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The morbid romance of the good job: News and the emotional social imaginary in late capitalism

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Abstract

The question of how to identify and secure ‘good’ jobs has long confounded researchers, politicians and workers alike, and seems only to have intensified post-2008 recession and with the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, late capitalism seems to be defined by a widening disconnect between the optimism of economic indicators and the grim reality of many people’s everyday working lives and livelihoods. Yet, hope that good jobs will guarantee a good future stubbornly persists, with profound consequences for public investments of all kinds. Research on the social imaginary has explored how common-sense ideas come to grip us through discourse. At the same time, research into the politics of emotion and affect has demonstrated how public feelings like hope might attach us to (and entrap us in) particular economic circuits and futures. However, scholars in these fields have not adequately addressed how emotion shapes the social imaginary in everyday discourse. Yet, understanding how emotion might form specific social imaginaries of ‘good jobs’, and attach publics to them, is vital to understanding how and why we keep deeply investing in economic systems that injure our wellbeing, equity and environment. Here, we address this gap by tracking feelings, figures and metaphors in a case study of news about jobs in a moment of crisis. We theorise what emerges as a ‘morbid romance’, a romantic, gendered, mythical ideal of good industrial jobs and good entrepreneurship that is always haunted by a morbid awareness of the threat of job loss, bad jobs and post-industrial death. Beyond our case study, as the pandemic produces profound shifts in working lives, we argue that the morbid romance of the good job can help us to understand the structure of feeling and social horizon of late capitalism.

Keywords

Austerity, discourse analysis, emotions, employment, news

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'Good' and 'bad' jobs have long gripped social, political and academic attention, and the widespread and protracted 'degradation of work' has only intensified post-2008 recession and through the global pandemic (Braverman, 1974; Kalleberg, 2021). 'Bad' work appears endemic to late capitalism – materialising as 'underemployment, unemployment, wagelessness, wage repression, in-work poverty, crises of livelihood, precariousness, and emptied-out futures' (Adkins, 2018: 1). Substantial research connects good work to good health; bad work or no work, in contrast, with poverty, illness and early death (Wadsworth et al., 2010: 9). Indeed, late capitalism seems to be defined by a widening disconnect between the optimism of economic indicators and the grim reality of many people's everyday working lives and livelihoods. Despite this unsettled status, good jobs often figure in public discourse as a tonic for past damage, as well as a charm for a good future. Hope that good jobs will guarantee a good future has profound consequences for public investments of all kinds, captivating immense political and economic resources (see, for example, the International Labour Organization's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, or the European Commission's 2019 commitment to 'create more and better jobs'; Adamson and Roper, 2019: 551). This persists even as critics point out that work might not solve social problems, but instead exacerbate and propel issues of widespread impoverishment and inequality (Adkins and Dever, 2014). Despite these contradictions, the political, social and emotional power of the 'good job' persists as an idea, a figure in the social imaginary, in ways that remain poorly understood.

In this article, we track emotion in everyday news discourse about jobs at a time of political and economic crisis and reckoning, in order to theorise an 'emotional social imaginary' under late capitalism (what we call the morbid romance of the good job), to help us understand how and why we keep deeply investing in economic systems that injure our wellbeing, equity and environment. In Wales, the site of our case study, deindustrialisation, rising levels of insecure, dead-end and low-paid work, along with unprecedented austerity-driven cuts, mean almost a quarter of all people and 40 percent of children, live in poverty (Barnard, 2018). Our material comes from a content analysis research project exploring narratives of poverty in which problems with work (job losses, low wages, immobility, precarity, zero-hours contracts and in-work poverty)¹ dominate every other poverty-related topic (Moore et al., 2018; Moore, 2020). These jobs stories, moreover, ring with feeling, figures of speech and of myth, and evocative metaphors, such that jobs emerge as a sore collective concern, and command public investment² in ways that seem both counterintuitive and poorly understood. To theorise these observations, we develop research on the social imaginary, or how common-sense ideas come into view and come to grip us through discourse, as well as how public feelings like hope might attach us to (and entrap us in) particular economic circuits and futures (Berlant, 2011).

We focus on a moment in 2016 when political reckoning over the future (an election and the EU Referendum) converged with mass redundancies in the steel industry and retail, with 12,000 jobs lost after the collapse of retailer BHS (British Home Stores) and 8000 jobs threatened by the Tata Steel crisis in Port Talbot, South Wales, the United Kingdom. But our focus could just as well have been 2021, when Brexit has confounded supply chains, and the collapse of Greensill Capital has again threatened thousands of jobs in UK steel. Furthermore, while embedded in a specific place, our case study offers

a useful example of emotional discourse about jobs that in fact resonates past Wales, across Europe and beyond (Adkins, 2018; Wacquant and Steinmetz, 2009). Indeed, populist election results from 2016 on have been linked to ‘a global pattern of response’ to the precarious conditions of late capitalist life, an attempt to find ‘protection’ from the worst effects of globalisation (Pettifor, 2017, cited in Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018: 767). Around the world, the ‘good job’ is an object of continued political fervour, especially as the COVID-19 pandemic shifts what work is considered secure and of value (Kalleberg, 2021).

