

To explore emergent visualities in terms of how we imagine and re-imagine places with smartphone filters, I now turn to debates and discussions about understanding place. There has been a shift in contemporary cultural geography to conceptualise place as dynamic. According to Massey (2005), space comprises interrelated flows, energies, and the things it renders so that a place "is always in the process of being made. It is never finished; never closed" (Massey, 2005, p. 9), and we are always and already emplaced. Landscape is constructed through social practices so that "environment manifests itself as landscape only when people create and experience space as a complex of places" (Knapp & Ashmore, 1999, p. 21).

The electromagnetic telecommunications and wireless networking infrastructures present in urban environments (de Waal, 2007) have become enmeshed in many of our landscapes and are an invisible, yet material part of urban environments. Through this invisible Hertzian infrastructure, Crang and Graham (2007) assert that cities can be theorized as sentient spaces capable of looking back at us as we move through them. In

other words, using location-based technologies and mobile devices such as smartphones enables reflexive and dynamic relations between the city and its inhabitants. Mobility is key to understanding landscapes (such as cities) as dynamic entanglements of complex spaces, rather than static objects. Cresswell identifies “three aspects of mobility: the fact of physical movement – getting from one place to another; the representations of movement that give it shared meaning; and, finally, the experienced and embodied practice of movement” (Cresswell, 2010, p. 19). Mobility is an important aspect of our experience of landscape.

Mobility also figures prominently in Ingold’s conceptualisation of place and ambulatory ways of knowing. Stressing the need to account for the embodied nature of our interactions with landscapes, he states that the landscape is a “region of the body’s very existence, without which no knowing or remembering would be possible” (Ingold, 2010, p. 122). We are entangled in landscapes as we move through them. According to David Crouch, “landscape is situated in the expression and poetics of spacing” (Crouch, 2010, p. 7). Crouch connects the affective dimensions of being in a landscape with the poetics of spacing. This has resonance with Lyotard’s evocative essay “Scapeland” where he described the sensation of being immersed within a landscape as the “vanishing of a standpoint” through “an excess of presence” (Lyotard, 1989, p. 216). Thus, a sense of place ordered by knowledge recedes. This is a somewhat romantic idea of landscape that emphasizes the personal and phenomenological, yet the concept of poetic spacing does illuminate the embodied and poetic dimensions of our interactions with the weather-world (Ingold, 2010). This can potentially help us to understand the popularity of faux-vintage aesthetics from a non-representational perspective, as well as their implications for creative practices.

## **Playing with Filters**

The sheer volume of videos uploaded each day to social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Vine show how commonplace our shared expressions of our footprints in the *weather-world* actually are. Arguably, poetic spacing is a poetic and romantic impulse to capture and communicate multi-sensorial experiences through visual media. Smartphones afford the ability to add atmospheric effects that evoke another time and another place through faux-vintage filters. It is possible that our desire to be haunted by the look and ambience of heritage media is symptomatic of our unresolved relationships with new technologies, including smartphones.

The experiment I outlined in the opening paragraph is an unremarkable and routine practice within the worlds of social media. In this section, I describe what happened when I performed this experiment to provide a concrete example of how such emergent practices are now a part of the vernaculars and socialities present in social media.

It was a mild spring afternoon, and I was happy that it was the weekend. I was walking to Melbourne Central station from work on a Friday afternoon in October in a laneway running between Latrobe St and Little Latrobe St that I pass through most days on my way to the station. A couple of people sitting on a bench chatting caught my eye. They were obviously at ease and mirrored my mood. A playful riff was forming in my mind. I decided to flow with the moment. I stopped, took a picture using Instagram, and applied a filter to evoke a breezy mood. I posted it to Facebook with the caption “Commonplace



poetry.” I applied a low contrast black and white filter and added a caption “Monochrome perhaps.” The next filter was a high contrast monochrome and I added the caption “Add drama.” Then I used a filter that evoked a faded colour photograph and the caption “A touch of colour.” The next filter was X-pro, and I wrote the caption “A certain something.” The last filter I used had an amber cast with distressed edges. I added the caption “Toasted.”



*Figure 1. Re-imagining place through six filters (c. Marsha Berry, 2013)*

I was playing to an audience of a close-knit group of eight poets on Facebook. We initially met on Twitter through poetry hash tags (see Berry, 2011). The poets reside in the UK and USA. The responses came swiftly. One of the poets had visited me in Melbourne earlier in 2013 and was familiar with the laneway in the images. He recognised the place, “it feels very familiar, is it at the other end of the graffiti alley?” and his subsequent comment was, “I wish I was there.” I had provoked nostalgia for his visit to Melbourne, and his next response was that he would start writing an ekphrasis in response to my filtered re-imaginings of a place he knew.

