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## **Closing Time: Deindustrialization and Nostalgia in Contemporary France<sup>1</sup>**

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In *Staande! Debout!* (2013), a film by Anu Pennanen and Stéphane Querrec, set in the aftermath of the closure of the Renault plant at Vilvoorde in Belgium, an ageing former worker struggles to come to terms with the loss of his factory.<sup>2</sup> As the fifteenth anniversary of the closure approaches, Félix obsessively relives the fight to save his workplace, still trying to figure out whether something could have been done to change the outcome. Revisiting his former colleagues, he urges them to join him in a commemorative gathering at the monument to their struggle - a huge iron clenched fist - which stands next to the decaying remains of factory. Not all his former colleagues are keen to participate in this ritual, some indicating that they are more preoccupied with their new jobs and daily lives. Nonetheless, in the climactic scene of the film, they gather at the monument at the appointed hour to mark their shared history. If they have 'moved on' - to use the everyday language of forward motion that so often frames discussions of loss or trauma - their presence testifies to a desire to keep faith with the past that Félix, the factory and the monument represent. Rather than offering a feel-good ending, however, the film remains more mournful than celebratory: in the moment of return to the site of collective defeat, Félix collapses and dies.

This story echoes in some ways the cautionary tale which opens Svetlana Boym's *The Future of Nostalgia*.<sup>3</sup> Boym recounts an incident reported in a Russian newspaper in which a German couple visited for the first time their exiled parents' native city of Königsberg, now Kaliningrad, following the opening of the old Soviet borders. In what had become, in Boym's words, 'an exemplary Soviet construction site' after World War Two, there was little that the couple recognized from their parents' descriptions until they came upon the river that runs through the city, the smell of its meadow-like banks finally conjuring up the image of Königsberg they had grown up

with. In a spontaneous homecoming ritual, the man bent down to splash his face with the water, only to discover the treachery of nostalgia: the contents of the heavily polluted river burned his face, forcing him to recoil in pain.

Both of these stories centre on figures who feel compelled to return to a time and place from which they are separated not just by individual life events but by major social or geo-political transformations. Renault's abrupt withdrawal from Vilwoorde in 1997, with scant regard for legal requirements or industry codes of conduct, rapidly came to symbolize the process of deindustrialization in Europe and the socially irresponsible excesses of neo-capitalism.<sup>4</sup> This sense that an old economic and social order has been lost also registered in the discussion that followed the première of *Staande! Debout!* at the Glasgow Film Festival in February 2013, where the film makers explained that they saw their protagonist as the personification of a language of struggle which no longer appears to have any purchase on the contemporary world. The ailing Félix's predicament might be seen as an extreme kind of nostalgia, particularly if we recover the older sense of that term as a sickness: *algia* after all implies pain and in the seventeenth century nostalgia was considered a medical problem.<sup>5</sup> On the face of it, both Félix and the German visitor to Kaliningrad suffer the physical consequences of attempting to enact an impossible return or homecoming. Yet what Félix revisits is not so much an idealized past as an unresolved one. The factory to which he returns is a site of struggle rather than an idyll of working life.

As the industrial sector has shrunk in Europe and North America since the 1970s, nostalgia for the social world of postwar industrial capitalism has expressed itself in a number of ways, from the development of industrial heritage sites to the phenomenon of the deindustrialization coffee-table book.<sup>6</sup> Historians too have been accused of indulging in the temptation of nostalgia: reviewing a scholarly literature on deindustrialization that first developed in the USA, Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott have argued that 'smokestack nostalgia' infused much of the work in this

field prior to their 2003 edited volume, *Beyond the Ruins*. This approach tended to romanticize industrial work, they argue, giving it a 'broad-shouldered social-realist patina' rather than seeing it for what it was: 'tough work that people did because it paid well and it was located in their communities'.<sup>7</sup>

This article reconsiders the politics of nostalgia for industry, focusing on the situation in contemporary France and on the issues raised by some of the most high-profile factory closures of recent years, provoked by the demise of the Moulinex domestic appliance company. The firm whose electric mixers and liquidizers had graced homes across Europe since the 1950s was declared bankrupt in 2001 after years of speculation about its future. Four factories closed and over 3000 people lost their jobs in Lower Normandy, where much of Moulinex's manufacturing capacity had been concentrated.<sup>8</sup> The oldest factory, in the town of Alençon, had existed since 1937, but most of Moulinex's industrial empire had developed between the late 1950s and the late 1970s, as the company, led by its founder Jean Mantelet, brought affordable electrical appliances to a mass market for the first time. In this sense, Moulinex epitomized the Fordist mode of production which was typical of this period, using standardised components and assembly lines to drive down production costs and create new markets at a time of rising incomes. The brand had thus been seen as an embodiment of the optimism and prosperity of what are known in France as *les trente glorieuses* (the thirty 'glorious' years of growth that followed World War Two); but at the turn of the twenty-first century it became a very different kind of symbol, a bye-word for the end of the postwar order, for economic crisis and the decline of French manufacturing.