So, while we focus on a specific, dramatic case study of how news discourse treats jobs, mass redundancy, and precarity, this refracts much broader critical and political questions about work and livelihoods under post-crisis capitalism, and the politics of emotion in public discourse. Our aim is not to delineate the emotional ‘reality’ of working life, but rather to demonstrate how discourses surrounding work are invested with emotions that shape both how ‘good jobs’ are understood and ‘the kinds of futures that are imagined in the new age of austerity’ (Berlant, 2011; Coleman, 2016: 83). We focus on how feelings of morbidity resonate in the coverage in fears surrounding ‘bad jobs’, mass redundancies and the legacies of damage already inflicted upon communities by industrial collapse. We contend, however, that it is in the articulation of such morbid feelings with romantic fantasies of renewal that meaning is really secured for the emotional social imaginary of the ‘morbid romance’. We argue that the narrative of the ‘good job’ moves as an important emotional social imaginary, which we term ‘morbid romance’, because of its gendered mythological allure and promise of a happy ending, yet one always already sedimented with the threat of fatalistic decline, a feeling that things (for ordinary people) do not end well. Our concern is critical as well as descriptive; taking discourse as both a source of normative political pressure and as shifting and contested, we explore how different stories about livelihoods open up and close down different, broader imaginations of the future.

Analysing moods of late crisis capitalism in news

By invoking ‘social imaginary’, we begin from a position where the social is understood as a discursive, open and inherently political realm, where identities and subject positions are unstable and conflictual, and where social order is never finally ‘fixed’ but secured partially, through hegemonic struggle (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). ‘Social imaginary’ plays a key role in the production of social order, as a mythical construction that has come to stand as the only possible social order (rather than as one possibility among alternatives; Smith, 1994: 174). Particular to time and place, a social imaginary, then, refers not to the expression of a specific political demand, but, as philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis (1987) notes, to ‘the organizing patterns that are the conditions for the representability of everything that the society can give to itself’ (p. 143, cited in Dobbernack, 2010: 151). Social imaginary is, in Laclauian terms, a ‘horizon . . . [that] structures a field of intelligibility’ (Laclau, 1990: 64), located between the impossibility of fixed meaning and the work of meaning-making.

So, while the ‘social imaginary’ serves as a ‘background’ to the action of social experience, it is also more than this. It functions as a vision of the social order that

symbolically (and continuously) organises the ideas that can be articulated as ‘common sense’ and the subject positions, demands and social relations that are understood as ‘legitimate’ (Laclau, 1990). As such, social imaginary has been understood as constitutive and socially powerful, ‘a project that agents are invested in, “gripped” by and derive pleasure from’ (Dobbernack, 2010). A social imaginary is the articulation of myth ‘inscribed’ with ‘a fullness’, which in ‘reality’, the existing social order is failing to deliver. As such, in situations of social and economic crisis, myths can be disruptive, offering ‘an alternative to the logical form of the dominant structural discourse’ (Laclau, 1990: 62), and challenging the existing social order, as ‘a space where demands can be articulated and related to forms of desirable social life’ (Dobbernack, 2010: 152). We suggest that local journalism – produced by and for the people of a specific imagined community – is a useful object of study to investigate social imaginaries because it tends to produce a ‘journalism of consensus’, or common sense, and to involve public feeling (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2005, 2018). Yet, while these references to ‘desire’ for and ‘pleasure’ in the social imaginary touch on emotion, debates to date have tended to focus on the ‘sense’ of common-sense ideas, the structure and logic of public discourse, while leaving the role of emotion something of a cypher.

We argue that the myths of a social imaginary in fact take much of their political and social force from how they cathect public feeling. Affect scholars have long argued that social and political life can only be understood by attending to emotion, especially how public feelings shape shared political attachments and futures (Ahmed, 2004, 2014; Berlant, 2011; Cvetkovich, 2012; Stewart, 2012; Wetherell, 2012; Williams, 1977). Understanding collective meaning-making requires theorising how, as Sara Ahmed (2014) argues, emotions circulate among people, and so ‘create the very surfaces and boundaries that allow all kinds of objects to be delineated’ (p. 10) and made meaningful. Furthermore, public emotions, or ‘structures of feeling’, as Raymond Williams (1977) puts it, have real effects; they ‘exert palpable pressures and set effective limits on experience and on action’ (p. 132). For these scholars, public emotions – such as pessimism, hope, anger and ‘smokestack nostalgia’ (Strangleman, 2014) – not only energise certain political plotlines, but animate collective attachments to particular objects, like jobs.

