5

REPULSIVE MEDIA

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Blech

How can we understand our lived environments through the deployment of *repulsive media*?

Repulsion is a framework for understanding the organised shaping of shared space and the distribution of bodies and behaviours in that space. Let me put that another way: repulsion is an abundant source for analysing the ambivalent drives, urges, and oustings in built and mediated environments. We are trained to think of media as connective – media communicate, create shared meaning, and congeal into rituals. This chapter asks a different question about what media do: What might we see differently in the light of repulsion and the ways media are deployed to repel and repulse?

Repulsion lives with its siblings, the revulsive and the repellent, which each describe moments and forces that drive people from things. These are the moments and forces that don't just disgust us or annoy us – they send us packing with our eyes clenched. Repulsion implies a personal experience of revulsion so intense that a person is not just put off but driven away.

Repulsion may also mark *the desire* to push things apart and to drive people away – it is a marker of the social urge to repel people. In the late 18th century, the famed French architect Jacques-François Blondel warned against using garish, 'gigantesque,' features in the façades of buildings. He coined the term *architecture terrible* to describe the style as unwanted in most contexts. But there was an exception: *architecture terrible* could actually be useful in the construction of 'dungeons and prisons' where it could 'announce from the outside' the invidious lives of those inside. Blondel stated that this strategic deployment of *architecture terrible* should be thought of

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as a usefully 'repulsive style' (Blondel, as quoted in Wiebenson 1968:137). Blondel's instrumental and moralising use of repulsion for dual mediatic enterprises; repulsion drives you away while declaring a normative view that you ought to feel driven away.

Repulsive media, then, channel the forces that affectively repel people from other people, things, or places *and* the things that communicate that people *ought to* feel driven away (like the image of Mark Zuckberg in Figure 5.1 that is meant to both drive the parent from their phone and communicate the idea of normative repulsion). An analysis attuned to repulsive media considers the experience of feeling repulsed and the strategic use of repulsion to shape behaviour, space, and the normative distribution of bodies. This approach to bodies, space, and technologies is inspired by scholars working at the intersection of media studies and disability studies. When I write about the normative distribution of bodies, or the ways that intended affective reactions crystallise in media artefacts, I am following Neta Alexander's (2025) call to understand interfaces (among other media) through the framework of distributed, 'access frictions' – where smoothed access for some may impede, decrease, or encumber access for others.



FIGURE 5.1 A screenshot of an Instagram Reel from the account of Smartphone Free Childhood, a UK-based organisation.

My approach to repulsion is also enkindled by the study of 'ugly feelings.' As articulated by the cultural theorist Sianne Ngai, ugly feelings are negative emotions that often perform ambiguous, political work in the cultural artefacts of 'the fully "administered world" of late modernity' (2009: 1). Following Ngai and others (Berlant 2016, 2022), I document infrastructural ambience as the crystallisation of emotion and affect. The cases in this chapter manifest as objects meant to embody and propel an emotional reaction. As Ngai puts it, the 'powerful question of objectified emotion … presents itself most forcefully in the aesthetic concept of tone' (28). The tactical use of repulsion is meant to shape behaviour under the guise of social and personal hygiene, but, in effect, it is often used to cleanse people from public space or mobilise shame to shape personal behaviour. In this chapter, emotions are objectified in the observable eruption of repulsive media into the materiality of everyday life.

Ugly feelings are an unavoidable aspect of an emotive life, no doubt, but by dint of their ugliness, they may not draw focus or sustained attention. This is the process to brook: an analysis of repulsive media requires an explicit desire to move towards the ugliness, to sustain contact with that which, by definition, intends to drive us away. Push uphill, against the wind. Move towards the stink, nostrils flared.

While this investigation stems from an interest in the deployment of repulsion, it is axiomatic that our public space is governed by the management of aesthetic and moral tone. Take a conspicuous case: in the late 19th century, a series of ordinances were passed by local governments throughout the United States, banning the presence of unwanted people from public view. These ordinances have come to be known as 'ugly laws' – a name that speaks to the aesthetic telos of their use but also to the fact that the laws themselves are repugnant artefacts of modernity. The disability studies scholar Susan Schweik documents the history of ugly laws, showing how they spread throughout the United States as a sort of political and discursive contagion. A typical law, from 1881, Chicago, reads:

> Any person who is diseased, maimed, mutilated, or in any way deformed, so as to be an unsightly or disgusting object, or an improper person to be allowed in or on the streets, highways, thoroughfares, or public places in this city, shall not therein or thereon expose himself to public view, under the penalty of a fine of $1 [about $20 today] for each offense.
>
> (2009: 1–2)

These hateful laws have a murky historical genesis, but one likely source is the widespread English prohibition against the public appearance of the poor and disabled. They are a part of what Schweik and Philip Ferguson (1994: 5) call an obsession with a 'broad cultural aesthetic' that sought to control the

tone of public space through the removal of bodily difference and poverty, and, in the process, wedded poverty with disability.

Schweik's history also shows how repulsion and desire are two sides of the same coin. Ugly laws *pushed* people out of public view because neediness could *attract* public attention. The logic underpinning the ugly laws dictated that decisions about who was deserving of sympathy and support were not meant to take place in public. In such a context, a person appearing 'needy' might be expected to cultivate public affect (sympathy), and that was an unwanted contribution to the public atmosphere; even mere co-presence with those potentially deserving of sympathy could lead to a coarsening of the aesthetic tone of shared space. The ugly laws, then, foreshadow the complex affective physics of repulsive media.