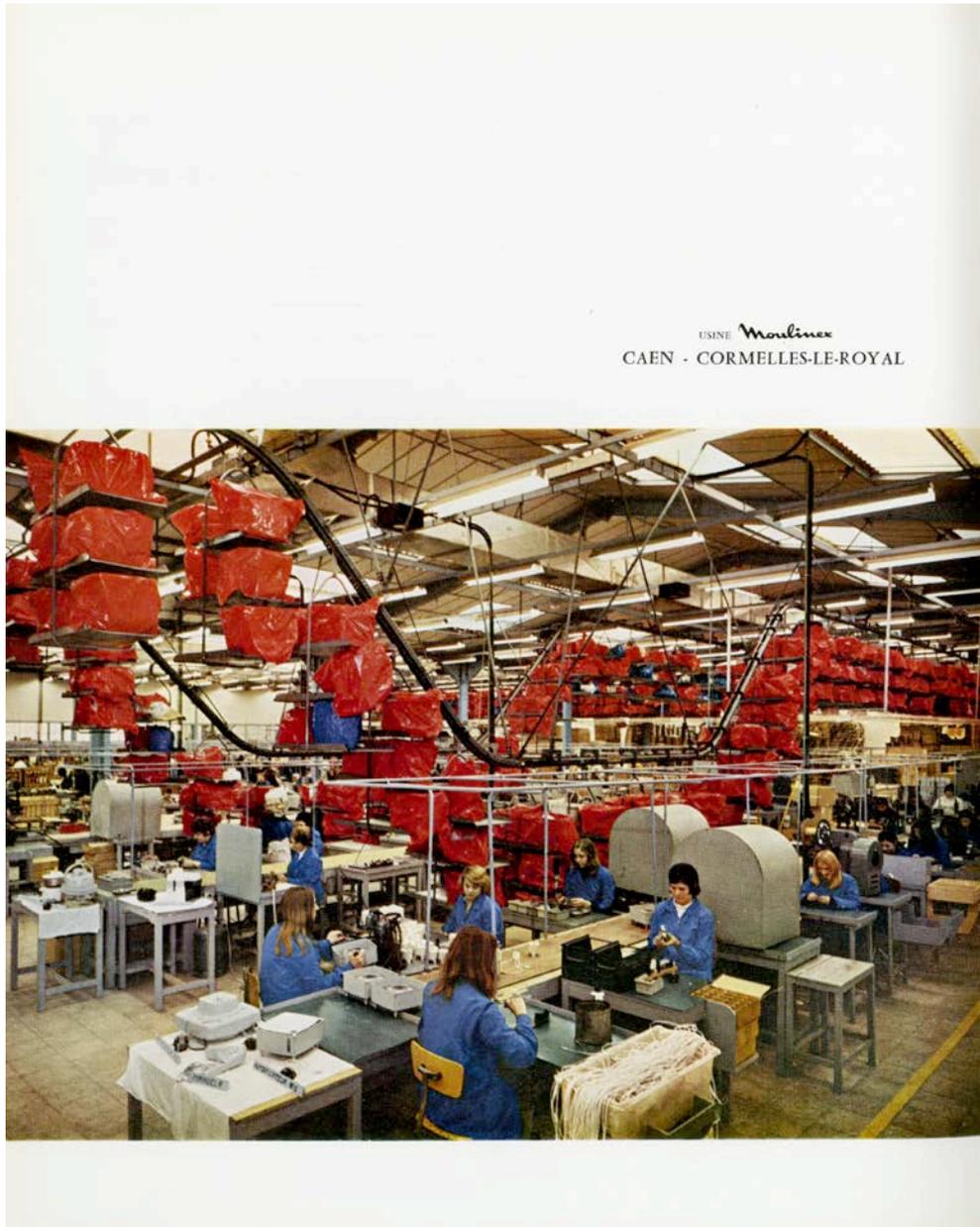


Figure 1. Production line at Moulinex-Caen, pictured in the company's Annual Report for the year 1969. Archives du Calvados 2003 JP 894 2. Reproduced by kind permission of the Archives du Calvados.

An important feature of Moulinex factories was their stark sexual division of labour, which meant that production-line work was done by women (Figure 1). As the aftermath of the factory closures has continued to receive periodic media attention since 2001, it is this group of workers who have become emblematic of the Moulinex case.<sup>9</sup> To this extent, the closure of Moulinex has brought into view an as yet under-explored aspect of the history of deindustrialization - not the loss of male dominated

heavy industry but that of more recent, highly feminized areas of industrial activity. Many of the Moulinex women had been hired in the period of industrial expansion in the late sixties or the first half of the seventies, when opportunities for those without qualifications were relatively plentiful in the rapidly industrializing rural region of Lower Normandy. In 2001 these women found themselves in a very different economic landscape and their story has continued to occupy public attention in part because their predicament speaks to that of a whole section of the French working class which now appears to have no place in the contemporary labour market.

Even before Moulinex went bust, a restructuring plan which closed two factories in 1996 was reported in the national press in terms that portrayed the company's workers as nostalgic for the paternalism of its heyday, when Moulinex was still owned and run by its founder.<sup>10</sup> As we will see, the politicians and professionals responsible for dealing with the aftermath of the company's collapse, went on to echo this view, seeing the ex-workers as representatives of an old economic order and framing their perceived attachment to that order as a problem. One aim of this article is to highlight the implications of such representations. What does it mean to claim that a group of people are – by their very association with a particular form of industrial capitalism - living in the past? I will suggest that, in the Moulinex case at least, the dismissal of (ex-)industrial workers as nostalgic served to disqualify their speech, by consigning them to the past. I will begin, however, by exploring the phenomenon of nostalgia for working life in oral history interviews conducted with women who worked at Moulinex. If these women are indeed nostalgic, what is it that they are nostalgic for?

## **Looking back**

The oral evidence I discuss here comes partly from interviews I conducted in and around Caen in 2010, but this is supplemented and contextualized by material from a

collection of interviews with ex-Moulinex employees held at the Municipal Archives in Alençon. While the total corpus contains interviews with men and women who occupied a wide range of positions in the company over many years, some of whom had retired before the Moulinex went bust, my concern here will be primarily with women workers who lost their jobs in 2001.<sup>11</sup> Not surprisingly, the emotional orientation of these narratives varies somewhat and women's accounts of working life often combine nostalgic elements with more critical or negative recollections. Indeed, while the term nostalgia is commonly used to designate an oversimplified view of the past, theorists of the phenomenon have recognized that yearning for another time is not a one-dimensional emotion: both Fred Davis and Svetlana Boym distinguish 'simple' or 'restorative' nostalgia from more 'reflective' positions.<sup>12</sup>

The spectrum of nostalgic feeling that can be found in the narratives of ex-Moulinex workers certainly bears out this more nuanced assessment. Of all the people I interviewed, the least nostalgic was Josette Gosselin, who had started at the Caen factory as a teenager in 1969. 'Thirty three tedious bloody years, I spent at Moulinex', she told me, 'I used to cry... thirty three years, I...I shed tears. It was hard, I didn't like it. It was horrible.'<sup>13</sup> At the other extreme, Mireille Jouvin, who had worked at Moulinex since 1968, summed up her feelings with the simple phrase: 'I loved my factory' – her use of the possessive expressing a sense of belonging, even a sense of (lost) ownership.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, what the accounts of women who worked on the shop floor at Moulinex tend to have in common, whatever the balance of positive and negative memories, is an unromanticized view of work itself, which is most clearly expressed in evocations of the production line. Marion Guérin who started at Moulinex in Alençon in 1973 spoke of how her head used to spin because of the constant motion of the line; even Mireille Jouvin conceded: 'It's not easy (c'est pas rien), you know, when you go a full day, weeks and everything, always the same thing. On top of that it's not very interesting'.<sup>15</sup>

At the same time, a certain nostalgia for the production line does emerge in these sources. Interestingly, in her research in an automobile plant in Kenosha, Ohio, Kathryn Dudley found that assembly-line workers spoke about the line with a certain pride, countering the popular representation of the worker as robot or 'line rat' with a self-representation that emphasized the ability to perform or keep up with the pace when others might have wilted.<sup>16</sup> Although Dudley does not analyse this narrative in gender terms, the workplace she studied employed a high proportion of men and the discourse which valorized toughness and performance in work was surely also the articulation of an ideal of masculinity. When Moulinex assembly workers recall what they miss about their old workplace, they draw less on the language of achievement than on memories of the line as a space of feminine working-class sociability and solidarity.