Bringing ‘emotion’ to join the social imaginary thus helps articulate how it might be that a discursive construction like the good job might ‘make us “do things”, move us, connect us to things, but which can also overwhelm us’ (Skeggs and Wood, 2012: 134). At the same time, the concept of the social imaginary helps to bridge the distance between the embodied or relational aspects of emotion and discourse, especially everyday discourse like the news (Wetherell, 2012). While research on the news has often ignored how emotional news discourses shape politics and public opinion (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018: 768), we argue that news offers one key discursive site where the ‘grip’ of the social imaginary can be meaningfully examined, located in the mythical narratives that sustain or challenge emotional investments in late capitalism.

Mapping patterns of emotion in coverage of problems with jobs in the news media in Wales in the spring and early summer of 2016, we identify romantic investments in ‘saving’ certain good jobs mixed with a morbid fatalism about the future. In attending to such contradictions, we develop the work of Berlant (2011: 3) on ‘cruel optimism’, her

description of the way we invest in the promise of something – such as diet culture, ‘meritocracy’ and the idea of ‘life as a project of adding up to something’ – even as that promise ‘frays’ and ‘dissolv[es]’, and even as going after or clinging to that promise might at the same time entrap and harm us (Coleman, 2016). For our argument here, tuning this theory, the morbid romance of the good job is a similar trap; a trap where morbidity is a haunting terror of (very real) social death, and romance an effort to mask that terror with a beloved object, the good job, which holds out hope for a happy ending, the good life.

In developing the morbid romance as a particular public feeling, we join a growing body of scholarship that examines how emotion laid down over generations erupts into political drama in the present in ways that are not well understood (Bright, 2016; Reay, 2005). In deindustrialised coal-mining communities in the North of England, N. Geoffrey Bright (2016: 143–144) has described an affective ‘social haunting’ of the past as an – often futile – fight, ‘a kind of “ghosted” affective atmosphere’ that erupts into moments of ‘vivid, carnivalesque resurgence’. These scholars argue that the past refracts the present as a powerful but still poorly registered signature of many post-industrial communities, the ‘affective sedimentation’ of generations of class oppression (Bright, 2016; Reay, 2005). Expanding on this scholarship, we draw attention to the ‘romantic’ elements of news narratives offering phantasmatic (harmonious or hopeful) futures within a dominant late capitalist imaginary. We are concerned primarily with what we identify as ‘morbid’ elements of news narratives, which signify social death as proximal to post-industrial working lives, and as a terrifying ‘morbid’ threat located in the absence of ‘good jobs’ through the failure to address the decline, collapse or necessity to recreate romantic narratives.

Method

Our case study covers a moment of crisis and public reckoning over the economy and the future; a sample of news in Wales from April to July 2016, a period of dramatic job crises in industry and retail, an election and a referendum. Our analysis focuses on the emotional and figurative discourse surrounding jobs in a sample ($n=300$) of evocative jobs stories drawn from our previous study of poverty news narratives ($n=1498$; Moore et al., 2018).³ We began by revisiting every story in the original corpus of poverty coverage ($n=1498$) to select stories which either (1) focused on one of three significant news events about job losses and insecurity; (2) addressed a job-related problem as the central, often headline focus of the story; or (3) profiled people who had been unemployed. We analysed this subset of 300 job-focused stories for themes in the metaphors and figurative language, such as ‘dying town’, ‘new dawn’, ‘rescue’ or ‘collapse’, and for references to emotions, such as uncertainty, hope or fear. From these, we distinguished the following three thematic narratives – the nostalgic romance of industrial work as good men’s work, the ‘morbidity’ of job loss and bad jobs, and the fatalistic romance of Knights of industry (and working women) as entrepreneurial heroes – and chose a subset of example stories on these themes. Contextualising each of these three thematic narratives in economic and cultural history of the location of our case study, Wales, we

suggest that it is through this specificity that it is possible to see how a myth – like the morbid romance of the good job – might in fact resonate and travel in other contexts.

We consider how this discourse operates across the following three thematic sections: first, a romantic love story of industrial communities with industrial jobs as a source of pride, collectivity, masculine heroism and life itself; second, the morbid haunting of feminised, post-industrial places by social death and the fatalistic awareness that the past will repeat itself; and third, the complicated, morbidly romantic promise of the billionaire Knights and mumpreneurs who promise rescue and hope, always already tinged with failure.

