

# The Attraction of Repulsion

By Mike Trippitt

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TO MY SHAME I have not picked up a Charles Dickens' novel since childhood. Putting that right, I've recently begun reading *Our Mutual Friend*. If truth be told, I did not know it as a Dickens' work. It was his last completed novel, finished in 1865.

Like most of Dickens' work *Our Mutual Friend* is set against a background of a dark and often squalid nineteenth century London. Central characters Gaffer Hexam, Lizzie Hexam and Roger "Rogue" Riderhood all inhabit the filth and deprivation of the Victorian capital, whilst in contrast Mr and Mrs Veneering, Mortimer Lightwood and Eugene Wrayburn live among the wealth and splendour of the city. *Our Mutual Friend* explores both the attraction of "money, money, money, and what money can make of life", as one character says, and the repulsion of sinister penury.

Dickens is renowned, through his satire and social commentary, for his ability to both attract and repulse. But he was able to go further. He exploited his readers' desires to witness and explore that which is inherently unattractive; something that Dickens' biographer John Forster and celebrated London author Peter Ackroyd refer to as "The Attraction of Repulsion".

Few of us will readily admit to being attracted to the repulsive. After all, how many children admit to liking cabbage? And what is the point of Broccoli?

But Dickens was on to something here wasn't he? How often do we see motorists slowing down on one carriageway of a road to ensure they get a good view of the carnage that is a terrible accident on the other. Rubbernecking is a symptom of the same desire that leads us to watch shocking images of animal cruelty on social media, or to give our full attention to a news report prefaced with "Viewers might find some scenes upsetting". There is no doubt, shocking images; repulsive images have the power to attract. Consequently, news outlets, charities, activists and champions of a cause harness that attraction for their benefit.

During the last 12 months I've heard much criticism of television news coverage of coronavirus, Brexit, Black Lives Matter and more

recently about street violence against women. Some of our best journalists come in for criticism for their perceived negativity and rigorous questioning. I've heard more than one person say: "I don't watch the news anymore. It's all bad."

More than 125,000 deaths from COVID-19, the death of an unarmed black American at the hands of the police, and the death of, or violence towards, a woman at the hands of a man are truly shocking and abhorrent. Repulsive you might say. But whilst ever we turn our television news bulletins off, or turn away from our social media, we are turning our back on the repulsive and allowing it to thrive.

The more we, as a society, keep appalling events at the front of our consciousness, the more we expose ourselves to the evils that life and our fellow man inflict upon us, then the more likely we can take action as a force for good to bring change. We cannot improve our society by turning our back on the bad and sad news that is all around us. We need to hear it, see it and above all understand it. We need to keep our televisions and radios on. Long may we be attracted to the repulsive. We will be better for it.



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