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To cite this article: Triona Fitton (10 Jun 2025): Thanaleisure and the super-rich: the case of the *Titan* submersible disaster, Consumption Markets & Culture, DOI: [10.1080/10253866.2025.2515149](https://doi.org/10.1080/10253866.2025.2515149)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10253866.2025.2515149>



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Published online: 10 Jun 2025.



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Thanaleisure and the super-rich: the case of the *Titan* submersible disaster

Triona Fitton

School of Social Sciences, University of Kent, Canterbury, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

This commentary reflects on the Titan submersible disaster as a case study of the thanatic leisure habits of the super-rich. Previous analyses of elite consumption have explored their tendency to seek out exclusivity and luxury, and to monopolise space (Thurlow and Jaworski 2012; Featherstone 2014; Atkinson 2021). Drawing on literature from the fields of thanatourism and dark leisure, the commentary theorises how deep sea submersible tourism offers adjacency to death and suffering as a means to pursue mythical masculine desires, confront artificial frontiers and hardships, and assert status. It concludes with a discussion of how the wastefulness, pollution and redemption struggles that characterise what is here defined as *thanaleisure* add to our understanding of thanacapitalism (Korstanje 2016). That is, as an economic system that not only commodifies death and suffering, but justifies its own existence through promoting the hypermobility of the few at the expense of the majority.

ARTICLE HISTORY



Received 9 November 2023
Accepted 30 May 2025

KEYWORDS

Super-rich; Titan submersible; Titanic; dark leisure; thanaleisure; thanacapitalism

Introduction

Disasters and consumer behaviour seem on the face of it to have a rather uncomfortable relationship with one another. The unexpected and “unintended consequences of purposive human action” (Matthewman 2012, 195) that constitute a disaster provoke moral aversion when associated with the desire to consume and the pursuit of profit (Heller 2016, 4). Yet the symbiosis of these two cultural phenomena can tell us a great deal about power, capitalist markets, and the paradoxical pursuit of consumer pleasure found in the experience of suffering, death and destruction. In terms of tourism and leisure activities, which are traditionally focused upon the consumption of “pleasant diversions in pleasant places” (Strange and Kempa 2003, 387), this pattern of consumption has received extensive academic interest in the field of dark tourism (Foley and Lennon 1996). This commentary considers a specific case of such tourism that enables extrapolation to the wider cultural consumption and leisure habits of the global super-rich. I examine the 2023 Titan submersible disaster which occurred en route to the most famous shipwreck in the world, R.M.S. *Titanic*, and consider how and why distant spaces of death and suffering become an object of fascination for the super-rich. I discuss how these excursions are a distinct form of thanatic leisure, a costly and voluntarily dangerous past time that elaborates upon the prior work on thanatourism and dark leisure discussed below. The constituents of “thanaleisure” – seductive myths, artificial frontiers, manufactured discomfort,

CONTACT Triona Fitton  T.Fitton@kent.ac.uk  School of Social Sciences, University of Kent, Canterbury, Kent CT2 7NZ, United Kingdom

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wastefulness, pollution and exclusivity – feed into thanacapistal ideals of suffering and redemption that maintain and justify privilege for a select few with our current economic system. The commentary closes with some tentative conclusions about thanaleisure as a necessary form of super-rich consumption in late era capitalism.

The *Titan* disaster

The *Titan* was a deep-sea submersible, designed and operated by research and excursion company OceanGate. It was constructed with the primary purpose of exploring the wreck of the ill-fated British ocean liner *Titanic*, which lies on the seabed of the North Atlantic approximately 12,500 feet below the surface. On June 18th, 2023, the *Titan* set off on an expedition carrying five passengers and crew to view the wreck site, in what was to be the last of many the submersible had undertaken since 2010. One hour and forty-five minutes after the submersible left the surface, OceanGate lost all communication with those on board.