The morbid romance of the good job in late capitalism

Part 1: the romance of 'save our steel' and the gendered mythology of industrial work

The Port Talbot steel crisis unleashed powerful emotions rooted in industrial identity and history around 'our steel', community and working men's fellowship. In an emergency session of the Welsh Senedd called to rescue the steelworks, as reported in *The North West Daily Post* on 5 April, Carwyn Jones, then leader of the Labour Welsh Government, claimed, 'We are driven not just by sentiment'. Yet, sentiment – deep feelings of 'passion', 'fierce pride', 'fellowship', togetherness – surges through the steel crisis discourse. As Port Talbot-born actor and activist Michael Sheen emphasised in a June 2016 documentary for *BBC One*,

Walking around and meeting the people working in here you can tell there is a real sense of massive pride and a real sense of family. You get a real sense of camaraderie and the fierce pride in what they are doing.

Indeed, in one photograph, we see the vast walls of the warehouses emblazoned with tall blue lettering: 'The Pride and Passion of Welsh Steelmaking'. The feelings are 'real': the steelworks form the 'heart of the community', a 'North Star' around which the life of the town revolves, as Sheen explains. We theorise these passionate feelings as a romance: a gendered love story of a community with 'good' industrial jobs of the past and the present, jobs that make good men, good fellowship and thereby good lives.

The romance of heavy industry builds on more than 200 years of mining and manufacturing in Wales, a history that binds industry closely to Welsh national identity (Dicks, 2000, 2008). The 19th century in Wales saw coal, iron and steel production boom to fuel Britain's industrial and imperial expansion, and the dangerous labour of heavy industry, as well as the strife of brutal strikes and labour disputes, bonded localities together for survival. Generations of struggle forged a romantic myth of industrial community with powerful existential stakes (Dicks, 2000; Strangleman, 2014; Walkerdine, 2010). In this romantic myth, industrial community is not only the source of deep feelings – 'loyalty, friendship, sympathy, generosity, and solidarity' (Spence and Stephenson, 2009: 77) – but of collective life itself (Stroud and Fairbrother, 2012; Walkerdine and Jimenez, 2012: 279). One *WalesOnline* story, for example, praised a popular volunteer-run gym in

former mining and steeltown Ebbw Vale for its communitarian ethos, based in a building constructed in 1935 by deducting ‘one penny from [miners’] weekly salaries’. The steel is ‘ours’, a source of belonging. Closing the steelworks in Port Talbot would, as in other places, similarly forged by industrial expansion and collapse, ‘ruin’ these communities (Bright, 2016; Strangleman, 2014).

The romance of the steelworks in this news also appears as a gendered myth of ‘heroic potency’ (Munt, 2000: 10) around men in heavy industry and their families. In the news coverage, the ‘local boys’ – a mass of stoic steelworkers, almost entirely all men – protest side-by-side behind banners for the ‘Unite’ union. To ‘Save Our Steel’ is to save good men’s fellowship; as a plant worker named Stuart Jones put it, in a *WalesOnline* piece 11 July 2016, ‘It’s all local boys in there who go out. . . . It’s just a bond we got in there like – it’s part of the community’. Another headline from 8 April in *The Western Mail* reads, ‘Little girl’s impassioned plea to politicians to save her father’s job’. As the ‘little girl’, Neve McQuaide, age 9, explains, ‘if you don’t save the steel, I will be very, very, very sad and my family will be upset too’. It would also save the future itself; Neve worries that a future without the steelworks will be worse, a future where ‘there’s nothing here’ for her, a ‘little girl’. Her words ‘went a bit viral’, as her father put it, cathecting collective feelings of attachment and worry, and recruiting investments from government and financiers. This pattern of investment in response to precarity stretches across economies around the world, where native, white men have benefitted most from labour protections and ‘thus have experienced the biggest loss in privilege as these labour protections have been eroded’ (Kalleberg, 2021: 115).

In these stories of crisis, we trace a powerful romance – a collective love story reflected in the passion and pride in industrial jobs as beloved objects, in the community of past and present industrial towns, and in the heroic men who work in them. Yet, as we elaborate in the next section, in an emotional social imaginary of a post-industrial place scarred by struggle and facing austerity, these mythologised, beloved jobs are also always tinged with threat – threat of loss, of repeating past damage and of social death (Walkerdine and Jimenez, 2012). Bust has always followed booms of extraction here, such that Wales has the dubious honour of being both the first industrial nation and, in the South Wales valleys, the first site of post-industrial regeneration (Dicks, 2014: 959). The existential threat faced by Port Talbot is therefore troublingly familiar; endangered by a ‘remote Indian conglomerate’, ‘our steel’ in Wales threatened by ‘out there’, a globalised world where steel manufactured in China is ‘cheap’ and ‘shoddy’ stuff, ‘dumped’ into the ‘tip’ of European markets. To lose the steel jobs would break the heart of the ‘industrial heartland’. Theorising this familiar existential threat as morbidity, in the next section, we explore how the morbid lurks in and disturbs these romances to create the coupling of morbid romance.