The most recurrent way in which this social world of the factory is evoked in the interviews is in reminiscences about the 'bonne ambiance' or good atmosphere which reigned at Moulinex. Asked about working on the line, for example, Josseline Berthaume smiled: 'sometimes you had the impression, even...even when you went home... you had the impression that you could still see the conveyor belt turning [laughs] but it was a really good period. Because there was an atmosphere that was lost afterwards.'<sup>17</sup> Madame Berthaume, who had spent thirty-two years at Moulinex, elaborated with both pleasure and pride on this 'good atmosphere', which, for her, was defined by the kindness and friendship of her immediate colleagues:

Because people got on so well. Because I arrived in February and... I had my birthday in September when I was 17 and my pals who worked with me gave me a present, and well, that really stayed with me...It was a leather manicure pouch...but that... it really stayed with me...And then the following year for my eighteenth they gave me a bedside lamp... and I can't remember, there was something else with it, but that really stayed with me and when I moved to a

different part of the factory, well it was the same, I had a whole bunch of pals, and every time, we celebrated our birthdays together and gave presents.<sup>18</sup>

Other women tell similar stories – sometimes featuring the baking or consumption of cakes or croissants in the work space.<sup>19</sup> These stories, which are specific to the women of the shop floor, should be understood in the context of the very strict regulation of time and space in the Fordist factory, where (in accordance with Taylorist principles) the production of appliances was broken down into a series of simple repetitive assembly tasks. The pace of the line determined the rhythm of work, ensuring that production targets were met and offering little room for worker autonomy. Breaks were limited to ten minutes, or half an hour for lunch in the canteen, and lateness was penalized by the docking of wages. To share a moment of conviviality in the workplace was thus to reclaim a degree of autonomy and to humanize an environment which otherwise allowed very little interaction. As Fanny Gallot has noted, such practices draw on conventionally feminine familial roles to enact a form of gender and class solidarity that subverts the paternalist discourse of factory as family.<sup>20</sup> But my point here is less about the way in which the interviews illuminate life in the factory in the 1970s, and more about the significance accorded to these practices in the act of remembering in 2010-11. The retelling of stories like Madame Berthaume's, a decade after the factory closures, affirms an ongoing desire to keep faith with an ethos which she believes has been 'lost'.

The lost atmosphere of working life is often described by Moulinex workers in terms that cast the factory as a family. In the paternalist vision of social relations, this metaphor serves to naturalize class and gender hierarchies and to delegitimize conflict. This was certainly the model espoused at Moulinex under Jean Mantelet, who cast himself as a father-figure to 'his' workers, addressing them as 'tu' (the informal pronoun one would use with a child) or 'mon petit' (my little one).<sup>21</sup> Yet, as the festive practices of women on the line suggest, the workplace family could also take other forms. This

became particularly clear in my interview with Jocelyne Rouvrais who had lost both her mother and her husband within a few months in 1973, when she was only in her mid-twenties. This left Madame Rouvrais alone with three young children and financial worries due to inherited debts. She recalled:

...it's hard when you're young and you start out like that. But well, at least I had the factory which really helped me. I had to get on with my job. And there you meet people, it's... well...because we had some nice people, people who had lived, because there were grannies, at least, I wouldn't call them grannies now, but [women who were] older than us and who helped us in our life.<sup>22</sup>

At this point in the interview, perhaps because the idea of the workplace as family had a paternalist ring to my ear or because I was aware of recent sociological work that had examined Moulinex workers' 'attachment to the firm', I asked Madame Rouvrais her to elaborate on how 'the firm' ('l'entreprise' - not the word she had used) had supported her.<sup>23</sup> She replied: 'Well, not the firm itself, no' and explained what she meant by 'the factory' (the same word that Mireille Jouvin has used to identify the place she loved): 'It's the heart, the world of the working class [le monde ouvrier], the workers, not the bosses.'<sup>24</sup> Clearly this idea of the factory as family was not simply an echo of the company's paternalist past or a harking back to the class and gender hierarchies on which such a model relied. Indeed, Madame Rouvrais told me quite explicitly that she believed the ethos of mutual aid was stronger in working-class communities than among the 'rich'. What she valued, looking back on working life at Moulinex, was the access her job gave her to a cross-generational support network of working-class women. If she used the language of family (grannies), rather than conceptualizing her world in the more fashionable twenty-first century language of networks, it was less an internalization of company discourse, than a reflection of the extent to which this workplace network stood in for family members who had been lost.

This is not to say that the language of paternalism is absent from the interviews. One of the principal ways in which Moulinex workers evoke a better past that has been lost is in their fond memories of the company's founder. Many still refer to their former boss as 'le père Mantelet' or 'papy Mantelet' - 'father' or 'grandpa' Mantelet. In some cases, interviewees refer more respectfully to *Monsieur* Mantelet, but the subsequent managing directors—who command neither respect nor affection—are typically referred to only by their surnames. Josseline Berthaume, told me that 'all the time grandpa Mantelet was there, it was great'; unlike 'Blayau' (Managing-Director 1996-2000), she insisted, Jean Mantelet 'would never have made anyone redundant' (though in fact there had been job losses in 1980s prior to his departure).<sup>25</sup> For Brigitte Pauchin, Mantelet was 'a real boss' who would now be 'turning in his grave'.<sup>26</sup> This reverence for Jean Mantelet may seem surprising, especially given that both of these women were active trade union members who had served as union reps.<sup>27</sup> While Madame Berthaume's engagement dated from the year Mantelet stepped down, Madame Pauchin had participated in the major strikes which had shaken Moulinex in 1974 and 1978, and described herself as someone who has always been a rebel. This is a clue that the idealization of 'the real boss' may rest less on an ongoing acceptance of paternalist authority than on a critique of the 'other bosses' who came after Jean Mantelet.

When Mantelet stepped down in 1987, the controlling interest in Moulinex passed to a triumvirate of company executives, headed by Roland Darnaud. However, after several years of in-fighting and financial problems, this structure was disbanded and as ownership of the company passed to banks and investors in the 1990s, a succession of new faces were brought in: Jules Coulon, Pierre Blayau, and finally Patrick Puy. The company that had had one Managing Director since the 1930s now saw four in the space of ten years. This was also a period of economic uncertainty and redundancy plans, notably under Pierre Blayau who initiated the closure of the Mamers

and Argentan sites in 1996. Hence, part of what Jean Mantelet came to symbolize in retrospect was relative stability and security of employment.