While the ugly laws may appear as historical artefacts of the Victorian era or Gilded Age, they have their equivalents in contemporary practices of hostility, violence, and criminalisation targeting the poor and unhoused. New anti-begging ordinances are regularly introduced by governments at all levels, usually in the name of commerce and cleansing public space of disorder; in the digital realm, the aesthetics of social media are crucial to the spread of content, and a similar logic to that of the ugly laws can prevail. TikTok was exposed in 2020 for instructing moderators to filter out content that seemed to show 'ugliness,' poverty, or disability, in an attempt to cultivate an aspirational tone on the platform (Biddle et al. 2020). The constant, across these examples, is the control of shared space through the strategic management of normative aesthetics – using affect to draw some people in and drive others away.

The goal of my investigation into repulsive media is to draw nearer to this logic, to analyse the use of technology and infrastructure in the management of tone, the ways such management aims to cleanse difference, and the manner in which repulsion is weaponised to control space. To draw near to the ugly feeling of repulsion, I will look at cases of repulsive light, from light bulbs and screens to hue-shaping glasses and light-blocking consumables, each of which is used by property owners, local governments, and businesses to shape space and condition behaviour in everyday encounters. This essay offers a reading of repulsion-as-ambiance, via the media of light. I argue that ambiance is the way we need to think about repulsion if we are to understand the embodied political aesthetics of public space. My analysis of repulsive light is an explicit call to dwell in the stink of the repellent.

While many deployments of repulsive media apparently exist in the name of social hygiene, their use marks out the limits of compassion and the failures to incorporate some of the most vulnerable people into our lives. The cases of repulsive media in this chapter document instances where technology and infrastructure replace people. This includes the stand-in use of technology and design in the place of parents, social workers, police, and custodial staff. So, while many repulsive media may purport to be passive deterrents, they are anything but. Instead, as I argue, ambience actively shapes and compels certain kinds of action through the manipulation of affective expectation. The cultivation of a repulsive sentiment towards space is an intentional act, meant to create friction between people, things, and places.

Repulsive light exists within a built and designed environment where bodies are constantly being urged, nudged, cajoled, and contorted into new positions (Doyuran 2024; Schüll 2012; Seaver 2019). Hence, repulsive light is considered here alongside other forms of hostile infrastructure and architecture – like the use of high-pitched sounds only audible to 'unwanted' teens and the use of bars and spikes to make surfaces unsleepable. The 'repulsive' in repulsive light is attached to broader intentions to create friction and misfits between unwanted bodies and their surroundings (Alexander 2025; Garland-Thomson 2011). The 'light' of repulsive light is symptomatic of a pervasive transformation of the lit environment at the level of infrastructure and device screens. Repulsive uses of light operate, as well, within the exponential growth of tools and technologies for so-called 'digital well-being' that include the use of night modes (Mulvin 2018) and the use of screen settings meant to make devices less appealing (that is, more repulsive).

Taken together, the repulsive media in this chapter are representative of a strategy that operates in tandem with the social insistence on 'pro-social behaviour' and 'wellness' that uses shame and disgust to shape human practices. Together, this chapter argues that the criteria for making and maintaining a docile and normate body are readable from the infrastructure around us, including the ambient hue of artificial light (Alexander 2025; Hagood 2019; Hamraie 2017; Hu 2022; Zeitlin-Wu 2023). Methodologically, I follow Steve Goodman's model in *Sonic Warfare* (2012) for an approach to studying the affective micropolitics of everyday life. Goodman uses a transdisciplinary and trans-genre method that draws together philosophy, sociology, aesthetics, fiction, and phenomenology to analyse the bodily manipulations entailed by the creeping intrusion of militarism in the built environment. Whereas Goodman is invested in a 'nonrepresentational ontology,' I am specifically interested in documenting *both* the entwined, tactical uses of affective manipulation *and* the signifying, representational role of repulsive media. And where Goodman is interested in the militarisation of sonic technologies, I am interested in the weaponisation of light in the creation of repulsive environments. By collecting and mapping the constellation of artefacts in this chapter, I develop a means for analysing the uneven distribution of light and hue that poses ambience as a political problem.

The aesthetic and ambient consequences of introducing LED-lit screens into the nooks and crannies of everyday life largely go uncommented upon; instead, it is eclipsed by discussions of the night sky and broad concerns about 'light pollution' (Crary 2013). I am motivated to show powerful actors,

in culturally and historically specific ways, realign technology, bodies, and aesthetics according to prevailing assumptions about normative perception and behaviour. A close analysis of the aesthetics of light, especially in ordinary daily uses, lays bare such contemporary politics of bodies and space. By investigating repulsive media, in other words, I understand the construction, experience, and aesthetics of infrastructure and technology through the intentional, affective reorganisation of people and their environments. *What I want to know is: What bodily, affective, and infrastructural analyses are made legible by following repulsion? What will we find if we trace back from where we have arrived to where we were pushed from?*

Repulsion

Repulsion is allied with the effects of disgust, horror, and revulsion. As William Miller writes of these effects, 'They all convey a strong sense of aversion to something perceived as dangerous because of its powers to contaminate, infect, or pollute by proximity, contact, or ingestion' (1997: 2). In popular discourses around affect and media, there is an assumption that desire is unaccountable, whereas repulsion is obvious and certain. Hence, even when they attract massive audiences, horror films or gross-out television are patently horrifying or disgusting, but other forms of taste are fundamentally personal and subjective. As Miller puts it, the avowal of disgust or repulsion 'expects concurrence' (194). Or as Ngai puts it, 'Even if disgust is boiled down to its kernel of repulsion, repulsion itself tends to be a fairly definite response, whereas the parameters of attraction are notoriously difficult to determine and fix' (2009: 335). As both authors will tell you, this commonsense view is far from reality. If repulsion is meant to be transparent, and desire is opaque, what is gained, and who gains, from such an assertion?