Morbid moonscapes and charity shops

Morbidity is articulated with jobs in this news discourse, we argue, through metaphor. Metaphorical language in these stories connects jobs like those in the Port Talbot steelworks with pride and vitality, fellowship and family, hope and futurity. The loss of steelworks jobs, in contrast, would bring descent, decline, and literal morbidity. Job loss brings

‘ruin’, ‘decay’, ‘demise’. It stirs up collective ‘worries’, ‘uncertainty’, ‘fears and doubts’, and ‘anxiety’, a fear of collective death, and that there will be ‘nothing here’. Wales without these jobs, as a letter writer points out, would be an ‘industrial graveyard’. In broader coverage of jobs, businesses shut down, close down and collapse, in physical processes beyond any one actor: ‘Hundreds of jobs lost as the door shuts on BHS’, as *ITV* news put it on 2 June, or ‘warning that Welsh Steel industry could be “hoovered up” and closed down’, from *WalesOnline* on July 13. Instead of abstracted words like redundancy, jobs are ‘cut’ or ‘lost’, figuring unemployment as a visceral injury and a source of grief.

This threat to industrial communities is figured as a mood of social, emotional and even literal death. The potential morbidity of job loss ricochets through the coverage: a headline in the *Western Mail* on 6 April, for example, explains that Port Talbot churches were open to offer ‘aid, food and prayers’ and pastoral care to anxious steelworkers and their families, while another in *WalesOnline* on 21 April read, ‘People worried about job losses as a result of the steel crisis are urged by the Samaritans to seek help’. The psychic and social morbidity of mass redundancy is further articulated as a ‘grim’ and ‘heavy’ collective atmosphere, Michael Sheen described it in *WalesOnline* on 8 June: ‘with further government “austerity” cuts in the pipeline, the future of the steelworks hangs over [Port Talbot] heavy and threatening indeed’. Finally, job loss and deindustrialisation produce literal and embodied morbidity in this coverage; as *ITV Wales* news on 1 June noted, in the ‘unhealthiest part of UK . . . problems come from poverty or aftermath of heavy industry’, as people suffer worse physical and mental health, die younger, and are twice as likely to be living on disability or incapacity benefits in these places.

Furthermore, through references again and again to ‘decayed’ or ‘dying’ towns, job loss threatens to turn entire towns into feminised nothings. This is the ‘worse’ future steelworker’s daughter Neve imagines, a town of ‘nothing’ in which she has no future: ‘We have all charity shops and we need to make sure people have other jobs to go to. I wanted to grow up and live in Port Talbot but now I think there’s nothing here’. The spectre of ‘dying’ places Neve imagines appears repeatedly throughout the news coverage; the future, a letter to the editor laments, will be ‘a nation of tanning studios and charity shops’, with high streets, according to a different letter writer in the *South Wales Echo*, ‘sadly . . . now occupied by charity shops, fast food takeaways, betting shops, pound stores and so on’. Charity shops, in particular, signal the feminised post-industrial future as spaces where volunteers and low-waged workers – the vast majority of whom are women – sort, clean and sell other people’s cast offs, with clear associations with the home, the leaky, abject body and with death (Gregson and Crewe, 2003; Gregson et al., 2000; Tyler, 2013). While researchers argue for the social benefits of charity shops as sites of mutual care, creative remaking and community (Edwards and Gibson, 2017), they appear in the news discourse as a symptom of the abjection of a post-industrial economy.

