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Design in a Post-Coal Wales; Class, Memory and Identity

The industrial legacy of the Welsh Valleys, particularly the Rhondda, has left a profound cultural, economic, and psychological impact. Following the decline of coal mining in the late 20th century, communities have grappled with issues of identity, memory, and regeneration. This exhibition, curates five artefacts across performance, graphic design, public art, branding, and textiles to explore how creative practices have responded to and preserved the social and cultural fabric of post-coal Wales.

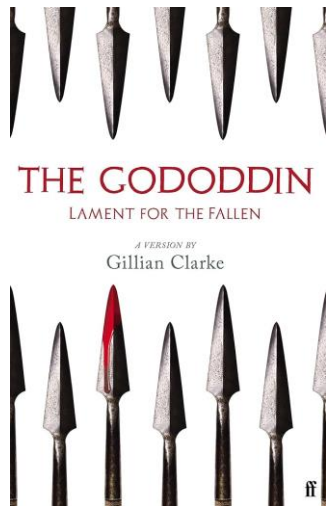


The exhibition is situated at the Rhondda Heritage Park, a site rich with historical resonance as a former colliery and now a museum of mining life. This location embodies Pierre Nora's (1989) notion of *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory), where collective remembrance anchors itself to physical spaces as industrial and cultural landscapes undergo transformation.

Through the lens of Marxist theory (Marx, 1867; Eagleton, 2011), cultural memory studies (Assmann, 2011), and theories of place and identity (Massey, 2005), the exhibition critiques and contextualises each artefact as a response to deindustrialisation and the fragmentation of working-class life. As Assmann (2011, p. 37) notes, "the past is not preserved as such, but is cast in forms that make sense in the present," a process clearly visible in how art and design reframe the Welsh mining past for contemporary audiences.

One of the most compelling responses to Welsh post-industrial identity is *The Gododdin* (1988), a site-specific performance by experimental theatre company Brith Gof. Performed in disused industrial spaces such as old factories and warehouses, *The Gododdin* reimagined an ancient Welsh poem about doomed warriors, linking it directly

to the narratives of economic defeat and social disintegration faced by former mining communities during the 1980s (Wallis, 1993). In using abandoned post-industrial sites as performance spaces, Brith Gof physically embedded memory within the decaying structures of Wales's lost industries, embodying Nora's (1989) theory of *lieux de mémoire*.



The production's violent, chaotic choreography and use of everyday objects (rusty metal, coal dust, broken machinery) positioned it within Marxist critiques of cultural production, highlighting the alienation of the working class (Marx, 1867). By staging collapse both thematically and physically, the performance interrogated what Terry Eagleton (2011) describes as the "cultural trauma of redundancy," wherein communities are severed from the means of their previous economic and social structures.

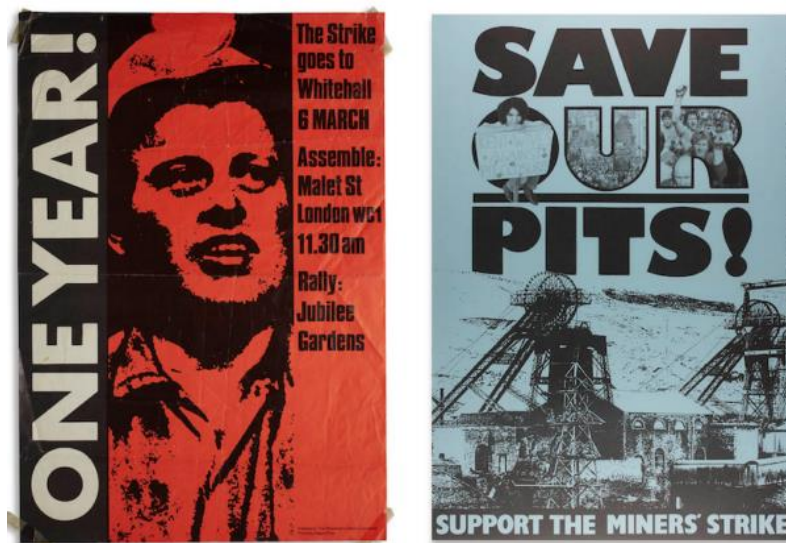
Brith Gof's strategy of combining history, performance, and political commentary aligns with Walter Benjamin's (1940) concept of "brushing history against the grain," forcing audiences to confront uncomfortable narratives often sanitized by official memory. This critical approach suggests that the past is not merely inherited but must be actively reinterpreted in light of current crises — in this case, Thatcherite economic policies and their devastating impact on mining communities (Smith, 1999).

Graphic design played a pivotal role during the 1984–1985 Miners' Strike, producing some of the most iconic visual artefacts of working-class resistance. Solidarity posters created by collectives such as the Poster-Film Collective and See Red Women's Workshop not only communicated urgent political messages but also visually codified class struggle through design. These artefacts demonstrate what Roland Barthes (1972)

calls the "mythologies" of everyday life, embedding ideological meaning into visual symbols.

The posters often featured bold sans-serif typography, clenched fists, and direct slogans like "Coal Not Dole," using visual economy to create mass resonance. Their minimalistic design speaks to semiotic efficiency: they became instantly recognisable emblems of solidarity, crossing regional and even national boundaries (Griffiths, 2021). Through Barthesian analysis, the posters can be read as "anchoring" the working-class struggle in powerful, simplified imagery that resisted the complexity of media narratives which demonised strikers (Barthes, 1972).