After authorities were alerted, the potential disaster story of the *Titan* rapidly captured public attention around the world. It spawned multiple social media hashtags, YouTube videos, and even a dedicated “submarine Tok” on video-sharing platform TikTok. Morbid countdowns commenced to when the submersible’s passengers would likely run out of oxygen (Lane 2023). Following a high-profile search and rescue operation, the five on board were found to have perished, confirmed by the observation of wreckage from the submersible on the ocean floor not far from the *Titanic* wreck site on June 22nd. The craft had imploded under the extreme oceanic pressure, most likely on June 18th at the time when contact with the craft had been lost.

Even when the loss of human life is relatively limited, disasters have important social and political effects (Guggenheim 2014). As with all catastrophic events, the first question asked about the *Titan* was “How did this happen?” The reason for the implosion was speculated to be due to flaws in the submersible’s experimental carbon fibre outer shell, concerns about which had been raised previously by an OceanGate director who was subsequently fired from his job (Rondeau 2023). But the question of “how?” is not just about understanding the practical errors and oversights of the company, or even the contemporary societal preoccupation with advanced technologies that enable such exploration. For this commentary, it is about how these events emerge as cultural phenomena, and the consumer markets that can both prompt them and profit from them. Thus, this commentary is not so preoccupied with the *Titan*’s demise as a disaster in and of itself, but the cultural meanings behind its intended journey.

Along with questioning how the disaster came about, much of the media reporting at the time also revolved around “who?” More precisely, who would take such a high risk and high cost excursion to the treacherous ocean bed? The *Titan* was carrying two billionaire businessmen: Hamish Harding, owner of an aviation empire from Great Britain, and Shahzada Dawood, a British-Pakistani fertiliser magnate, along with Dawood’s son Suleman, OceanGate CEO Richard Stockton Rush III, and pilot Paul-Henri Nargeolet. Tickets for their *Titanic* excursion had cost \$250,000 each. Similarly to *Titanic*, this trip held attraction for a particular kind of elite clientele. The status of the ticketholders became a significant focus of public ire when the extent of expenditure on the rescue and recovery mission became apparent. Debates proliferated on social media platforms about why a submersible containing five rich people was considered more newsworthy (and worthy of state-funded rescue) than a boat of migrants that capsized off the coast of Greece five days prior, ending the lives of over 500 people (Gopal 2023). The mediated demise of these elite adventurers at a point in time when global inequalities are at their starkest in decades captured public consciousness, because it made little sense – why would those who have so much would risk it all to see the broken carcass of a long lost ship? The “why?” in terms of their personal motivations can only be speculated about. However, the touristic habits and proclivities of the super-rich provide insight for a theoretical discussion of the desire for high-stakes leisure activities that hold a symbolic and actual proximity to death. Thus, we must consider the appeal

of the Titanic wreck through the lens of the myth that has developed around it, and how this corresponds with the monopolising of unexplored locales by the super-rich. It is a myth that is underpinned by a masculine preoccupation with capitalist progress; and an insatiable desire to dominate over (Mother) nature.

Are you ready to go back to Titanic? Myth, masculinity and manufactured hardships

The wreck of Titanic was discovered by the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, who captured its decaying structure on video in 1985 (Yang 2023). Subsequently, the wreck was famously immortalised in footage in James Cameron's film *Titanic* (1997). Cameron himself filmed the footage in his own submersible, cementing the reputation of the site as a magnet for multimillionaires and magnates. Thanks to the discovery of its final resting place, and the blockbuster movie, Titanic became a (literal) floating signifier: a concept almost entirely detached from the real thing to which it refers (Laclau 2005; Levi-Strauss 2013). Titanic's reality as crumbling, unstable wreckage was upstaged by Cameron's vision of a dream-like spectacle of pre-WWI extravagance, technological progress and fallible masculine hubris, viewed through a lens of a Hollywood trope – a heteronormative love story that cut across class, status and material conditions. Along with a host of other metaphors (Brown 2012, 365; Gregson 2008), Titanic can be seen in its eponymous film as a seductive object of desire, symbolic of missed opportunities and desperate longing, for men in particular. The ship's perfect proportions and majesty were described lasciviously at the time of her launch, deeming her to be the ideal "mechanical bride" (Larabee 1990). To this day, Titanic's wreck is "saturated with the romantic lust that typically accompanies heroic exploration" (Rushing and Frentz 2000, 17), a fact made evident by James Cameron's own infatuation with the ship's history and gravesite (Rampton 2005). This compulsion was even personified in Cameron's film, in the character of Titanic treasure-hunter Brock Lovett (played by Bill Paxton), who wistfully laments how for "three years, I've thought of nothing except Titanic" (*Titanic*, 1997, 3:02:52). The tendency to fawn over the mediated crumbling remnants of the ship holds similarities to the appeal of "ruin porn" (Kindynis 2019, 387). This is the problematic practise of urban exploration photography providing superficial aesthetic pleasures for the observer, coupled with a deliberate avoidance of the socio-political context through which the ruin came about. Titanic is still considered a beauty, drawing the attention of historians, oceanographers and maritime fanatics from around the world even 113 years after her demise.