It may seem simplistic to dramatize the contrast between periods of security and insecurity, as Madame Berthaume does, with a story of heroes and villains. But this is also a story about the changing culture of capitalism. As a self-made man, an inventor who had prided himself on the construction of an industrial empire and liked to cast himself as the protector of 'his' workforce, Jean Mantelet embodied a form of industrial capitalism that was rapidly giving way to a regime of capitalist accumulation more dominated by trading on the financial markets. Pierre Blayau, on the other hand, was a member of France's highly qualified administrative elite who followed what is now a common trajectory from a senior position in the civil service to a role as an industrial executive, and was appointed at Moulinex at the behest of its major shareholder, Jean-Charles Naouri. As Chief of Staff at the Ministry of the Economy and Finance (1984-87), Naouri had been one of the architects of the liberalization of France's financial markets, before leaving public service to join Rothschild Bank and to found the private equity company which subsequently bought into the struggling Moulinex group.<sup>28</sup> Stories in which ex-workers distinguish an idealized 'good' boss from subsequent 'bad' bosses can be seen as a way of apprehending the structural and ideological changes that are crystallized in these different forms of ownership and management. Thus, when I asked Jocelyne Rouvrais whether she felt there was an evolution or deterioration after Mantelet's departure, she said: 'A deterioration as regards work, I think. Erm...after Monsieur Mantelet's death, I think it was more the power of money, more the erm commercial interest which led to the loss of the factory.'<sup>29</sup> In fact, Mantelet's departure from the company preceded his death by four years but the conflation of the two in these remarks signals the extent to which he stands here for the end of a social and economic era.

It is significant also that Madame Rouvrais links the transition from the values of industry to the values of money with a deterioration of 'as regards work'. It would be naïve of course to suggest that industrial capitalists like Jean Mantelet were not interested in money or reliant on banks, but as Moulinex became more exposed to global competition and pressure for profits on the financial markets, the effects were clearly felt in the Normandy factories. Thus, reports of the deteriorating atmosphere on the shop floor tend to be associated with narratives about the intensification of work in the late 1980s and 1990s. This is apparent in Josette Gosselin's predominantly negative account of working life which contrasted the earlier years at Moulinex with the later years, the difficulties of the latter period apparently determining the overall colour of her narrative. Asked about the changing organization of work and about whether her last years were perceptibly different from the earlier years, she responded in an emphatic way that suggested my question had touched on something fundamental:

Yes yes yes yes yes yes yes. I remember. Maybe those were the good old days then. When people could step up the pace. We helped each other out. A girl who was faster would help one of the other girls. We helped each other out. Yes, we were good pals and there were times we finished an hour ahead, but that was in the good years. Up until, I'd say, the, oh about 85, 86, let's say.<sup>30</sup>

These remarks refer to the way in which the assembly of certain products was organized in the Caen factory from around 1975. Unlike the classic production line method, where each worker was responsible for a single step in the assembly process, the 'global method' allowed one woman to assemble an entire appliance from start to finish, setting her own pace. This system, which was seen to offer workers greater autonomy and variety, was introduced in an attempt to fend off the barrage of criticism of production-line work that came to the fore in France in the wake of May 1968. Much to the annoyance of the Caen management, who urged staff to work at a steady pace,

the global method allowed those who worked at top speed at the start of their shift to ease off or take extra breaks later in the day. According to Madame Gosselin it also meant that colleagues had time to help each other out, but this margin of autonomy was subsequently lost as production targets constantly increased.<sup>31</sup>

The negative impact of new forms of organization and management is corroborated by an account from Alençon, where the factory nurse recalls hearing recurring complaints from those who worked on the shop floor, especially after a wave of campaigns exhorting workers to implicate themselves more actively in quality monitoring were launched in the late 1980s and early 1990s:

...at the end, people were saying, we work fewer hours and we're much more tired. And we don't get on anymore on the shop floor. We don't get on. We keep having a go at each other. Because, well, the management was different. It used to be more about the work, the team - it used to be the team that succeeded, it was different. [...] Certainly that was the way we experienced it....So the atmosphere, yes, there were people who found it fine, and others who coped less well....and well, that's how it is...constraints on the management to be able to produce more, constraints on the staff to be ever more effective and efficient – that was the fashionable word. So there was a process of intensification...putting people a little bit in competition with each other...with forms of management based on comparisons, indicators like the introduction of quality measurements etc...<sup>32</sup>

As the company's fortunes dwindled and pressure on management to improve productivity increased, she suggests, relations became strained, not just because of pressure to produce faster, but because a new emphasis on quality targets and measurements set one person or team against another.

This was also true of another organizational innovation applied in the Moulinex's Bayeux factory, where Jossette Gosselin spent her last three years with the company. By the 1990s production lines, which existed to generate high quantities of goods at low prices and tended to lead to the accumulation of large amounts of stock, had come to be seen as overly rigid. Specialists in industrial organization now looked to Japan for inspiration and favoured 'just in time' production, which meant reducing the amount of stock held and producing goods rapidly to order. Flexibility became a keyword in the managerial lexicon. It was in this context that Moulinex's Bayeux factory became the showcase within the group for a system which clustered workers into small autonomous teams of around four people. On these work stations—or 'islands' as they were known—each member of the team had to complete her part of the assembly process before passing the partially assembled appliance onto her colleague. In theory, each woman worked at her own pace, as there was no line to regulate her speed, but in practice this meant that the pace of the fastest worker put pressure on the others to keep up.<sup>33</sup> Like the global assembly method of mid-1970s, this form of organization could be seen as offering greater autonomy and responsibility to workers, in comparison with the traditional production line, but by harnessing the dynamic of the group as a means of regulating production, it also overcame the perceived problem of the more autonomous worker's reluctance to work at what management considered the correct pace. Hence, Madame's Gosselin's sense that the days of mutual aid among those who worked at different speeds were gone. Liberation from the line led, in practice, to an intensification of the *psychological* pressure to maintain a certain speed. There was no longer time to sip a coffee as you worked, Madame Gosselin complained, and despite rhetoric about autonomy, 'you couldn't leave your spot at all even to go for a pee. You had to put your hand up.'<sup>34</sup>

Mme Gosselin was in her forties and had been assembling appliances for about thirty years by the time she worked in Bayeux. Those who had been hired as

teenagers or young women in the late 1960s and 1970s were, by the 1990s, experiencing both the natural effects of ageing and the cumulative effects of long-term repetitive work, shift-working, speed-ups and new forms of mutual surveillance. Reports of musculoskeletal disorders, such as carpal tunnel syndrome, rose steeply in this period.<sup>35</sup> It is little wonder then that, looking back on their younger selves and their earlier working lives, these women tend to construct the period up to the 1980s as a better time. While the collapse of Moulinex in 2001 is remembered as an event that came as a shock, it is also viewed as the culmination of a process that began in the 1980s, a process which, before finally depriving workers of their livelihoods, eroded the spaces of autonomy, sociability and solidarity that these women had managed to carve out in the Fordist factory.