The view of disgust, aversion, and repulsion as clear and obvious results from the belief that these are biological reactions, as opposed to learned, cultural ones. Such a view presumes a distinction between the forms of taste that we cultivate over time and the biologically triggered reactions we have to the things and practices we find repulsive or disgusting. Sara Ahmed challenges this view, writing that 'being disgusted is not simply about "gut feelings"; or if disgust is about gut feelings, then our relation to our guts is not direct, but is mediated by ideas that are already implicated in the very impressions we make of others and the way those impressions surface as bodies' (Ahmed 2004: 83). I want to think about a repulsion that is *already mediated by ideas* and one that moves beyond the consensual certainty of disgust to understand the social distribution of repellent urges.

Media scholars engage with disgust, repulsion, and revulsion as the centre of much film and television work (Brinkema 2014). In the context of audience and fan studies, both the pursuit and avoidance of disgust and repulsion

may, in fact, be sources of pleasure (as in, again, the case of horror films or gross-out reality TV). As Peter Stallybrass and Allon White write, 'Disgust always bears the imprint of desire' (1986: 191). While they write from the perspective of an individual subject caught in a loop of disgust and desire, social formations gather, too, around the dialectics of repulsion and attraction, a process Ahmed (2004) describes as the passion of negative attachment. Negative attachment, in Ahmed's case, refers to the cultural investment and social grouping around emotions with a negative valence, like hatred, rage, or disgust. The relationship between the push and pull of affect, then, is knotted by the dynamic interaction between repulsion and desire.

Schweik (2009) argues that the use of the 'ugly laws' to bar the public appearance of poverty, disability, and neediness worked in tandem with laws meant to control attraction to the visible. Hence, laws that identified the visible, disabled body as a threat to public order were often paired, side-by-side, with laws banning the public display of breasts, nude sunbathing, and striptease (Schweik 2009; see also Alan Hyde 1997). As Schweik writes, 'if this grouping seems counterintuitive, it is perhaps because we have been so well trained to think of "deformity" in contradistinction to "desire"' (164). Ugly laws were treated as a necessity not just because of a hateful need to cleanse public space of difference, but because the appearance of 'neediness' was imagined as irresistible to those wanting to help. Repulsion, in other words, compels an investigation of the complexity and often paradoxical trajectories of movement away from *and* towards the putatively harmful, socially abject, and legally suppressed.

For instance, many scholars, journalists, and artists have been fascinated by the symbolic challenge of communicating the danger of stored nuclear waste to future generations who, we must assume, will not be literate in our contemporary languages (Hecht 2018; Moisey 2012; Pasqualetti 1997; Van Wyck 2005). There is a particular fascination with the US government's planning for the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) in New Mexico. The WIPP is meant to store waste, forever, and remain dangerously radioactive for at least ten thousand years. As Peter Van Wyck argues, the problem is both technical – how do you contain it? – and cultural-symbolic – how do you keep people away from it? The cultural problem is doubled, though, because any attempt to make the site seem dangerous is assumed to also make the site mysterious, attractive, and fascinating.

The attempt to solve these problems began in the 1970s, but as planning advanced in the early 1990s, repulsion became a central focus of the exercise. Two teams were assigned to develop rival solutions. One chose a series of narrative pictographs showing what would happen, in simplified form, if a human entered the site. The other team, however, adopted an approach based on a 'gestalt of danger' that aimed to bypass communication through the 'use of fundamental and enduring psychology' (Van Wyck: 53). Their

approach combined icons of humanesque faces meant to convey 'abject horror and terror' (Sandia Report, 1993: F-114) and evoke Edvard Munch's painting of 'The Scream.' This approach to creating a timelessly repulsive atmosphere around nuclear waste is based on the idea that repulsion invites concurrence because of a bodily/psychologically hardwired connection between aesthetics and affect. The gestalt of danger is meant to overwhelm the desire to approach the fascinatingly repulsive.

The team's design for the site was also surrounded by a series of earthworks that 'sets the tone for the entire landscape – **non-natural, ominous, and repulsive**' (emphasis added, Sandia Report 1993: F-12). One example is a sculpture called *The Landscape of Thorns*, which features jagged spikes emerging from the ground, like a briar patch grown to gargantuan proportions. Writing the summation of their approach, the *Landscape of Thorns* team wrote about the message they wished to convey, phenomenologically, through the site.

An excerpt:

> What is here was dangerous and repulsive to us. This message is a warning about danger. The danger is in a particular location…it increases towards a center … the center of danger is here… of a particular size and shape, and below us. The danger is still present, in your time, as it was in ours. The danger is to the body, and it can kill.

The *Landscape of Thorns* has not been built (a decision on the final design was deferred to 2035), but similar warnings already suffuse our daily lives. A pack of batteries, purchased to power a child's Tamagotchi, comes with the promise of an 'Extra Repulsive Taste' (see Figures 5.2a and b) to protect against children swallowing them. The package is illustrated with the drawing of a baby's disgusted face, an image that is reminiscent of the WIPP team's drawings of faces. The batteries are coated in Bitrex, a brand name for the chemical compound denatonium, the world's bitterest compound. The same compound can be found in anti-freeze, nail polish, and Nintendo game cartridges. Repulsion, in other words, is a commercialised technique for both protecting people from ingesting poison and protecting corporations from liability when people do (Jain 2006; Mulvin 2018, 2020).