The masculine fixation with reclaiming Titanic from its fate followed through to the Titan's ill-fated explorers. Whilst Titanic's wreck represents a failure of male-coded nautical prowess when faced with the awesome force of mother nature (McGee 1999), the promise of "going back to Titanic" in the Titan offered an opportunity to succeed where one's historical counterparts did not (Laing and Crouch 2011, 1526). The natural world is symbolically maternal and feminine: quietly reproducing, delicate and vulnerable to human desecration, whilst wielding the ultimate power over all creation. To conquer that is to conquer what no man has yet to conquer: nature's female autonomy. Submersible excursions to Titanic reflect virtues of normative masculinity: persistence, courage, quiet strength, adventurousness, independence, honour, imperturbability under duress, and ultimately, sexual virility (Mosse 1998). For over 100 years, Titanic has been within the purview of the ocean; humans have had little to no control over it. A return to Titanic therefore offers transcendence, a chance to rise above the supremacy of nature, "to lift [one] to a higher plane" (Arnould, Price, and Tierney 1998, 100) through a quasi-religious experience of "going beyond" the barriers it presents. This plays into a courtship fantasy where the demonstration of stoicism and persistence in the face of adversity will enable men to "triumph" and reaffirm their autonomy. Through the performance of male struggle, there is an opportunity to re-masculinise Titanic. This is a vessel that has long been feminine-coded: At the time of its launch, for being little more than a luxurious "steam-driven floating hotel" (Stanley 2000, 235),

and subsequently, by the weaknesses exposed during its “maiden” voyage, and its submission to and ultimate reclamation by nature.

The Titan’s passengers, James Cameron, and other deep sea exploration enthusiasts do not just have gender in common – they also all possess the means to access the technology that facilitates such an expensive pastime. Submersible tourism shares a commonality with other types of conspicuous leisure (Veblen 1994) in that it is too expensive a hobby for all but the ultrawealthy. Only an estimated 250 people have taken the journey to Titanic since 1985 (Gordon et al. 2023). It has been argued that those with excessive wealth struggle to relate to the human need to strive towards something (Ehrenreich 1989, 15) because all their basic needs are met. This can result in the invention of elaborate vanity projects, the pursuit of excessively difficult or complicated goals, and other “manufactured hardships” must be overcome (Rosen 2007). So for the super-rich, encountering the enigmatic myth of the Titanic; the “ship of dreams” that has floated free from its watery reality (Brown 2014; Brown, McDonagh, and Shultz 2013) offers the ultimate artificial frontier, prime for a new class of elites to surmount.

The ocean floor is just one of many geographical spaces that elite tourists have monopolised. In the nineteenth century, members of the gentry took up mountaineering in pursuit of new forms of symbolic capital to assert their superiority (Simon 2004). Early gentleman climbers sought to conquer peaks such as Mount Everest for the sake of “play,” or “aesthetic pleasure” (Mazzolini 2010, 6) rather than for any practical purpose. Today, the super-rich have ever more expensive technological advancements (for example, space rockets) at their disposal to distinguish their status in extravagant but evermore scientifically and politically useless ways. Tickets for these exclusive journeys feed in to a “sign economy of leisure” (Veblen 1994; Rojek 1997, 384) which dictates the activities and habits deemed to hold value in society. For Titanic excursions, the tickets were sometimes marketed using wry, nose-tapping referential gimmicks to imply status: for example, London-based company Blue Marble charged \$105,129 for the trip, which they claimed was the value of a first-class Titanic ticket in today’s money (Yang 2023). Perhaps this offered subliminal reassurance of survival for these first-class ticket holders, should anything go awry. Nevertheless, no steerage option for travel to the Titanic wreck has as yet been made available; the exclusivity of the excursions is assured.

