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Closing Moulinex: Thoughts on the Visibility and Invisibility of Industrial Labour in Contemporary France

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On 7 September 2001, Moulinex, the company whose affordable mass-produced appliances had helped transform French domestic consumption in the postwar period, went into receivership. A year earlier, a controlling interest in the heavily indebted company had been acquired by the Italian group El-Fi, which already owned Brandt. A new Managing Director, Patrick Puy, was given the task of restructuring the Moulinex-Brandt group and in April 2001 he had announced a plan to close three factories—Lesquin in the Nord, and the two biggest Moulinex sites at Cormelles-Le-Royal outside Caen, and Alençon in the Orne. After a long struggle, a *plan social* (the third in five years) was negotiated but the financial position of the company was such that the shareholders refused to fund the restructuring, forcing the company into the hands of the receivers. Seizing its opportunity, Moulinex's principal French competitor, SEB, made a successful offer to buy the rival brand name, but only one third of Moulinex's French workforce was offered continued employment in this deal. The result was the closure of four factories (Alençon, Cormelles, Falaise, Bayeux) and the loss of over 3000 jobs in Lower Normandy.¹

This was, of course, just the latest in a protracted and seemingly relentless round of *plans sociaux* to affect French industry, as competition from cheap imports, relocation of jobs to countries with lower labour costs and the dominance of the stock market over other social and economic interests have combined to make manufacturing an increasingly difficult activity to sustain in France. Redundancies have often been met with violent or spectacular protests on these occasions. The case of Cellatex, a textile factory in Givet (Ardennes) hit the headlines in July 2000, for example, as workers carried out a threat to release into the environment highly flammable acid used for making rayon (See Larose et al. 2001). More recently, as businesses struggled with the effects of the recession in summer 2009, workers at the

automobile industry supplier, New Fabris, in Châtellerault (Vienne) threatened to blow up their factory in order to secure funds for supplementary redundancy payments, while those at the Serta transport company in La Vaupalière (Seine-Maritime) warned that they were ready to pour toxic products into a tributary of the Seine if similar demands were not met.²

While such threats and acts of sabotage are not new in the history of industrial disputes, these actions can be seen as a response to the particular sense of violent rupture that accompanies mass redundancies and deindustrialisation, especially in the case of long-standing industrial institutions like Cellatex, where the history of the factory in Givet dated back to 1903. In the case of Moulinex, the business had been present in Normandy since 1937 (initially under the name Moulin-Légumes) and many of the workers who lost their jobs in 2001 had been with the company for thirty years or more. They too appropriated stocks of materials to dramatise their protest, dumping the shells of microwave ovens outside the Préfecture in Caen when the proposed closure of the Cormelles factory was announced in April 2001. By November of the same year, as they engaged in a last-ditch struggle over redundancy payments, protesting workers set up gas canisters on the roof at Cormelles with a makeshift sign that read simply: 'Du fric ou boum!'

As Sophie Bérout and René Mouriaux (2001, pp.162-4) have pointed out, these high-profile eruptions of social conflict and the spectacular forms of protest which often accompany them reveal an acute concern with visibility in the mass news media as the essential ingredient for a successful movement. But in the last decade or so factory closures have also been made visible through a growing body of cultural production across a variety of genres. Audrey Mariette (2005, p.654) noted at least seven documentary films dealing with factory closure in France and Belgium between 2000 and 2004, including two (Luc Decaster's *Rêve d'Usine* [2003] and Ariane Doublet's *Les Sucriers de Colleville* [2004]) which had cinema releases. More recently the director Stéphanie Hammou gave a camera to the workers of the Confection de l'Alloeu in La Gorgue (Nord) and invited them to film the last days of their factory. Her montage of their images, *Prête-moi ta camera, mon usine ferme*, was disseminated in several episodes via the website of the newspaper *Libération* (<http://www.liberation.fr/camerausine,99881>, accessed 22 July 2011). Fictional films too have dealt with the rupture of factory closure, perhaps most memorably in *Louise-Michel* (dir. Gustave Kervern and Benoît Delépine 2008), where a group of workers