### **Closing time**

One could certainly characterize the narratives discussed above as a form of nostalgia for Fordism. These stories do not offer a simple idealization of the old social and economic order: the factory remains an object of ambivalence, even if some speak of loving or hating it. But there is a strong sense that the factory floor is identified as a site of social integration—a space of class and gender solidarity. Since the process of narrating working life is inevitably selective, this may well be a simplified account of workplace relations. Indeed, one might legitimately contend, following the French social theorist André Gorz, that industrial society never offered more than a very imperfect form of social integration and that to believe that it did is to perpetuate industrialism's own myths.<sup>36</sup> Similarly the construction of the period before the 1980s as one of security and stability needs to be understood in relative terms. Yet the tendency to revisit those practices which specifically asserted autonomy, humanity and solidarity also directs us to the critical potential in these women's reminiscences.<sup>37</sup>

To tell these stories is to challenge the view that deindustrialization and the neo-liberal economy represent progress and, to this extent at least, the nostalgia of Moulinex workers could be seen as a way of taking issue with a certain conception of the movement of history. Indeed, to understand fully what is at stake in this critical nostalgia for a lost industrial order, it is important to grasp the extent to which dominant representations of Moulinex workers as passive victims and relics of another age, tended to silence and disqualify workers' voices. By the early twenty-first century, stories of industrial job losses, factory closures, downsizing and off-shoring had taken on an air of inevitability in the French media. This was all the more true in the Moulinex case, since the company's difficulties had received regular press and television coverage over several years by the time it went into the hands of the receivers. The brand's identification with the boom years from the 1950s to 1970s – revisited with retro footage in the coverage of the closures – underlined the sense that the passing of Moulinex signified the passing of the postwar industrial order.<sup>38</sup> But such perceptions were not limited to the media coverage. Ex-Moulinex workers, especially women, quickly discovered that they were viewed by employers, and to some extent by employment advisors, as ill-fitted for the twenty-first century world of work. This perception was doubtless partly about attitudes to age: the average age of those who lost their jobs at Moulinex was 49.<sup>39</sup> This view was reinforced, however, by another sort of stigmatization which constructed Moulinex workers as products of another time. One employment advisor told the French news magazine *L'Express* in 2002 that 'the image of the Moulinex workers is disastrous...It takes months to convince an employer that they're competent, autonomous and that they're not savages.'<sup>40</sup> The reference to lack of autonomy, a problem particularly associated with production line work, is a clue to the fact that this perception of ex-Moulinex workers applied particularly to the group who had become most emblematic of 'les Moulinex': the women who had worked in production jobs. Many of the women who had been hired to these roles during the years of industrial expansion at Moulinex had left school without qualifications and in

some cases with no more than a primary education.<sup>41</sup> This was not unusual in the rural areas in which some had grown up in the 1950s and 1960s, and the old perception of rural France as backwards ('savages') now transferred itself onto the industrial worker. Class, gender and generation all contributed to this stereotype of the Moulinex worker as the product of another age, a figure out of sync with history.

The tendency to portray Moulinex workers as stuck in the past also expressed itself in an analogy between the loss of work and bereavement. In the wake of the closures, redeployment units were set up on the former factory sites to support people in finding work, but some advisors in these units caused disquiet among their clients by suggesting that Moulinex workers were too attached to their former company and that this was an obstacle to their redeployment. Those who had lost their jobs were exhorted to stop grieving and move on.<sup>42</sup> In a context where some had spent thirty years or more at Moulinex, this advice provoked the ire of trade union representative, Maguy Lalizel. What she objected to was not just the advisors' apparent impatience or failure to recognize the profound social rupture that came with the factory closures, but the assumptions implicit in the language of bereavement: 'the business didn't die', she told me; rather Moulinex was 'killed off', in her view, by a political decision to favour rival company, SEB.<sup>43</sup> In other words, she contested the implication that the loss of industry was a natural process which one must simply accept as part of the cycle of life.

A similar rhetoric was apparent in public statements made by certain politicians implicated in dealing with the Moulinex case. In Alençon in particular, where Moulinex was by far the biggest private employer, the closure of 'the mother-factory' seemed to mark the end of an era and ex-Moulinex employees still reproach the town's former mayor, Alain Lambert, for urging the population to 'turn the page'.<sup>44</sup> As Mayor and then leader of the Greater Alençon Urban Community, Lambert's primary preoccupation in the immediate aftermath of the closure was the economic regeneration of the area. Launching 'Operation Phoenix', which aimed to create a thousand jobs in a thousand

days, he spoke in January 2002 of the danger of being ‘consumed by grief’, seeing this as a form of paralysis.<sup>45</sup> Looking back in 2005, he explained: ‘I was convinced at the very moment I heard the verdict [i.e. that Moulinex would close], that we had to courageously turn this glorious page in our history and roll up our sleeves to write a new one’.<sup>46</sup> As he reiterated to me in June 2013, he saw a stark choice between remaining in the past and being part of the future. Equating grief and nostalgia, he identified both as obstacles to progress: ‘one cannot build a new relationship [*histoire*] if one is nostalgic for the previous one’.<sup>47</sup>

It was true, of course, that dealing with redundancy was an emotional process and that economic circumstances had changed significantly since most of the Moulinex workers had entered the company two or three decades previously. My argument here is not about whether ‘times had changed’ or whether this created a need for adaptation (in the form of retraining, for example) but about the disqualificatory implications of certain ways of conceptualizing change. The stark polarization of past and future, and the insistence that entry into the latter was dependent on a radical rupture with former, offered a choice between being consigned to the past or disavowing it. One of the characteristics of this mapping of socio-economic change as an inevitable forward movement is that the present tends to disappear: the collapse of Moulinex is taken to exemplify a historical process of deindustrialization and yet, even as it is happening, the death of the old order is understood as something already complete. At the same time, being in the present – being of one’s time – is figured as requiring a leap into the future. Yet how is the future imagined here, if not as a version of the present?