Jacques-François Blondel, advocating for the prophylactic use of *architecture terrible*, or the WIPP team using their *Landscape of Thorns* to drive curious visitors away, thought about repulsion as a moral act, actualising an imagined responsibility of designers to push people away from danger. On the other hand, Bitrex uses repulsion as a handy intervention in a dilemma: so much of what is ready-at-hand, including media objects like toys and video games, ought not to be ready-at-mouth. Training children

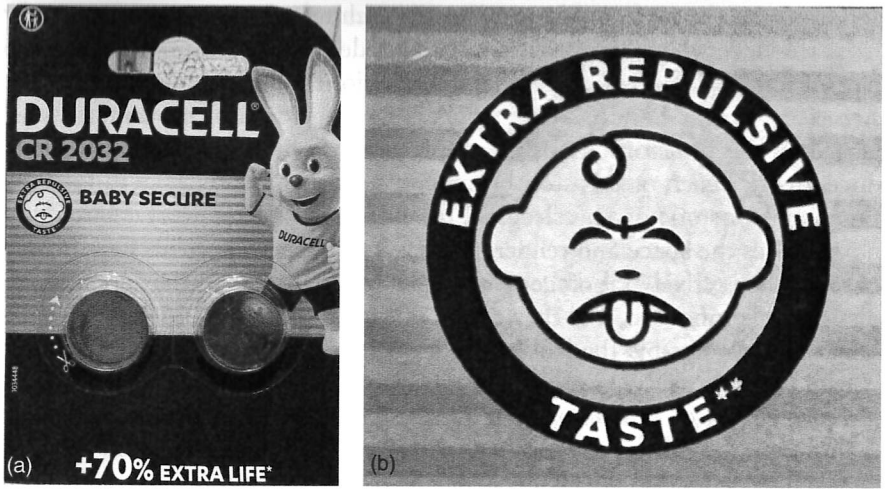


FIGURE 5.2a and b A pack of Duracell batteries advertising an 'extra repulsive taste' coating and a detail of the decal.

to stop putting non-food items in their mouths is a crucial step in personal development – so much so that it is a basis of much of psychoanalysis. But whereas the benefits of Bitrex are hard to argue with, the cases of repulsive media I analyse below are characterised by a hostile attitude to people and space. An affectively oriented design history can be tied, in this way, with the quotidian deployment of repulsion as a behaviour-shaping technique and a marker of the undesirable.

Hostility in design

The materialisation of hostility is readily visible and sensible in the pervasive and (usually) urban deployment of *hostile architecture*: the use of design features and equipment to prevent or discourage unintended uses of space. The use of hostile features in the design of urban space targets the most vulnerable and least powerful residents of the city, including the unhoused, the poor, drug users, and minors. Hostile architecture is part of a suite of techniques and technologies meant to 'design-out' particular populations from public space in the name of 'liveability' (Hamraie 2018). Hostile architecture has come to the fore as a tactic employed by property owners and governments as a means for cleansing and sterilising public space. The notable case in 2014 of the use of 'homeless spikes' in a South London apartment building spread on social media and became an icon of increasingly aggressive techniques of cleansing the unhoused from urban streets (Petty 2016).

For many, the perfected form of hostile architecture exists a stone's throw from the desk where I am writing: the Camden Bench (Figure 5.3). It is so named for the London council that commissioned it and deployed it on the streets of central London. City-dwellers and visitors are no doubt accustomed to the transformations of simple benches in recent decades. Where once a park bench or bus-stop bench could accommodate three-to-four sitting people, or one person sleeping, the intrusion of bars every metre or so now divides the space and renders it useless for sleep. These bars are *hostile* because they actively sabotage the existing use of a surface, they are antagonistic to the unhoused, and they communicate, to both potential users of the bench and passers-by, that this space has been designed to intentionally bar behaviour and prevent prolonged use. They have become so ubiquitous that a recently released *Pokémon* game for the Nintendo was lambasted for their inclusion in the game.

But the reason that the Camden bench attracts attention is its peculiar and hypertrophied combination of hostile features. The Camden bench is not just hostile to sleeping; it is replete with the materialisation of aggressive and repellent features that are meant to prevent, control, and drive away what, in the United Kingdom, is called 'anti-social behaviour' (ASB). Hence, in one



FIGURE 5.3 The Camden bench near Holborn station in London.
Author's photo.

design of the review conducted by the 'Design Against Crime Research Lab' (Gamman and Willcocks 2011), which describes the bench as 'ASB-resistant,' the authors note that its features and intended consequences include:

- Anti-graffiti (coating).
- Anti-postering (has few flat surfaces).
- Camden logo is cast into the bench so it is easier to pull off any posters.
- Difficult to skateboard on.
- Deters drug dealing, as there are no cracks or slots in the bench to hide materials.
- Reduces littering, as it has no flat surfaces, slots, or water traps to leave litter on, and so it is designed for water and litter to flow off it.

The Camden bench, then, is a congregation of repulsive techniques. Not only do these techniques work to repel street-involved people, but they are also conspicuous for the fact that they eliminate cleaning work by council employees. The bench is a passive friction that is self-maintaining. Hidden beyond its smooth angles, aiming to tightly circumscribe its use to short sits and to militate against unwanted behaviour, it becomes a mobile bulwark in the local council's efforts to shape the ambience of urban space.

Hostility, though, manifests far beyond the bench. Consider, for instance, the much-publicised use of 'Mosquito speakers,' which broadcast obnoxious and repulsive tones in frequencies only audible to younger ears – technology that previously existed, in slightly modified form, to repel rodents (Goodman 2012). In the early 1990s, convenience stores and other property owners of shared, outdoor areas began to blast Muzak to drive unwanted groups out (Hirsch 2006; Sterne 2005; Thompson 2017). The aim was to control the bodies of, usually, young people and the unhoused. But the Mosquito is a weaponised version of this repulsive technique.

Like the Camden bench, the Mosquito speaker is a UK invention, patented by Howard Stapleton in 2005, first trialled in Wales, but now used pervasively around the world to make the gathering of young people in shared urban space repulsive. The device broadcasts a signal at 17.4 kHz (a high frequency thought to be audible only to younger people who have not suffered the typical audible scarification of adults) and can be ramped up in strength to be as loud as 108 decibels. So more specifically, the Mosquito speaker does not just weaponise sound to control young people's bodies; it weaponises the physiology of teenage audition to make socialisation in public space repulsive.