The super-rich epitomise the modern tourist described by Bauman, for whom “space has lost its constraining quality and is easily traversed” (1998, 88). Indeed, spatial constraints as a rule do not impact upon this group: There is extensive literature on how they occupy and dominate urban space, establishing power through, for example, their extensive ownership of real estate (see Fernandez, Hofman, and Aalbers 2016; Webber and Burrows 2016; R. Atkinson 2021; Burrows and Knowles 2019; Burrows, Webber, and Atkinson 2017). This research has emphasised the group’s “new cosmopolitanism” (Bauman 2001) and the global mobility their wealth facilitates. There has long been a tendency for the super-rich to “go beyond” boundaries, and cultural consumption of distant, unexplored places has long been the purview of the white Western upper classes, if we consider the early explorers of history. These colonial expeditioners were regarded as courageous, inquisitive, and adventurous, notwithstanding the fact the places they discovered were often already inhabited and “known” (Gopal 2023). As more space is conquered and colonised, we have collectively become desensitised to exploratory feats. Spaces of “undisturbed natural beauty” are now few and far between, making them ever more desirable to the romantic tourist gaze (Mishan 1969, quoted in Urry 1995, 134). The wreck of Titanic, eerie and decaying but still displaying remnants of Edwardian maritime glory, arguably falls into this category by virtue of its remoteness and inaccessibility. For most untouched spaces, their appeal wanes as they become commercialised and subject to the environmental or cultural degradation of mass tourism (Urry 1992). The advent of air travel, the internet, social media and viral video sharing mean that the world’s most distant and extreme locales can now be known of, viewed, fantasised about and longed for at the click of a button. They are already consumed and enjoyed in their illusory and idealised form (Campbell 1989) – for example, anyone can experience the majesty of

the Titanic wreck site via crystal-clear video footage on YouTube for free. But still only a select few can access the real thing.

The illusory hedonistic consumption of Titanic can be observed in its evolution from a maritime relic into a mass marketable commodity and brand with immense retail value. By the time the eponymous blockbuster film came out in the 1990s, the Titanic myth had cemented its divorce from reality (Brown, McDonagh, and Shultz 2013), drawing many people to seek out Titanic-adjacent leisure experiences purely for entertainment. Immersive museums and exhibitions appeared across the United States, United Kingdom, and Ireland, in locations with nostalgic links to the original ship's journey. Some of the more mediated and stylised interpretations of the sinking were regarded as "softening" the harsh reality of the incident (Neville 2015), in particular, disguising the class inequalities on board that resulted in a large number of working class fatalities. Much of the Titanic nostalgia industry is targeted towards the masses and is designed to appeal to popular tastes: cheap consumables like the LEGO Titanic, or contrived re-enactments of the time period to commemorate the centenary of the sinking (Neville 2015). According to Stone's (2006) typology of dark tourism sites, Titanic-branded museums and centenary celebrations fall into the "lightest" form of the genre, where visitors attend a site *associated with* death or suffering, as opposed to a site *of* death and suffering itself. The latter category suggests something darker. The Titanic shipwreck, the site that the Titan sought to physically visit, is one such site *of*. The ability to now reach and explore the wreck offered an opportunity to go one step further than the popular, mass tourism sites that tell the story of the sinking. Submersible tourism to the Titanic allows passengers to confront the myth first hand, and gaze upon the relic of a ship where many lost their lives.