Still other stories outline the injuries of feminised ‘bad jobs’. Scholars have long noted how deindustrialisation brings with it low-paid, feminised work in caring professions or ‘on the till’ in retail, warehouse centres or call centres (Dicks, 2008; Walkerdine and Jimenez, 2012), and local news stories reflect these concerns. The stories refract deep economic shifts that mean an uneven but ‘dramatic growth of insecurity’ (Kalleberg, 2021: 115). A *Western Mail* report on 4 May on school support workers, who are 28 times

more likely to be women than men (Ifan and Siôn, 2019: 43), describes high workloads, 'low pay, stress and a lack of opportunities' and widespread 'stress, anxiety or depression'. A second story in the *South Wales Argus* on 2 May reported on a sharp rise in complaints in 2015–2016 of discrimination and 'unfair treatment' at work for pregnant women and new mothers, including 'cuts in hours, being put on zero-hours contracts or even forced out of their job'. Still another story from the charity Gingerbread focused on the employment anxieties of single parents, 90 percent of whom are women, facing punishing new Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016 work requirements. Stories like these enumerate the emotional and embodied injuries of the kinds of 'bad jobs' that infiltrate post-industrial economies. Enfolding with other forms of morbidity, the emotional and bodily damage of these 'dying towns' and 'bad jobs' haunts attachments to the strong steel communities and 'good jobs' for good men which are their others.

The news offers a third subtle but powerful valence of the morbid too: past industrial collapses figure as 'uncanny' forewarnings, bringing a fatalism that the past will repeat itself. This is morbidity in the sense of morbid irony, that feeling of 'unhappy coincidence' when the past seems to foreshadow and foreclose the present. First, for example, April 2016 marked a heavy metal and arts festival, with videos of desolate industrial 'moonscapes', to remember steelmaking in Ebbw Vale. The artist who organised the festival commented, 'I'd rather this event wasn't given such stark relevance by the prospect of more steelworkers and their families facing an uncertain future, but the unbearable prospect faced by the Port Talbot community actually happened here in Ebbw Vale'. What is more, the news catalogues a litany of 'parallels' between past and present events: the miners' strikes and pit closures in the 1980s; cyclic mass redundancies and sell-offs at British Steel; and the abrupt closure in 2002 of two other large steelworks in South Wales, Allied Steel and Wire and Corus Plc. In fact, Corus plc in Ebbw Vale shuttered abruptly, despite protests, union, and government action, leaving more than 2000 people out of work, and leaving the town, according to *The Guardian* in 2017, one of the most impoverished places in Europe. In an April 7 *WalesOnline* feature, 'A former Cardiff steelworker . . . warned [Port Talbot] steelworkers faced a devastating blow' in the loss of and protracted fight for their pensions.

These references to feelings – 'unhappy', 'unbearable', 'devastating' – refract a morbid dread that Port Talbot's fate will repeat the past. In conceiving of this last aspect of morbidity, we develop the work of N. Geoffrey Bright (2016: 143–145), who describes a similar 'social haunting' by the past in former coal mining communities in the North of England. Bright identifies 'a kind of "ghosted" affective atmosphere' which resurfaces as 'fixated repetitions in a halted time where the industry and its culture were rapidly being "rubbed out" but, at the same time, were refusing to go'. Stories directly compared Port Talbot to former steeltown Ebbw Vale, where a redevelopment scheme to build a motor-sport racetrack, and thereby 'transform' the area with thousands of new jobs, suddenly folded after years of planning. From 'promise' and 'transformation', the project was 'now effectively dead in its current guise', as *WalesOnline* put it on 6 April, 'in ruin' according to *ITV*. The failure was 'keenly felt' locally, according to BBC Wales on 7 April, and a 'cruel' disappointment all the worse for its familiar aftertaste.

In yet another 'unhappy coincidence', as tycoons competed to buyout Tata's steelworks, the news tracked the abrupt collapse of retailer BHS. Concluding a subsequent

government enquiry into BHS ‘retail tycoon’ Sir Philip Green’s mismanagement, which cost 12,000 jobs and emptied the pension schemes of tens of thousands more, *WalesOnline* reported dryly, ‘Sir Philip Green says “sorry” to BHS staff, and tells MPs he will “sort” pension scheme’. These feminised retail jobs do not incite the same public political and economic investments as the steelworks; but there is still morbid irony in the bite of ‘sorry’, the shared sense of how little the lives of the workers involved will count, how this fight will likely end, and how people’s fates lie in the hands of those who appear to deal with them very casually or carelessly. The morbid dread of all of this public discourse proves warranted: a 1 April 2021 story in the *Daily Mail* reported Liberty Steel thrown into yet another crisis, hunting for ‘billions’ in funds, with thousands of jobs at stake.

Morbidity in the morbid romance, therefore, takes many forms. It appears in figurative language around job loss, injury, decline and death. It moves as a mood of ‘grim’ worry about the future. It links morbidity to people’s literal embodied experiences of impoverishment and indeed to entire deindustrialised places, ‘dying’ towns filled with nothing but poorly paid, damaging feminised ‘bad jobs’. And it appears as a haunting, morbid sense that the failures and damage of the past will repeat in the present. We argue that these multiple senses of morbidity, however ‘heavy’ and powerful they might be, in fact gain more political traction in their articulation with romantic discourses of heroic pasts and promising futures. Against this future of graveyards, where is the happy ending promised by the romance as a genre? Enter the billionaire knights, tech unicorns, and ‘mumpreneurs’.