On the manufacturer's website, the Mosquito boasts 'Harmless prevention using the science of sound' and implores the buyer to 'sound out the problem of anti-social behaviour.' The images that accompany these declarations show hooded youths and quiet, suburban row houses in Anywhere, UK. The

company also shares a visual explanation of the Mosquito's effective use. It features a clock icon demonstrating the passage of 25 minutes and four small illustrations of silhouetted young people. At '8:20 PM', the 'Teens pick up on the high-frequency, repetitive tone of the Mosquito', and by '8:25 PM', the 'Teens disperse as they become irritated by the highly annoying sound.' The simple, cause-and-effect laid out by the company relies on the idea that repulsive media operate biologically, universally, and automatically to organise space through affective and physiological manipulation.

Use of the Mosquito has been widely criticised by civil rights groups and disability activists, though attempts to ban the devices in various jurisdictions have largely failed. In one report from the Children and Young People's Commissioner of Scotland (2021), they explain that they support a ban on the devices because, 'The message sent by using mosquito devices is that children and young people are unwelcome and deserve to be repelled. This further entrenches negative and intolerant attitudes towards them.' The Commissioner's statement speaks to the double mediation of repulsive media: not only does the Mosquito speaker weaponise the physiology of the supposedly normal teenage ear to control bodily movement and social organisation, but its very presence – *whether it is activated or not* – reinforces the undesirability of teenage sociality and teenagers' lack of bodily autonomy in public space.

The Camden bench and the Mosquito devices are ready examples, drawn from the soup of urban existence in 21st-century UK, where an impulse to control and shape behaviour manifests in brazen interventions in the lived experience of space. Repulsion is wielded as a weapon to drive (certain) people from space, to curtail the affordances of the built environment, and to signal to the diverse populations that move through these spaces that hostility reigns as a governance principle.

Repulsive light

Hostile architecture manifests in material objects and media practices that drive unwanted bodies from space and curtail targeted behaviours. This introduces new frictions between bodies and space to make certain actions uncomfortable – it is not that the Camden bench prohibits sleeping by displaying a plaque that threatens a fine or forced removal; it impedes sleeping through the subtle curve of line and slope. Such forms of repulsive media are crystallisations of antipathy that erupt into public space when a normative attitude towards unwanted people and behaviour takes hold.

The stuff of hostile architecture tends to be obdurate, conspicuous, and grating: mosquito speakers, cement benches, and spikes. Here, I draw together examples of the cultural and technological deployment of repulsive light. By considering the ways ambience and light are weaponised to shape people's behaviour, I consider the less obvious ways that repulsion is activated in the shaping of public spaces. Sean Cubitt writes that 'Light is the condition of all vision,' and considers the physical processes for shaping and reshaping light as the material basis of a mediated relationship with the world (2014: 1). Via this definition, I consider the use of lightbulbs, screen settings, light-blocking tools, and glasses (the lenses of which transform light to form new renditions of the world) as light media. Through this reading of light, I show how even the seemingly passive media of ambience and visual tone shift responsibility for behaviour onto targeted subjects through the inculcation of repulsion. Light and hue demonstrate this process because of the affective and cultural bond built between light and disgust. This is a bond that goes beyond what David Batchelor calls a 'chromaphobic' (2000) attitude towards colour to consider the ways certain hues and light-transformations appear at the nexus of technology and embodiment.

The repulsive lens

'Love Hungry' is a 1988 episode of the horror anthology series *Tales from the Darkside*. The series was created by zombie-film director George R. Romero and was like a 1980s hybrid of *The Twilight Zone, Tales from the Crypt,* and *Black Mirror.* Each 22-minute episode of *Tales* is a standalone story and therefore encapsulates a single, often comic, idea. 'Love Hungry' tells the story of Betsy Cowan. Betsy lives alone, is determined to lose weight to win the affection of a former high school classmate, and has exhausted the existing supply of gizmos, gimmicks, and fad diets. The premise is typical fat-phobic content of the period. For example, her fridge has a 'no women' decal pinned to it in an effort to remind her not to eat. One day, Betsy receives a mysterious package in the mail that includes an earpiece and a pair of glasses. Choosing to put these accessories on, she discovers that she now sees and hears her food as sentient. It is a horrifying representation of augmented reality *avant la lettre*. Soon, Betsy's life descends into pure repulsion. Instead of the crunch of a taco, she can only hear screaming. Arriving in her kitchen one day, her pieces of fruit now discourse with her about their pain. Torn between her hunger and her disgust at eating sentient food, Betsy ultimately sews her mouth shut and starves to death.

The 'Love Hungry' episode aired during a particularly ugly moment in the history of fad dieting. It is also possible (and I might say likely) that the episode was inspired by the actual existence of the *Vision-Dieter* glasses, a creation of Arkansas optometrist John Miller. The *Vision-Dieters* had one blue lens and one brown lens and claimed that looking through the glasses, via the distortion of these hues, would render food less appetising and Miller

claimed that the combination of hues was a 'secret European colour technology' (FDA 2017). Their essential promise was a restructuring of light to make food repulsive in a context of socially maintained bodily shame. But with no proof of their efficaciousness, the glasses were eventually removed from the market by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and destroyed.

The FDA's own internal history of the *Vision-Dieters* comments that '*Advertisements for Vision Dieter glasses in the 1970s boasted that 'you won't believe your eyes,' and claimed that by wearing the 'special' glasses, consumers could reduce both their hunger and food intake.*' I want to be clear here that I am not judging the tools, techniques, and practices that people use to shape their food preferences and eating habits, including the behavioural or pharmaceutical shaping of hunger and want. What is remarkable (and ridiculous) about the *Vision-Dieters* and what is meant to be 'horrifying' about Betsy Cowan's story is the weaponisation of vision technology to make the otherwise desirable repulsive.