Titanic thanaleisure: death, suffering and moral redemption

Locations that have seen mass death or suffering (such as Pompeii, the Killing Fields of Cambodia, Auschwitz or Pripyat) often make for popular tourist sites, offering visitors an opportunity to confront grief and mortality, perhaps a means to understand the human condition, or to learn lessons from history. People can find pleasure in imaging their proximity to the dead, and this plays an important role in the formation of collective cultural memory and identities (Rojek 1997). While the more commonly-understood concept of dark tourism (Dermody 2017; Foley and Lennon 1996; Miles 2002; Stone 2006) encompasses a range of more mundane forms of heritage tourism (as well as jovial macabre experiences such as the London Dungeon), the narrower concept of thanatic tourism, or thanatourism (Seaton 1996, 1999, 2009a, 2009b), is most appropriate for Titanic wreck site excursions. It refers to the drive or motivation to travel to a location to – either actively or symbolically – engage *directly* with those who have died in an often violent fashion (Seaton 1996, 240). The term takes its name from the Greek mythological character Thanatos, who would transport people to the underworld at the end of their life. Its modern understanding can be traced back to the William Cullen Bryant poem *Thanatopsis* (1817) which describes the sense of nostalgia for life one feels when looking through the eyes of the dead (Korstanje 2016, 8). This kind of tourism is premised around how tragedies of the past can be, in some sense, physically experienced or endured by those in the present (James, Cronin, and Patterson 2024, 2). Such tourism experiences are arguably more real, tangible, raw and sensory. A trip on the Titan, for example, provided a chance to dispel the monolithic hyperreality created by the various museum-curated and media-saturated portrayals of Titanic's sinking. The sensory experience of thanatourism is not limited to observing, but to also feeling, participating, sometimes even touching, and therefore can extend to unpleasant sensations for the tourist, such as repulsion or fear.

Excursions to deep sea wreck sites stand apart from visits to other sites of death because deep sea exploration has potential unknown risks for the participant. Compared to a leisurely trapeze around a graveyard or a museum, submersible thanatourism has more in common with "risky," "extreme" or "dark" leisure forms (Fenwick and Hayward 2000; Kindynis 2019; Kindynis and Hayward 2013; Rojek 2000). This is when individuals pursue increasingly dangerous, impulsive and/or deviant

activities in the search for excitement and novelty, at any cost (Bauman 1997; Campbell 1989). An example might be engaging in petty crimes, drug taking or dangerous sports. It encompasses activities that are regarded as transgressive, deviant, liminal, taboo (Light 2017, 278) and “wild” (Rojek 2000, 206). There is substantial conceptual crossover between thanatourism and dark leisure, particularly when it comes to collective constructions of morality and how this shapes and inhibits certain consumer choices. For example, participation in thanatourism is often regarded as “sick” or “deviant” (Johnston 2015; Stone and Sharpley 2014) and frowned upon. Yet, engaging in transgressive and deviant pursuits solely for the thrill is also something that consumer markets actively encourage (Fenwick and Hayward 2000, 39–40). High-risk activities (such as sky diving or glacier skiing) are more often undertaken within more affluent societies, by society’s more affluent members (Fletcher 2008). Thus the kind of thanatourism that also incorporates danger and hardship in congruity with visiting a site of death, as with the Titan’s excursion, can be bracketed off from popular mass thanatourism, and characterised instead as elite *thanaleisure*.

Technological advancements have enabled excursions that were hitherto impossible – to space and the ocean’s depths for example, with the caveat that the relative infancy of these operations can mean substantial risk to life is involved. As shown in studies of voluntary risk-taking and “edge-work” (Lupton 2013; Lyng 1990), deliberately placing oneself in danger can be pleasurable, and thanaleisure excursions can offer *actual* proximity to death through the potential threat to one’s own life. Submersible trips like those operated by OceanGate involve signing legal waivers that repeatedly cite a very real danger of severe injury and death (Kilander 2023). Despite this, and the absence of reliable safety assurances around deep water travel due to the murkiness of legal responsibility outside of national territories, many people still willingly participate in these risky excursions. The additional threat of death offers thanatourists the chance to consume “real” authenticity (Laing and Crouch 2011, 1528), and reimpose a “social-Darwinist arch-fantasy” that prioritises the survival of the richest (James, Cronin, and Patterson 2024, 3; Korstanje 2016, 2017), mirroring the stratification that also benefited Titanic’s first class passengers all that time ago.