As Krishnan Kumar commented in 1978 with reference to the wave of futurology that coincided with the proclamation of the post-industrial age, such constructions of historical time serve in fact to ‘close off the future’ by imagining it as ‘a bigger, better, more efficient version of the present.’<sup>48</sup> The particular variant of this logic that was apparent in the Moulinex case can perhaps best be described as neo-

liberal time, not least in the sense that what is invoked in the examples above is the imperative of the Market. Living in the present and conforming to the demands of the neo-liberal economy were seen as the same thing; any other position could be pathologized as nostalgia or as grief-stricken immobilism.

### An alternative present

In everyday parlance, in scholarly warnings against about smokestack nostalgia, and in the claims made in the wake of the Moulinex closures, nostalgia is assumed to be an inherently backward-looking sentiment. Hence, the politics of nostalgia tend to be seen as regressive. Yet, as Peter Fritzsche has argued in relation to post-revolutionary constructions of the past in nineteenth-century Europe, what the dismissal of such visions as backward or unmodern overlooks is the extent to which nostalgia is itself a kind of underside of modernity, predicated on a sense that the present is in discontinuity with past. In expressing the 'culture of victims' of such discontinuities, nostalgia is not simply an irrational attempt to turn the clock back, Fritzsche argues, but raises 'the spectre of alternative modernities'.<sup>49</sup> Or as Boym puts it, nostalgia also has the capacity to look 'sideways'.<sup>50</sup> Implicit in the idea that the past might hold the seeds of 'alternative modernities' is the proposition that historical change cannot necessarily be equated with progress. When the term nostalgia is used dismissively, this proposition is denied and all forms of nostalgia are reduced to the kind of impossible 'return' enacted by Boym's German visitors to Kaliningrad: nostalgia is dismissed as a doomed attempt to 'live in the past', or to exist out of time. Yet one could also see nostalgia as a challenge to the conception of historical time on which such a rebuke rests. When ex-Moulinex workers speak about the deterioration of their working conditions, for example, they refuse to equate managerial change with progress or 'modernization' (to use the term that most routinely expresses this equation).

Like the language of 'modernization', the official representations which framed the loss of Moulinex as a bereavement and as part of an inevitable historical movement away from an old economy served to entrench a depoliticized account of the process of deindustrialization. Allusions to bereavement are by no means absent from the workers' own narratives – Madame Rouvrais's story is not the only one where the loss of Moulinex is doubled by a narrative of the loss of family members.<sup>51</sup> But in 2001, Moulinex workers were not simply grief-stricken; they were mobilized – or many of them were - in what they saw as a struggle for justice. What Monsieur Lambert presented as a manifestation of grief (and hence paralysis), was also a manifestation of social conflict. By the time Moulinex went bust, workers had already been engaged in a wave of demonstrations and occupations which had begun when a restructuring plan that would close three factories was announced in April 2001. The mobilization continued once the company went into the hands of the receivers, as proposals from new investors were examined and the unions called for government aid to support a rescue plan. These protests continued well into November when redundancy notices were finally received. But one of the remarkable features of the Moulinex case has been the ability of the ex-Moulinex workers to remain organized, albeit in a rather different form, long after their factories closed. The workplace structures of trade union representation have been replaced by associations led by ex-union delegates. Similar associations have emerged in a number of factory closure situations in France and although the profile and activities of these groups varies, they can be seen as part of new wave of activism by the unemployed that has emerged since the 1990s.<sup>52</sup> Among other activities, the Moulinex associations have been instrumental in organizing a series of legal actions challenging failures in the application of their redundancy settlement and seeking compensation payments. These proceedings kept the fate of ex-Moulinex workers in the public eye and bolstered membership of their associations.

Representatives of the Moulinex associations were also vociferous in supporting a criminal investigation into suspected financial irregularities at the company in the period leading up to its collapse. This investigation began in November 2003 and in the following year the last two Managing Directors of Moulinex, Pierre Blayau and Patrick Puy were charged with offences relating to suspected illicit movements of funds and false accounting. The fact that Pierre Blayau had left the company in 2000 with a payment of over 2 million euros to compensate him for a no-competition clause (preventing him from continuing to work in the domestic appliance sector) added extra piquancy to the affair. As the years went on and the criminal investigation appeared to have stalled, the Caen association, Apic Mx, responded by collaborating with campaigning journalists in an effort to keep the story on the public agenda. In 2010 the association's leaders, along with journalists from radio programme *Là-bas si j'y suis*, publicly confronted Jean-Charles Naouri - who since selling his interest in Moulinex had become Managing Director of the Casino supermarket group. In a typically media-savvy protest, these representatives of the ex-Moulinex workers obtained shares in the Casino group and ambushed Naouri with questions from the floor at the company's Annual General Meeting, with the ensuing interaction about the circumstances of Moulinex's collapse being broadcast on the popular national radio station *France Inter*.<sup>53</sup>

At Apic Mx, which is affiliated to the Mouvement national des chômeurs et précaires (MNCP, National Movement of the Unemployed and Precarious Workers), such legal and media actions are seen not just as a means of defending the economic interests of those who lost their jobs at Moulinex but as part of a struggle against the stigmatization of working-class people and the unemployed.<sup>54</sup> In January 2011, when it was announced that the criminal case against the last Managing Director of Moulinex, Patrick Puy, would proceed to trial, Maguy Lalizel, the President of Apic Mx, welcomed the decision in terms that made this link explicit. Describing the 'sense of injustice' that

underpinned the movement she said: 'For a long time people made out that the women of Moulinex were uneducated and untrained women. That's not true. Because the majority of Moulinex women had done a CAP-AFPI [a vocational qualification similar to a City and Guilds Certificate]...So it was also about striking a blow against those received ideas.' Asked whether it was easy to keep people mobilized, she replied: 'Yes. It's easy because you need to have objectives. The objectives were the criminal case, proving to the world and particularly, to all the people who said Moulinex was killed by globalization. We knew it wasn't true. That was our first fight.'<sup>55</sup> In other words, the struggle for justice, as the association saw it, was also a struggle against an interpretation of the collapse of Moulinex which framed the event as the inevitable result of impersonal historical forces and positioned those most affected by it as part of the past.