Lest we think that fat-phobic technologies like the *Vision-Dieters* are things of the past, in 2015, Microsoft received a patent for a pair of augmented reality glasses that employed computer vision object-detection to guilt and shame users about the food they were about to eat. Specifically, the application was for a 'Wearable Food Nutrition Feedback System.' The first sentence of the application states plainly, 'People are generally not aware of the nutritional information on food items they consume' and goes on to promise that the glasses are a feedback tool meant to provide 'warnings based on personal wearer needs, general nutrition information, food consumption tracking and social interactions' (Jerauld et al. 2015).

Patent applications are fascinating texts because they often combine the overwrought language that explains how the given invention is unique with illustrations that specify how it is made and how it will be used. Contained within the Microsoft patent are illustrations for two use case scenarios shown from the perspective of the wearer's right lens/display (see Figure 5.4). In the first one, we see a menu for a restaurant – called *Garçon's*, naturally. The display has a superimposed speech bubble that reads 'You didn't like the Veal Special last time....' In the second scenario we see the clip-art image of a hamburger, and a speech bubble that says, 'That is your second big meal today – are you sure you want to do that?'

The Microsoft glasses can be considered a contemporary formulation of the *Vision-Dieters*. Instead of using the quack science of colour-hue distortion, they employ the wedded automation of vision and datafication at the immediate threshold of the eye, forcing the wearer to simultaneously behold their food and the caloric implications of its consumption. The technique is one of quantified repulsion, intervening in the user's sight lines to confront them with shame.

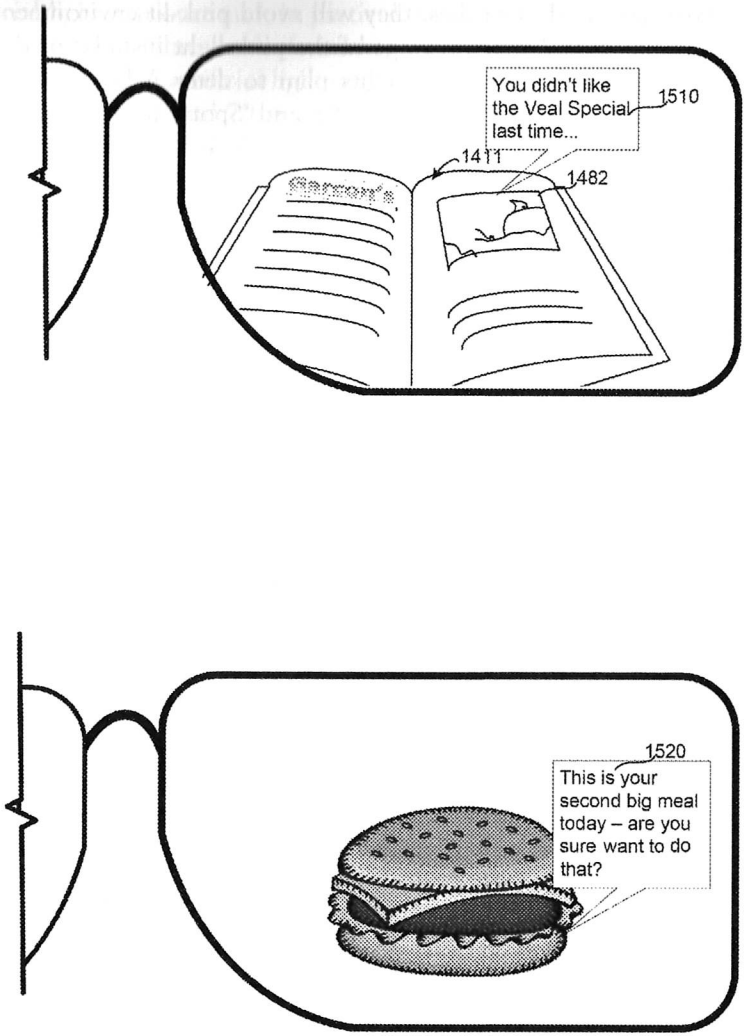


FIGURE 5.4 A detail of two illustrations from a Microsoft patent for a 'Wearable Food Nutrition Feedback System.'

Repulsive hues

To push deeper into the intentional deployment of repulsive light, we can reconnect with hostile architecture. Beginning in the mid-aughts, some local councils in the UK began installing pink LED lights to drive away teenagers from public space – especially around housing estates. Much like the Mosquito speakers, these lights had repulsion as their primary goal. The logic went like this: pink lights highlight blemished skin or 'acne'; since teenagers

tend to have spots and blemishes, they will avoid pink-lit environments out of shame and disgust. News coverage of the pink light installations carried headlines like 'Pink Cardiff street lights plan to deter Asbo yobs' (2012), 'Pink lights show up spotty youths' (2009), and 'Spotty teens deterred from underpasses by acne light' (2009), the last of which was illustrated with a semi-blurred photograph of young people in hoods.

Pink lights do not have anything like the take-up of Mosquito speakers but nonetheless connect the logics of hostile design to the transformation of the lit atmosphere and the intentional cultivation of shame to shape behaviour. I want to build from these examples to think about the affective micropolitics of repulsive light in the present conjuncture. It's necessary to stipulate that, of course, we live within environments that are thoroughly suffused with artificial light, and the transformation of space via artificial light is simultaneously a transformation of work and leisure time. Such transformations are the subject of both historical and contemporary work, like Wolfgang Schivelbusch's (1995) history of 19th-century lighting and the 'disenchantment' of night-time, or more recent, ecological concerns around perpetual lighting espoused by authors like Jonathan Crary (2013), or the affective analyses of light by writers like Lauren Collee (2024). But what makes the pink lights so interesting is that they mark not just the use of light to change the night but the use of hue to create disgust. This shift towards employing hostility to cultivate repulsion is markedly different than the use of light to smooth over the gaps between daytime and night-time.