Alongside death and the adjacency to it, experiences of suffering and hardship characterise this form of elite consumption. Expeditions to the peak of Everest, or travel in a spaceship or a deep sea submersible normalise bodily discomfort. Arduous physical or mental preparation such as training routines and practice runs are often required, and everyday actions such as cleaning your teeth or sleeping become extremely difficult. Many of these trips are cold, dark, painful, lonely and otherwise unpleasant. In the case of the Titan, passengers had to sit on the floor in a confined, poorly lit space for up to 12 hours with no toilet or food, and just one tiny porthole to see out of. The *Los Angeles Times* described the submersible as a “sardine can” (Gelt 2023). This provides a rite of passage for contemporary super-rich explorers to re-construct the hardships of prior adventurers and experience a sense of empathy with their circumstances (Tucker 2016). In our secular world, moral value can be extracted from the embodied experience of fighting adversity. What the passengers on the Titan were being offered was a temporary sensation of hardship and the foregoing of simple necessities as an artificial “repentance struggle” (Weber 2002, 91). Much like the free-floating fantasy of Titanic, this is illusory. Participation in excursions to the ocean floor and space for the super-rich are mostly characterised by their lack of involvement, unlike other transgressive dark leisure forms such as graffiti or parkour. Ticket holders are passive observers who engage minimally, if at all, with the navigation, research or otherwise technical aspects of the venture (Spector 2020). The operatives who pilot the crafts work like neo-colonial subjects, performing menial tasks at great risk to themselves, to ensure those paying the bills are satisfied with their experience. While thanaleisure offers elites the opportunity to feel something – the “semantically and semiotically” formed affect (Massumi 2021, 28) of going back to Titanic – this is impeded by their positionality as inert voyeurs, left to consume the illusion of their own suffering as if it were a museum reconstruction.

Tales of chivalry and self-sacrifice went hand-in-hand with dignity and honour in the sinking of the Titanic, where many men lost their lives. The austere provisioning of the Titan’s cabin positions

super-rich thanatourists as authentic survivors through their own ascetic consumption. This reaffirms the ability of those with resources and power to endure hardships and achieve successes, helping to justify extreme wealth and other inequalities exacerbated by capitalism. Just as the mythologising of Titanic offered maligned business tycoon John Jacob Astor redemption thanks to his perceived self-sacrifice during the sinking of the ship (Brown 2012, 361), engaging in thanaleisure offers a similar opportunity for the super-rich of today to be excused for their excesses: for being the haves in a sea of have-nots.

Learning from the *Titan*: thanaleisure as a constituent of thanacapitalism

The unavoidable mediated class politics of the Titan disaster points to the wider relevance of our present political economy of neoliberal capitalism. It is a system that is arguably analogous to thanaticism, as capitalism is “the mode of production of non-life” (Wark 2014) an order of existence that deprioritises human lives in favour of profit. Capitalism now regularly threatens to extinguish our existence entirely: for example, Wark cites the intention of oil companies to continue to exploit carbon deposits, in spite of indications that the burning of fossil fuels is causing severe, even cataclysmic climate change. Value continues to be extracted, up until and even beyond the point of death. Accordingly, OceanGate CEO Stockton Rush did not just run his submersible trips for pleasure; he was also blunt about his intentions to capitalise upon as yet undiscovered deep-sea resources, including “oil and gas reserves, rare minerals or diamonds” (Perrottet 2019). Rush, similarly to elite space explorers like Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos, and the gentleman mountaineers of old, was a thanacapitalist.