In the end, the criminal case against Patrick Puy never came to court. This and the other investigations against Moulinex executives ended in a ruling of no case to answer. Nonetheless, on 26 January 2012, the Cour de Cassation (the highest court in civil matters) ruled that the Moulinex workers had been made redundant 'without real and serious cause' and were entitled to compensation. What matters for our present purposes, however, is not who was to blame for the company's collapse. The point is that the legal and media campaigns of the ex-Moulinex workers illustrate the extent to which the closure of Moulinex gave rise not just to grief, but to a wave of post-work activism. If the scale and significance of the job losses had emotional as well as economic consequences, it would be difficult to characterize the response as one of collective paralysis. The psychologization of the event, and its construction as the movement-of-history-in-action, work either to deny this conflict or to position it as a kind of social pathology. Recovering the conflict is also important if we are to understand what was at stake when historians started asking ex-Moulinex workers to tell their stories in 2010-11.

One thing that has been apparent to me as I have attended the meetings of the Apic Mx, and which has been reinforced as I have visited the Association Moulinex Jean Mantelet in Alençon, is the interplay between the individual interview narratives and a collective practice of story-telling in the associations.<sup>56</sup> Not surprisingly, reminiscing is part of what members of these associations do when they get together for meetings. Indeed, at Apic Mx the content of the weekly general meeting is often slender, consisting essentially of brief updates from the members of the Executive Committee about ongoing projects. At times there has been little to report, but the place of these meetings in the weekly diary serves as much as an occasion to bring people together as it does as a means of circulating information. My presence on these occasions may well have encouraged reminiscing but it certainly was not limited to conversations in which I participated. One of the most common refrains I overheard among the women as they gathered to chat before and after the meeting was one that recurs in the interviews: 'but there was good atmosphere'. The 'but' here – or the phrase 'quand même' in French, literally translated as even so, but used more liberally than its English equivalent - serves as a reminder that nostalgia was always qualified and circumscribed for these women. Witnessing these conversations drew my attention to the fact that while my own interviews and most of the Alençon interviews were individual, the practice of talking – and laughing - about a time when there was a good atmosphere at work was also a collective one. Conversations on these occasions range widely and the atmosphere is anything but maudlin. When 'the girls', as the Moulinex women often refer to each other, get together and end up talking about the 'old days', they clearly use the past to reaffirm their solidarity in the present (a solidarity which, through the association's links with MNCP, extends beyond the defence of the simple defence of the interests of Moulinex workers). To this extent, a certain kind of nostalgia could be said to have played a part in the construction of the new form of social activism embodied by the ex-workers associations.

Svetlana Boym has described nostalgia as ‘a rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress.’<sup>57</sup> I have suggested here that in the context of deindustrialization, nostalgia for industry can be seen, at least in some cases, as a rebellion against a particular manifestation of this idea of time, which I have called neo-liberal time. One of the characteristics of this neo-liberal view is a construction of historical time which recasts ideological differences and social conflict as temporal lag. This linear conception of historical time, allows for movement in only two directions - forward or back – as though the path of history were drawn in advance and all that were left for people to do were choose their camp. Yet everything we know about lived time – about the kinds of things that people actually do with their pasts – surely points to the fact that the rhetoric of total rupture is non-sensical. Women’s stories about the good times at Moulinex serve to denounce the effects of post-Fordist management practices that remain very much part of the contemporary work environment. They not only reassert the value of solidarity in the face of a narrative which gives it no place in the present, but mobilize their shared past in the invention of new forms of organization and action. In constructing a useable past, these women highlight and reject the fallacy that there is only one way of living in the present.

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<sup>2</sup> See <http://pennanen-querrec.com/>.

<sup>3</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, New York, 2001, p.xiii.

<sup>4</sup> An overview of the issues surrounding the closure of Vilwoorde and reactions to it can be found on the website of the European Industrial Relations Observatory (an EU organization) <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/eiro/1997/03/feature/be9703202f.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, pp.3-6

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<sup>6</sup> See the contributions to *International Labor and Working-Class History* 84, September 2013, a special issue on 'Crumbling Culture, Deindustrialization, Class and Memory', co-edited by Tim Strangleman, James Rhodes and Sherry Linkon.

<sup>7</sup> Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott, *Beyond the Ruins: The Meanings of Deindustrialization*, Ithaca and London, 2003, p.15. Tim Strangleman has taken a different view, finding in the ethnographic literature on deindustrialization an antidote to the 'end-of-work' theorizing that marked the late 1990s. See Tim Strangleman, 'The Nostalgia for Permanence at Work? The End of Work and Its Commentators' *The Sociological Review* 55: 1, 2007, pp.81-103.

<sup>8</sup> Manuella Roupnel, *Les Chômeurs de Moulinex*, Paris 2011, pp.1, 22.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Julie Joly 'Vivre sans Moulinex' *L'Express* 14 November 2002, which was accompanied by profiles of five ex-Moulinex employees, all of them women. Ségolène Royal, the socialist presidential candidate also paid tribute to 'the women of Moulinex' in her 2007 campaign.

<sup>10</sup> Isabelle Mandraud, 'Moulinex: Chronique d'un plan social. La Nostalgie de Papy Mantelet' *Libération* 4 July 1996. Jean Mantelet remained the primary shareholder until 1987.

<sup>11</sup> The Caen corpus contains interviews with 8 women and 4 men who had spent the majority of their careers at the Moulinex-Caen site but in several cases had also worked in other Moulinex factories. Seven of the eight women lost their jobs in 2001, the eighth having retired just before the closure. The Alençon interviews were conducted in 2010-11 by Laurent Huron as part of a project funded by the town council. There are 33 interviews in the Alençon collection and as this municipal project sought to capture all categories of employees and to privilege an earlier generation of Moulinex workers, it has only few interviews with women who lost their jobs in 2001, but still provides considerable insight into life at the company in the period discussed here.

<sup>12</sup> Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia*, Basingstoke, 1979. Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*.

<sup>13</sup> Author's interview with Josette Gosselin, 29 June 2010.

<sup>14</sup> Author's interview with Mireille Jouvin, 25 June 2010.

<sup>15</sup> Marion Guérin is a pseudonym. Archives municipales, Alençon. Interview with M.G., 21 January 2011; Author's interview with Mireille Jouvin, 25 June 2010.

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<sup>16</sup> Kathryn Dudley, *The End of the Line: Lost Jobs, New Lives in Postindustrial America* Chicago 1994, p.107.

<sup>17</sup> Author's interview with Josseline Berthaume, 11 May 2010.

<sup>18</sup> Author's interview with Josseline Berthaume, 11 May 2010.