Another of the poets responded, “and we can see where this is coming from ... a creative imagination that always involves imagery, nice one, I like this idea. Where to next?” I realised he was reading my sequence of filtered images with captions as a poem. I applied another filter to give a cool cast and low-fi look and added the caption “With nostalgia.” The playful poem was now complete.

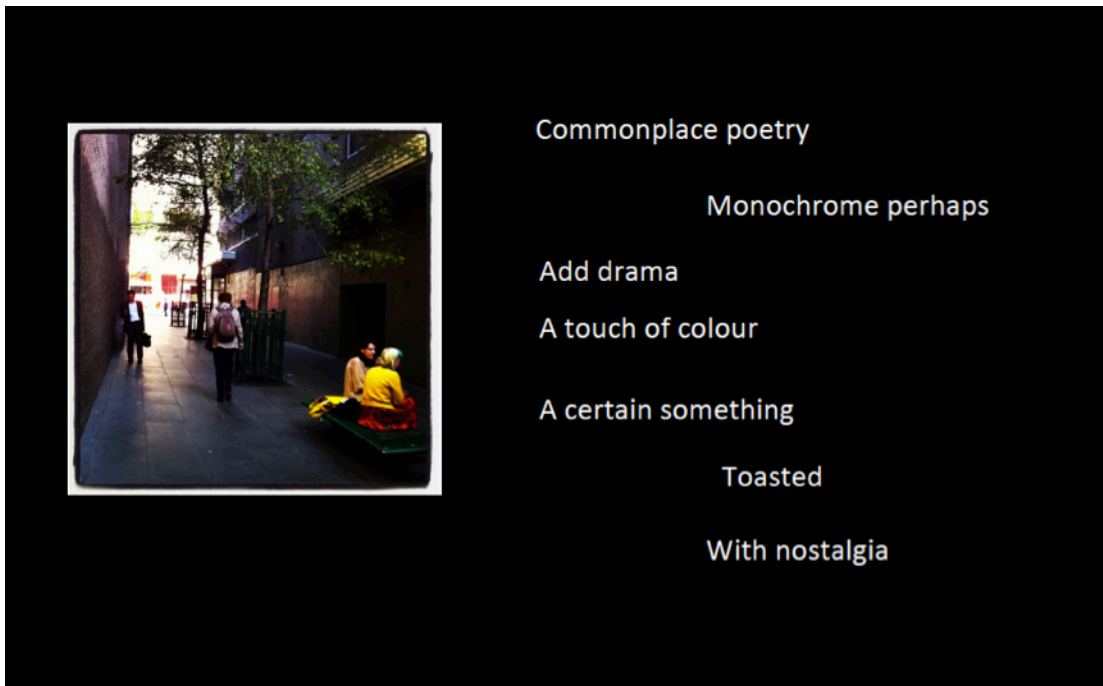


Figure 2. A playful poem about filters (c. Marsha Berry, 2012)

## More Than Meets the Eye

I started this paper with a call to rethink how we conceptualise and contextualise photography and video to account for artistic practices within the flow of everyday life. Photography is an embodied, material, and dynamic constellation of activities that are a part of emergent visualities and socialities in social media environments. My experiment is an illustration of these emergent phenomena. I have argued that it is important to include a consideration of the sensory, imaginary, and emotional as well our social interactions. Our sense of place is active and embodied. I have attempted to draw connections between the popularity of faux-vintage filters and hauntology to show how we communicate our sense of place through filtered images that do not just capture what is before the eyes, but also attempt to convey a multi-sensory embodied experience. Socio-technical environments are rapidly evolving to create constant new media ecologies, which offer new opportunities for creative practice. However, it also places pressure upon people to adapt to emergent socialities and vernaculars.

Many social media platforms also generate informal archives that permanently preserve memories. However, this too is changing through new platforms such as Snapchat where photographs and videos are ephemeral. In this paper, I have argued that non-representational perspectives offer new ways of understanding photography and film in social media visualities and socialities, and in turn, that these perspectives inspire emergent creative practices. In order to explore the numerous and nuanced implications of the popularity faux-vintage apps filters, I used Derrida's idea of hauntology as a starting point for my discussion. Perhaps our desire to haunt the places we pass through with the ambience of heritage media is symptomatic of our unresolved relationships with our new technologies, including our smartphones. On the other hand, perhaps the ambience of heritage media provides us with a form of evocative and poetic shorthand to express how we feel as we pass through entangled spaces every day.

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