Thanacapitalism (Korstanje 2016) is the “economic subsystem of neoliberalism organised to commoditise death and suffering for consumers’ reaffirmation of self and personal privilege” (James, Cronin, and Patterson 2024, 2). A core component of this is *schadenfreude*: observing and even revelling in the suffering and demise of ancestral others to remind ourselves that we are better and in some way “special” (James, Cronin, and Patterson 2024, 3; Korstanje 2016, 67). Korstanje’s conceptualisation of thanacapitalists describes how they succumb to exceptionalism, and a state of narcissism, believing they are “chosen by God(s), fate or destiny” (Korstanje 2016, 62–63). This reifies the gap between rich and poor, and encourages the preoccupation with extreme feats that characterise thanaleisure. Such feats are considered achievable by those at the top of the hierarchy, rendering them infinitely capable; meanwhile, much of the working population are deterred from even questioning the status capitalist markets assign them. As Korstanje writes, we are expected to fantasise about getting “to the moon as tourists,” but we are not allowed to imagine an end to capitalism, to “break with the ideas of the bourgeois or with a distorted idea of modern democracy.” (2016, 46).

Thanacapitalism requires a revelry and enjoyment in the spectacle of a tragedy, combined with a disassociation from its reality. As previously mentioned, this is evident in the seductive potential of sites like the Titanic wreck. It can also be observed in other thanaleisure sites such as Mount Everest, where visitors must navigate around the corpses of less fortunate adventurers that litter the route. But apparatuses of capitalism perpetuate in contemporary thanaleisure that Korstanje does not describe: namely their polluting and wasteful properties. It has been well documented that the travel, leisure and tourism habits of the super-rich are generally unsustainable and bad for the environment in terms of their carbon-footprint alone (Cohen 2022, 1482). In her discussion of the elite mountaineering industry on Mount Everest, Elizabeth Mazzolini laments the extent of ecological devastation caused by discarded waste around the summit, forgotten in “the pursuit of self-interest” (2010, 17). Similar concerns have been raised about submersibles disrupting the fragile deep sea ecosystems around Titanic, and even damaging the historical relic itself (Yang 2023). Despite the potential for thanaleisure excursions to contribute to scientific advancement, they are often the epitome of polluting and wasteful extravagance. Eric Anderson, chief executive officer of space tourism company Space Adventures, said of their excursions, “Imagine the cost of flying to Tokyo if you

throw away the airplane after one flight” (Pendleton and Schmidt 2021). Similarly, deep sea submersibles have a short shelf-life in order to maintain safety: as in the case of the Titan, the gradual accumulation of stress from the extreme pressure of the deep sea environment puts submersible hulls increasingly at risk of catastrophic failure. This proclivity for wastefulness taken to the extreme has also been identified in the super-rich propensity to buy up prime real estate then leave it empty to fall into disrepair (Atkinson 2019), where status is maintained through extending the range of commodities that are considered “disposable.”

Elite leisure experiences are often spatially wasteful: vast, cavernous and empty, devoid of the presence of living others who might otherwise reveal the extremity of inequality on show (Thurlow and Jaworski 2012). These “vacuous spaces” proliferate within many luxury tourist sites, from exclusive hotels to first-class airport lounges. In the case of the Titanic wreck site, emptiness is doubly constituted through its remoteness and inaccessibility, and its symbolism as a gravesite. But the thanatic draw towards “socially dead space” (Atkinson 2019, 4) encompasses not only the need to possess material things but also to re-emphasise the boundary as to what space is open and available and to whom. The deepest part of the ocean is a country club reserved for only the most elite of elites – OceanGate CEO Stockton Rush said that it was a “nice club to be a part of,” referring to the fact that he, James Cameron and Texan multimillionaire Victor Vescovo are the only people to have solo dived to such a depth (Perrottet 2019). Through a lens of thanacapitalism, the pursuit of voids, emptiness, exclusivity, and absent presence suggest the *uselessness* of thanaleisure. These activities and achievements are fashioned as a performance where the outcomes are not as significant as the identity-reinforcing qualities of the process. Georges Bataille (1988) wrote of this irrationality in his concept of the “accursed share”: where the giving away, wasting or even destruction of things of value is necessary in order to assert power. The fundamental activity of consumption for those with wealth is expenditure, whether it has further utility or not. Through this, the consuming of thanaleisure possesses an “exemplary virtue” (Bataille 1988, 70) that is necessary for capitalist economies to continue to run smoothly. The act of expending excess wealth on these kinds of pursuits offers a secular morality for the super-rich, reviving Christian Victorian ideologies of how self-indulgence and lack of persistence are exclusively the problems of the poor (Watson, Weir, and Friend 2005, 4). Rather than glorifying the reclaiming of the relic of Titanic for its historical or cultural value, thanaleisure reinforces the site’s symbolic value as a useless commodity: a tool through which to retain a moral high ground, while still demonstrating power through wastefulness and pollution.