<sup>19</sup> Author's interview with Francine Madelaine, 2 June 2010; Sonia Brault, *Les Moulinex, Alençon 1937-2001. Témoignages*, Le Fresne, 2009; Fanny Gallot, 'Les Ouvrières, des années 68 au très contemporain: pratiques et représentation', doctoral thesis, Université Lumière Lyon 2, 2012 pp.280-282.

<sup>20</sup> Gallot, *Les Ouvrières*, pp.274, 280-282.

<sup>21</sup> Archives Municipales, Alençon. Interview with Yvon Godard (pseudonym), 17 March 2010.

<sup>22</sup> Author's interview with Jocelyne Rouvrais, 18 May 2010.

<sup>23</sup> The question of attachment to the firm occupies an important place in the analysis in Roupnel-Fuentes, *Les Chômeurs de Moulinex*.

<sup>24</sup> Author's interview with Jocelyne Rouvrais, 18 May 2010.

<sup>25</sup> Author's interview with Josseline Berthaume, 11 May 2010.

<sup>26</sup> Author's interview with Brigitte Pauchin, 29 June 2010.

<sup>27</sup> Madame Berthaume became a member of the moderate CFDT (Confédération française démocratique du travail) in 1987 and later a break-away union called SYDIS (Syndicat de défense des intérêts des salariés), while Madame Pauchin was a longstanding member of the CGT, Confédération générale du travail.

<sup>28</sup> <http://www.groupe-casino.fr/fr/Biographie-de-Jean-Charles-Naouri.html>

<sup>29</sup> Author's interview with Jocelyne Rouvrais, 18 May 2010.

<sup>30</sup> Author's interview with Josette Gosselin, 29 June 2010.

<sup>31</sup> Author's interview with Josette Gosselin, 29 June 2010.

<sup>32</sup> Archives Municipales, Alençon. Interview with Mireille Lallement (pseudonyme), 14 February 2011.

<sup>33</sup> This issue is also highlighted by one of the Bayeux factory workers in Gilles Balbastre's documentary, *Moulinex: La Mécanique du pire* (2003).

<sup>34</sup> Author's interview with Josette Gosselin, 29 June 2010.

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<sup>35</sup> On the recognition of musculoskeletal disorders in the 1990s, see Gallot, *Les ouvrières*, pp.213-222.

<sup>36</sup> André Gorz, *Reclaiming Work: Beyond the Wage-based society* Cambridge, 1999, p.55, cited in Strangleman, 'The Nostalgia for Permanence at Work?', pp.85-6.

<sup>37</sup> On nostalgia as a form of resistance against the stigmatization of working-class culture, see Ben Jones, 'The Uses of Nostalgia: Autobiography, Community Publishing and Working-Class Neighbourhoods in Postwar England' *Cultural and Social History* 7: 3, 2010, pp.356-7.

<sup>38</sup> See Jackie Clarke, 'Closing Moulinex: Thoughts on the Visibility and Invisibility of Industrial Labour in Contemporary France' *Modern and Contemporary France* 19:4 2011, 443-458.

<sup>39</sup> On age as an obstacle to re-employment, see Roupnel-Fuentes, *Les Chômeurs de Moulinex*, pp.189-191.

<sup>40</sup> Julie Joly, 'Vivre sans Moulinex' *L'Express* 14 November 2002.

<sup>41</sup> Roupnel-Fuentes' survey of some 800 ex-Moulinex employees (from unskilled workers to managers) found that 56.7 per cent of those surveyed in Caen and 49.3 per cent of those surveyed in Alençon had no qualifications. These figures are broken down by type of post rather than gender, with most of those without qualifications being in unskilled posts. Since most such posts at Moulinex were occupied by women there is a clear correlation between gender and level of education. Caen and Alençon were 'hub' factories which housed a range of technical services for the group and had a higher proportion of skilled workers and technicians (and hence a higher proportion of male employees) than those factories which were purely assembly plants. At Falaise, for example, 77.2 per cent of those surveyed had no qualifications. Nonetheless, there had been opportunities for some to take vocational qualifications, notably as a result of gender equality legislation passed in the 1980s. Roupnel-Fuentes, *Les Chômeurs de Moulinex*, pp.60-65.

<sup>42</sup> Roupnel-Fuentes, *Les Chômeurs de Moulinex*, p.157; Maguy Lalizel remembers women coming to her in tears having been spoken to in this way. Interview with Maguy Lalizel, 10 June 2010.

<sup>43</sup> Author's interview with Maguy Lalizel, 10 June 2010. Under the legislation in force, trade union delegates remained in post for a year following the closures.

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<sup>44</sup> This has been expressed to me, for example, by Marie-Claire Nageotte, who is Vice-President of the Association Moulinex Jean Mantelet.

<sup>45</sup> [http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xjcr9l\\_conference-de-presse-operation-phenix-janvier-2002\\_news](http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xjcr9l_conference-de-presse-operation-phenix-janvier-2002_news)

<sup>46</sup> 'Les nouveaux défis d'Alençon' *L'Express* 29 August 2005

<sup>47</sup> Interview with Alain Lambert, 28 June 2013.

<sup>48</sup> Indeed this is in many ways inherent to the methodology of futurology which takes its starting point the identification of trends. Krishnan Kumar, *Prophecy and Progress: The Sociology of Post-Industrial Society* London, 1978, 327.

<sup>49</sup> Peter Fritzsche, 'Specters of History: Of Nostalgia, Exile and Modernity' *American Historical Review* 107:5, December 2001, p.1610.

<sup>50</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, p.xiv. The critical potential of nostalgia is also highlighted in Stuart Tannock, 'Nostalgia Critique', *Cultural Studies* 9:3, 1995, p.455.

<sup>51</sup> Josseline Berthaume's story of her working life was also intertwined with that of her family life and the loss of her mother and husband. Interview with Josseline Berthaume, 11 May 2010.

<sup>52</sup> See Delphine Corteel, 'Fermetures d'usines : les associations d'anciens salariés comme espaces de médiation originaux' *Formation Emploi* 108, Oct-Dec 2009, pp.53-65.

<sup>53</sup> [http://www.la-bas.org/article.php3?id\\_article=1950](http://www.la-bas.org/article.php3?id_article=1950)

<sup>54</sup> [http://www.apicmx.com/pages/actu\\_4](http://www.apicmx.com/pages/actu_4)

<sup>55</sup> [http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xgmy83\\_moulinex-maguy-lalizer-invitee-de-tendance-ouest\\_news](http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xgmy83_moulinex-maguy-lalizer-invitee-de-tendance-ouest_news)

<sup>56</sup> I spent 3 months in Caen in 2010, attending the association regularly during my stay and have since made a number of return visits.

<sup>57</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, p.xv.