Billionaire knights, tech unicorns and ‘mumpreneurs’

The coverage invests much of its romantic hopes for the ‘rescue’ of the steelmaking jobs and the future in entrepreneurship, and particularly the chivalric entrepreneurship of individual wealthy men. Over the course of the crisis, dozens of stories focus on the pasts, plans and evolving promises of wealthy businessmen, such as ‘steel tycoon’ Sanjeev Gupta, owner of Liberty Steel and potential buyer of Tata Steel. The BBC radio programme *Good Morning Wales* on 18 April reported the meeting of a ‘rich man’s club’ in Brussels to discuss the crisis in steel exports. Commentary features profiles of the likes of Sir Chris Evans and Sir Terry Matthews, Welsh ‘billionaire investors’, literal Knights of the Realm, sent in shining armour to ‘Save Our Steel’ and the nation. Even the prospective management buy-out group, meeting in secret at Sir Terry Matthews’s Celtic Manor resort, calls itself ‘Excalibur’. These ‘tycoons’ are the heroes of the steel crisis, as headlines promise these men will ‘rescue’, ‘save’, ‘secure’, ‘assure’ and ‘promise’ ongoing livelihoods. Investing private finance in public hope for a shared, liveable future, these chivalric billionaire heroes ‘create’ life, a ‘boost’, ‘fresh’ hopes, ‘regeneration’, ‘growth’, ‘transformation’ and a ‘new dawn’. Such speculative entrepreneurship carries the only hope of a happy ending: ‘Unicorns and dragons could yet spur the tech revolution in Wales’, as an opinion piece in *WalesOnline* put it on April 20, because ‘while the days of manufacturing – as the current steel crisis proves – are almost certainly over, so a unicorn [a tech unicorn, a business valued in the billions] can fill the gap’. From Knights and Excalibur to unicorns and dragons, then, the language of romantic myth reveals deep emotional investment in a fantastical entrepreneurial rescue from the problems of the present.

There is, however, another romantic, if much humbler, entrepreneur who appears in the coverage as a figure of rescue and promise, side by side with these billionaire knights; industrious women who have hustled from disability, near-homelessness or redundancy, to entrepreneurship, if at a much more modest scale. One such profile features ‘young entrepreneur’ 19-year-old Bethan White of Pontypool, surrounded by flowers in a brief 7 April story in the *South Wales Argus* about restarting a family florist business after a disabling accident because she could never be happy ‘on the sick’. Another features Helen Walbey, who started up a motorcycle scrap yard from her home when an infection threatened her partner and left them nearly homeless and in debt; she features her story to launch a report by the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) called *Women in Enterprise: the Untapped Potential*. A third profile in *WalesOnline* features Angela Beacham of Ebbw Vale, a ‘divorced single mum [who] now runs a successful business after losing her job and reaching “lowest point”’, wielding a trowel by the flowerbeds of a Welsh castle.

After being made redundant from the printing factory where she had worked for 34 years, Beacham ‘found her life “nose-diving” with no income and no idea how to pick herself up again’. Going to the local Jobcentre led to volunteering, volunteering led to a horticultural course, studying horticulture led to starting her own gardening business. She frames her story as a fairy tale renewal, a ‘blossoming and blooming’, and ‘the beginning of my new life, with a “new me” leading it’. The message is pedagogic, buoyant with advice, creating romantic stories of redemption and possibility out of women’s ‘untapped potential’. Yet, even as these stories celebrate all three women, they hint at the arduousness and precarity of such endeavours: debt, chronic pain, multiple jobs ‘to make ends meet’. While the mumpreneurs, for example, may have found work they ‘love’, as Lisa Adkins (2012) points out, their labour through loss, disability and risk exemplifies how unemployment has metamorphosed into a state of relentless and perilous ‘becoming’ (p. 637).