Conclusion

This commentary draws some tentative conclusions around how the Titan submersible offered an authentic tourist experience of death, and a locus for the somatic sensation of suffering. What has emerged is a picture of a distinctive niche market that appeals to the proclivities and desires of the super-rich within this era of thanacapitalism. Webber and Burrows note that understanding this group “is now an essential prerequisite for anything approaching an adequate social science” (2016, 3139), and this is also true of this case study of their leisure consumption. It highlights the importance of studying up (Nader 1972) when positioning theory on consumer markets within present-day hierarchies and systems of power. There is no question that the extensive Titan rescue mission demonstrated the privilege of its passengers, and thus the perceived value of their lives in relation to others lost at sea. Little has changed in this dynamic since the sinking of Titanic itself. But that privilege must be maintained and constantly re-asserted via novel forms of consumption. Thanaleisure, distinctive from the kind of thanatourism that is accessible to the mass market, offers an opportunity for exclusivity, risk-taking, transgression and wastefulness that extend beyond normal social and economic boundaries. This is a consumer market that could also be construed as immoral, in the way it exploits human death and suffering for monetary gain, commodifies a genuine risk to life, and lacks utility. The market for thanaleisure

mirrors economic markets more generally, with its propensity for extreme risk-taking and flagrant disregard for existence. It mimics the inequalities of capitalism by encouraging and promoting hypermobility amongst an elite few, while the majority are “constrained to immobility” (Korstanje 2016, 60).

The limited accessibility of Titanic submersible thanaleisure impels us to reflect upon how the reification of the “neo-colonial dream” and high-class fantasies or “tropes” around Titanic turn the negative aspects of the ship’s demise into something positive or aspirational (Brown 2012). Arguably a similar thing can be seen to have happened following the tragedy that befell the Titan. The elite courageous explorer trope obscures the unforgiving realities of this kind of deep-sea exploration. The crushing pressure, unpredictable currents, limited oxygen, risk of entanglement or crash are rendered thrilling and challenging, as well as fundamentally necessary for the assertion of male power. The potential for disasters in thanaleisure, as in the case of the Titan, has only stoked the fires of the super-rich. Another billionaire, Larry Connor, has already invested \$20 million in a submersible company called, unironically, Triton, and vows to return “safely” to Titanic by 2026 (Guinness 2024). The echoes of the masculine industrial domination complex continue to haunt the depths of the North Atlantic.

Pursuing “parasuicidal risk[s]” (Kindynis 2019) gives the super-rich a new avenue for the assertion of distinction and status, and in this case, also constitutes a specific elite marketplace to tackle the consumerist desire for a contiguity with death (Atkinson 2019). We have, as consumers, a thanatic attraction to “dead things”: surrounding ourselves with durable inanimate objects that mimic immortality (Fromm 1973). For the super-rich, this is demonstrated ostentatiously, constructing buildings or elaborate mausoleums that will “live on” after their death, or purchasing priceless immortal commodities such as the Hope Diamond (Hirschman 1990, 36). It has also been evident in their recent draw towards space and deep sea tourism, where death waits patiently just outside the airlock. This fascination is inexorably linked to the position of the super-rich within our current economic system, as the markets they profit from career full steam ahead towards their own deadly iceberg: environmental degradation and the possible eradication of our species. The thanaleisure industry is insatiable even when faced with the potentiality of death. The cyclical construction of new artificial frontiers and elite consumer markets to overcome them serve to illustrate the indulgences, inequities, and ominous threats of late-stage capitalism.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Dr *Triona Fitton* is a Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Kent. She has been researching and writing for over ten years about second-hand cultural consumption and charity primarily. Her recent work explores consumption through a more criminological lens, examining liminal spaces and more deviant forms of consumer behaviour.

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