Furthermore, the participatory nature of poster production challenged traditional hierarchies of art and design. As Angela McRobbie (1984) argues, feminist and grassroots design practices in the 1980s blurred the line between art as 'high culture' and political tool, prioritising accessibility and collective authorship. In this sense, solidarity posters operated within what Jacques Rancière (2004) terms the "distribution of the sensible" — a reconfiguration of who is visible, heard, and counted in the public sphere.



The *Pontypridd Community Mural*, created in 1979 by artist David Petersen alongside local volunteers, is a landmark in participatory public art in South Wales. Painted onto a building in the town centre, the mural vividly portrays industrial life: miners descending into the pit, families gathered on doorsteps, and banners of solidarity. This work exemplifies Doreen Massey's (1994) concept of "space as the product of interrelations," a socially constructed landscape embedded with layers of labour, memory, and community experience.

The act of collective creation was as significant as the finished mural itself. As Miwon Kwon (2002) suggests, community-based art practices in the late 20th century challenged the "autonomy of the art object" by privileging social process over isolated aesthetic value. Here, the mural became not only an artwork but also a form of place-making and resistance, affirming local identity at a time when traditional industries — and the social structures surrounding them — were under existential threat.

The mural's visual language, employing bold figurative scenes and vivid local references, also resists the alienation often associated with modernist abstraction. It can be read through Henri Lefebvre's (1991) theory of the "right to the city" — asserting working-class people's right to visual and spatial representation within their own urban environments.

Including the *Pontypridd Community Mural* in *Design After the Dust* highlights the transformative potential of collaborative, site-specific art. It foregrounds how memory and identity are preserved not just through elite institutions but through grassroots cultural production that is embedded in the fabric of everyday life.

Artefact 4 -

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Valleys Re:Made is a contemporary branding initiative that supports sustainability, local making, and post-industrial resilience in the South Wales Valleys. Designed by

Studio Tri (2020), the project utilises clean typographic treatments, organic colour palettes, and narrative-driven photography to reframe traditional perceptions of the region. Rather than focusing on industrial decline, the branding celebrates craftsmanship, community, and renewal, aligning with theorist Stuart Hall's (1997) ideas of identity as "a production, always in process."

This project embodies what Guy Julier (2008) terms "design activism," where graphic communication is mobilised not only for commerce but to foster social change. By crafting a visual identity that situates the Valleys within a future-oriented, ecological, and creative context, *Valleys Re:Made* challenges outdated stereotypes of the region as desolate or economically stagnant. It positions design as a vital force in reconstructing regional pride and economic participation.

Moreover, the project's conscious use of place-based branding fits within Malcolm Miles's (1997) concept of "art for social purpose." Rather than aestheticising poverty or romanticising decline, the branding strategy articulates a pragmatic optimism, using visual communication to encourage collective reimagining. It acknowledges the Valleys' industrial past without allowing it to wholly define the community's present or future.

Eleri Mills' textile series *Coal Seams* (2015) offers a quiet yet powerful meditation on the enduring connection between land, labour, and memory in post-industrial Wales. Using hand-stitched techniques and natural fibres, Mills abstracts the physical landscape of former coalfields, weaving patterns that echo both the geological strata beneath the surface and the social histories embedded within them. Her work exemplifies what Tim Ingold (2007) describes as "textility" — the interwoven relationship between material, maker, and environment.

In contrast to the overtly political tone of earlier artefacts, *Coal Seams* operates through subtlety, using fabric and thread — traditionally associated with women's labour — to explore themes of extraction, loss, and resilience. This approach aligns with feminist critiques of labour history, which often highlight how narratives of industrial decline can marginalise domestic and creative practices (Parker, 1984). Mills' work reclaims textile-making as an act of cultural remembrance, where stitching becomes both a physical and metaphorical process of mending fractured histories.

From a cultural memory perspective, Mills' tactile abstraction of the landscape evokes Pierre Nora's (1989) notion of "sites of memory," transforming cloth into a space where personal and collective histories converge. The repetitive, meditative process of stitching mirrors the cyclical nature of mining labour while simultaneously offering a softer, more reflective lens on industrial heritage.

Design in Post-Coal Wales brings together five artefacts that each, in different ways, explore how design, memory, and labour intersect in the post-industrial context of Wales. From the political immediacy of the Miners' Strike posters to the intimate materiality of Eleri Mills' *Coal Seams*, the selected works demonstrate the vital role that visual and material culture plays in constructing and preserving cultural memory.

Applying critical frameworks such as Barthes' semiotics (1972), Massey's spatial theory (1994), and Hall's theories of identity production (1997) has revealed how artefacts not only reflect social histories but also actively shape them. The artefacts curated within this exhibition show a movement from collective resistance towards contemporary reimaginings of place and identity, tracing the evolution of post-coal Wales from loss to regeneration.

Moreover, through the lens of thinkers like Kwon (2002) and Julier (2008), it is clear that design and art in this context resist traditional hierarchies of culture, instead positioning grassroots practices as central to both political action and community resilience. Artefacts such as the *Pontypridd Community Mural* and *Valleys Re:Made* branding project illustrate how design can function not merely as aesthetic embellishment but as an agent of social and economic empowerment.

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