For all their obvious romance, then, the allure of both the billionaires and the mumpreneurs is tinged with morbidity; the morbid reality of the distance between the promised good life of the lucky few and the immobilised real lives of so many others. In the United Kingdom, as anywhere with a similar ‘landscape of extreme poverty and wealth’, as Jo Littler (2013: 55) theorises, ‘entrepreneurialism and celebrity rags-to-riches tales become highlighted, or rendered “luminous”’. Offering ‘luminous’ visions of possibility for liveable livelihoods in difficult times, the romance of these stories lies in the way ‘they become publicly visible opportunities to “escape” an otherwise entrenched position of social subordination’ (Littler, 2013: 55). The mumpreneur complicates the strict gendered contours of the narrative of the morbid romance, by offering an escape hatch; she signals that this late capitalist economy is not a closed system, where the post-industrial landscape is simply female and dead. The economy here in fact soldiers on, in its precarity. Historically, more exposed to precarity (Kalleberg, 2021: 115) women workers become examples of how to cope with a new normal of violent uncertainty. The mumpreneur matters because she holds open a possibility for reform – as a symbol of self-reliance par excellence, rising like a phoenix from within the wreckage of a rotting feminised landscape, she holds forth the potential for immanent rebirth through a spirit of go-getting innovation. Developing Angela McRobbie’s (2013) formulation, the

mumpreneur offers a 'luminous' ray of light and hope for transformation, and an escape route from social death. In her shadows are the emasculated steelmen in need of a Knight's entrepreneurial rescue.

Within these romantic narratives, gendered stories from the past are borrowed and appropriated – through nostalgia – as remnants of the past in the present, in order to serve and sustain the individualism and precarity intrinsic to late capitalism. Model mumpreneurs contrast with the teaching assistants, single mothers and invisible others 'on the sick'. Other, less savoury billionaire Knights shadow the luminous ones, such as slippery 'tycoon' Sir Philip Green. And even the brightest Knights of one moment, such as rescuer Gupta in 2016, tarnish over time; 5 years on, according to *The Guardian*, the collapse of Greensill Capital exposed billions in alleged corruption and money-laundering in the financing of Gupta's Liberty Steel, with the sudden possible loss of 3000 jobs. Yet, invested with longing and hope, shadowed by lived experiences of loss and death, nourished by myth, metaphor and public feeling, the morbid romance of the good job continues to attach and move us.

Conclusion/coda

The morbid romance of the good job we trace here is part of a broad, long, uneven process of 'deterioration' and 'degradation of work' across sectors and around the world over two generations, a trajectory that the COVID-19 pandemic has both complicated and exacerbated (Adamson and Roper, 2019: 553; Braverman, 1974; Kalleberg, 2021). Some people's jobs have been severed, lost or furloughed; some found their jobs newly lethal, but valorised and protected as essential; some jobs continued but in different settings, their demands often intensified; some old 'good' jobs seemed to vanish, obsolete overnight, while other jobs, like delivery drivers, proliferated; and throughout it all, the work of caring for others flared up, freshly visible and never done. At the same time, alternative modes of livelihood 'decoupled' from waged work, such as mutual aid or universal basic income, have flourished alongside uprising, protest and union organising (Bell, 2021; Kalleberg, 2021: 217).

While these activities have been accompanied by talk of a 'new normal', of reimagining futures that shift rather than repeat the problems of the past, we are reminded of the stickiness and slipperiness of late capitalism's power. As new millions have been thrown into precarity and poverty, and new jobs recovery schemes unfurled by governments, tens of new billionaires have also been minted, as fresh crises fold into entrenched patterns; as Lisa Adkins (2018) describes in her book *The Time of Money*, 'households whose debts outstrip the probabilities of repayment, wages that do not cover the costs of life, and work that does not pay are all at issue here' (p. 2). Thinking with morbid romances helps us to understand how and why attachment to the 'good job' as a rescue from both the everyday grind and acute crises of work persists, and continues to drag in emotional, political and economic investments and resources of all kinds. While we trace one iteration of a national narrative, the morbid romance of the good job can help unpick other global stories. The work to reimagine work, then, might involve tuning into the emotional social imaginaries that structure how publics envision the future.

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Notes

1. Unemployment and job insecurity appeared in nearly half of all stories (47.3%, n=708), low wages (12.4%, n=186) or underemployment (7.1%, n=107). Therefore, work-related issues dominated (66.8%, n=1001). No other issue came close; for contrast, ‘social welfare and funding cuts’ and ‘poor economy/infrastructure’, appeared in only 24.3 percent (n=364) and (20.6%, n=308) of stories.
2. The Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2016 has subsequently put ‘decent work’ as a priority as part of a commitment to make Wales ‘more prosperous, resilient and equal’; 2017 saw the Welsh Government launch the Fair Work Commission.
3. ‘Exploring the News Media Narrative on Poverty in Wales’ aimed to demonstrate how poverty is represented in the news media in Wales through a content analysis of online, print and broadcast (English and Welsh language) news and to explore how and why poverty coverage is produced in the way that it is through a production study. Eight weeks of coverage from 4th April to 15th July 2016 (40 days in total) were monitored for all news explicitly relating to poverty, economic inequality, disadvantage or marginalisation, coding 1498 articles in total (Moore et al., 2018).

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