Long before the use of pink lights in social housing, businesses and local governments had begun deploying blue light in bathrooms to deter people who were looking for private space for drug injection. This was very common in Vancouver (where I grew up), including in businesses and hospitals. While the use of blue light to prevent drug injection is spreading, coverage of its deployment in the popular press also spreads, speaking to the ways repulsive media both drive people away and become the subject of normative expectations about who ought to feel driven from public space. A recent blue light programme in Philadelphia saw people installing these lights not just in public toilets but also on porches and private spaces. Though light has long been a means of driving people away from space, I'm interested in the particular use of a hue of blue to make the body illegible. The thinking is that blue light makes it near impossible to identify a vein on your body and that you will be pushed from this space out of frustration. The empirical data suggests that people will still use such spaces, but at the risk of increased harm from not being able to see properly. The deployment of blue light renders the body inaccessible for stigmatised drug users and other people needing to inject medicine and, potentially, compounds harm through mis-injection.

Contrast this use of light with concerns about artificial light exposure. Parallel to the deployment of repulsive blue and pink lighting, public discourse around well-being has evidenced an obsession with the health effects of

artificial light exposure and, in particular, exposure to 'high frequency' blue light (beyond the threshold of visible perceptibility). It is a well-established fact that the use of artificial light can affect a person's circadian rhythm. But a shift occurred around 20 years ago with the identification of a novel photoreceptor sensitive to high-frequency blue light. This changed the scientific understanding of how light worked to set circadian rhythms. As research into exposure to blue light seeped into public awareness, 'blue screen light' was blamed for the health problems of endemic sleep loss.

When I previously wrote about screen light and 'night modes' (Mulvin 2018), I was keen to show how a set of techniques, filters, and screen settings appeared as defences against the apparently damaging effects of screen exposure. As the fears around circadian-disrupting blue light mounted, a cottage industry developed offering blue light-blocking, filtering, and repelling technologies to protect the body against a host of supposedly damaging effects of blue screen light. In essence, the introduction of blue-blocking glasses, night modes that turn devices a more amber hue, and other related technologies sought to smooth over the transition from daytime to night-time. A neighbouring technique saw people change their screen settings to make their phones less attractive. Some users set the colour to monochrome, while a popular post on the sub-Reddit *r/productivity* walks users through (mis) using the colour-blind accessibility features of the iPhone to make the phone repellent or, in the words of the post, 'look like shit basically.' All of these efforts aim to assuage fears that it is the form (light frequencies) and not the content of our screens that keeps us up at night.

The protective and prophylactic measures against screen light do not stop at screen settings. While some research now disputes the effectiveness of night modes themselves (Duraccio et al. 2021), in recent years, the commodities available to protect the body from high-frequency blue light have only expanded. It is now easy to find, in a drugstore, or advertised in a social media feed, blue-blocking glasses, blue-blocking facial mists, blue-blocking cosmetics, and even a blue-blocking oral supplement (see Figures 5.5a and b).

This assemblage of anti-blue products stands in stark contrast to the deployment of blue light in urban spaces, meant to control and drive away IV drug users. But both techniques demonstrate how ambient infrastructures produce bodily difference through the intentional deployment of the repellent and the repulsive. If we limit ourselves to just comparing these two cases of blue-blocking and blue-shining techniques, we can see the ways that light and hue expose the affective politics of infrastructure and ambience.

On the one hand, the soothing, smoothing, and shielding techniques of blue light protection in glasses, screen modes, cosmetics, and oral supplements offer a balm against the ubiquity of screens and the disgust that we might feel at our own entwinement with, say, incessant work requirements. Knowing that there is (a hazy and ill-defined) problem with blue light requires

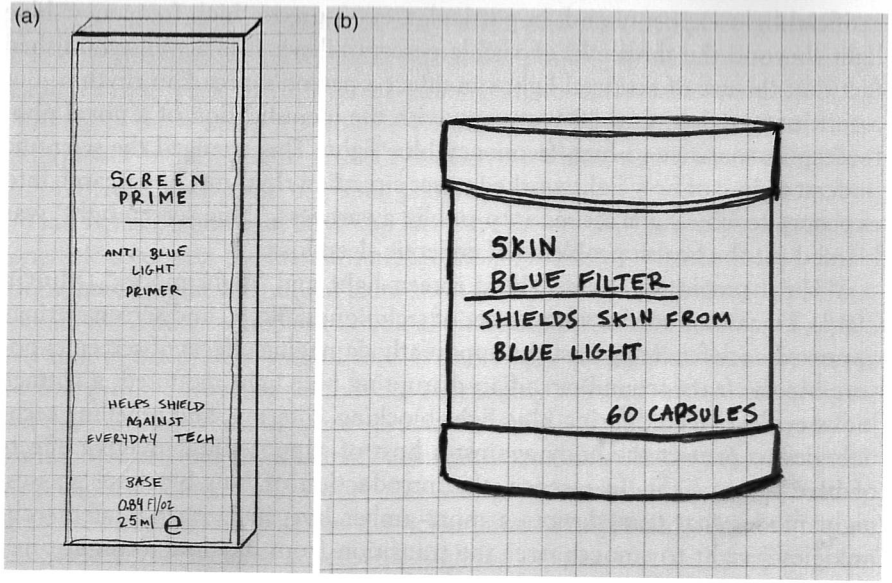


FIGURE 5.5a and b A box of 'Screen Prime' anti-blue light facial primer and an ad for a 'skin blue filter' oral supplement.

a hyperawareness of the contemporary body, its relationship to work, and its 'over exposure' to certain frequencies of light. These uses of technology, meant to repel blue light frequencies from the threshold of skin and eyes, rely on an ultra-legibility of bodily processes characteristic of contemporary well-being culture. In contrast to this use of commodities meant to protect the body against the effects of blue light, the insertion of blue light in public bathrooms and in public places is a hostile armament, a prickly transformation to the illuminated environment meant to physically render the body illegible and inaccessible.

This analysis understands the changing hue of our environments as a political object. The accretion of repulsive techniques, from the intimate scales of personal screen light and glasses to the urban scales of lit bathrooms and public spaces, culminates in a hostile and queasy ambience. A focus on lit ambience, however ephemeral, reveals how infrastructures produce, reproduce, and entrench the politics of bodily difference through the ongoing management of light.

Go home

In the United Kingdom, the most consequential example of hostility is not the Camden bench but the longstanding 'hostile environment' policy of the Home Office. The policy was deployed by then-Home Secretary and future

Prime Minister Theresa May and was designed to make living in the UK so frustrating that non-settled migrants would voluntarily emigrate (Webber 2019). The programme included the use of public-facing media meant to drive out unwanted residents of the UK, and bureaucratic techniques meant to make living in the UK onerous and frustrating. Both forms of friction enacted and communicated a desire to repel people from their new home and to enunciate a normative view that they ought to feel unwanted. One facet of the programme included mobile billboards stating: 'In the UK illegally? Go Home or Face Arrest,' followed by the encouragement to text HOME to a text hotline. The billboard was part and parcel of an immigration strategy that punished the under-documented through the weaponisation of paperwork and the tactical use of media – visual media like billboards and communications infrastructures like a text hotline.

As William Davies argues,

> It's almost as if, on discovering that law alone was too blunt an instrument for deterring and excluding immigrants, [Theresa] May decided to weaponise paperwork instead. The 'hostile environment' strategy was never presented just as an effective way of identifying and deporting illegal immigrants: more important, it was intended as a way of destroying their ability to build normal lives. The hope, it seemed, was that people might decide that living in Britain wasn't worth the hassle.
>
> (2018)

The use of bureaucratic friction was a technique for creating discomfort and for unsettling those living in the UK who did not fit the government's own definitions of desirable: namely, poor, racialised, and ethnically othered residents who are making do under conditions of scarce resources and practically non-existent social care.

Reading the abrasions of the hostile environment through the lens of repulsive media makes two facets of the policy legible. A text like the mobile billboard transforms the infrastructures of public space (roads) into media for repelling people, but the goal of the hostile environment policy was also for it to be seen to be in operation. The government sought recognition to be 'doing something' about immigration, and the hostile environment policy served this role most conspicuously. In other words, the goal was both repulsion and being seen to be driving people away. The hostile environment policy speaks to the broader politics of repulsion and the ways that ambience and tone are weaponised to repel targeted populations. The intentional cultivation of a hostile environment (for some) creates a repulsive atmosphere for everyone.

In this chapter, I frequently turn to favourite objects of social and political analysis like the hostile environment policy, including the Camden bench, the Mosquito speaker, and the *Landscape of Thorns*. These are near

commonplaces that scholars, activists, and journalists often invoke as shorthand for the iconographic stories they tell about urban governance, the temporal politics of technology and waste, and anti-immigrant politics in the 21st century. I have paired these commonplaces with a set of less-analysed objects: a standalone television episode from the 1980s, a quack invention, a Microsoft patent, a pack of batteries, and cases of urban lighting tucked into the nooks of council housing and public toilets. By braiding these cases together, I document the mediatic work of repulsion across scales and registers of bodily adaptation and social life.

A final, methodological note on biography: I live in the United Kingdom and am daily encountered with the ways space is designed and managed to control behaviour. This country inherits the longstanding attitude towards the poor and the unruly that manifested in the ugly laws and continues to materialise in the hostile ambience propagated by its infrastructure. But I also grew up in Vancouver, a city often praised for its natural beauty and quality of life, that simultaneously punishes and ignores its poorest and neediest residents, including those who use IV drugs, lack permanent housing, or need social and mental welfare. Vancouver was one of the first places where blue lights appeared in public bathrooms. I vividly recall being a child and using a toilet at The Bread Garden in a cubicle bathed in the off-putting hue of a blue-lit bathroom. This project grows out of the unavoidably embodied nature of research and my own life, lived mostly in two cities that persistently adopt an aggressive attitude towards their residents. From this biography, my method has been to gather and connect both the most conspicuous cases of repulsion and the marginal, easily forgotten artefacts of ambient control.

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6

THE FRICTIONS OF CONCEPTS AND ACTUAL ACTIONS

Divide, escapism and roofless people's media use

Maren Hartmann

This chapter looks at rather specific audiences and reflects on their digital media uses: people who live on the streets in Berlin. When homelessness and media use were still an extremely marginal research topic in the early 2010s, some of these media uses were framed as escapism (e.g., Borchard, 2009). In fact, escapism was a term that popped up regularly within the few pieces that existed on the topic. As Muggleton and Ruthven outlined in 2012 (n.p.):

> In the context of social isolation, unpleasant living conditions and traumatic life events, both past and present, the ability to switch off and distract oneself can be a vital corollary of serving more basic needs for food, clothing and shelter.

And while the research field of homelessness and media use itself has since grown, escapism seems to have become less of a topic. In this chapter, I would like to bring back this concept (and its many ambivalent connotations) and potentially reclaim it. In fact, I would like to proclaim escapism as a survival mechanism in the context of homelessness, particularly in roofless lives (see also Hartmann, 2023: 284). In order to potentially revive the concept, however, I need to first explore some possible frictions in the concept itself as well as with the research material.

I decided to hone in on the question of 'escape' (and therefore also of 'escapism') in the process of analysing the material from a research project on digital media uses by people experiencing rooflessness in Berlin. In the 'European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion' (ETHOS), homelessness is described in four conceptual categories: people living in (a) inadequate or (b) insecure housing or who are (c) houseless or (d) roofless.

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