who discover one morning that their jobs are gone and their factory has been cleared out overnight decide to pool their meagre redundancy payments in order to, as they put it, 'faire buter le patron par un professionnel'. In the sub-genre of factory closure literature, François Bon's *Daewoo* (2004), first performed as a play and then published as a novel, is probably the best-known work, but there have also been creative writing and theatre projects involving workers such as that which followed the closure of the Levi's factory in La Bassée (Nord) in 1999. A year after the closure of their factory and the five-month conflict which had preceded it, a group of former workers (all women) formed an association called Les Mains Bleues and joined forces with theatre director Bruno Lajara and writer Christophe Martin to produce a piece of drama, *501 Blues* (2001). While *501 Blues* is based on the workers' own writings, a slightly different model was adopted in Romainville (Seine-Saint-Denis), where a professional writer was brought in to create a text based on workers' life histories, published as *Notre usine est un roman* (Rossignol 2008).

Nowhere has this wave of cultural production been more sustained than in the case of the Moulinex closures. Here too there was a creative writing project though not until 2005-06 and this initiative (which included participants who had no connection with the firm) focused only partially on Moulinex and its demise. A selection of the writings produced was published in 2007 under the title *Nous ne sommes pas une fiction* (Billard et al.). At least four documentaries have dealt with the closure of Moulinex factories and the fate of those who lost their jobs: *Ex-Moulinex, mon travail c'est capital* (Marie-Pierre Brêtas, Raphaël Girardot and Laurent Salters 2000), which followed an earlier wave of closures in 1996-97 under Pierre Blayau; *Moulinex, la mécanique du pire* (Gilles Balbastre 2003); *Sauf la lutte* (Catherine Tréfousse 2002) and *Moulinex. Vivre après faillite* (Mouhcine El Ghomri 2005). The aftermath of the 2001 closures was also marked by the publication of a collection of photographs and testimonies (Gros and Daniau 2003) and a widely publicised biographical novel, Franck Magloire's *Ouvrière* (2002), which has been adapted and performed in the theatre. Moreover, in 2010 the socially-engaged rap group Nouvelle R released 'La Machine', a track about factory closures with a video which features the Moulinex story and footage of ex-Moulinex workers shot on the former factory site at Cormelles-le Royal

http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xf9aqt_la-machine-nouvel-r_music accessed 22

July 2011). Clearly then, the Moulinex case has been one with considerable cultural resonance.

What many of these texts have in common is a concern summed up by François Bon at the beginning of *Daewoo: 'Refuser l'effacement'* (p.13). It is this question of the erasure of industry and industrial workers and of resistance to erasure that I pursue in this article. This may appear to be a rather well-worn academic gesture, that of making visible those who are 'hidden from history' and allowing marginalised voices to speak. I would argue, however, that it is worth thinking again about what the stakes of visibility and invisibility are today. We are now in a very different historical moment from that which produced an earlier wave of research on working-class culture and the development of fields such as women's studies. The period since the 1980s has been characterised by new forms of working-class *invisibility* which have attracted some scholarly attention in France but relatively little interest in the English-speaking French Studies community (which constitutes much of the audience for this journal). I will flesh out briefly what I mean by a new invisibility below, before examining in more detail how some of the narratives that have surrounded the closure of Moulinex have served to enact or resist erasure.

'Il n'y plus d'usines en France'

The visibility and invisibility that I am concerned with here are relative rather than absolute. Taking a cue from the authors of *La France invisible* (Beaud, Confavreux and Lindgaard 2006), I am using the term invisibility to signal not total disappearance, but various forms of marginalisation, occlusion and disqualification from the mainstream political and media discourses which play an important role in shaping public understanding of the social world. As the flurry of cultural production around factory closures indicates, the industrial worker has not entirely disappeared from view. Indeed, as Michel Cadé (2000) and Martin O'Shaughnessy (2007) have shown, there has been a certain resurgence in the portrayal of working-class France on cinema screens since the 1990s. This period has also been marked by a renewed attention to questions about work in the social sciences in France, with major interventions coming notably from Castel (1995) and Beaud and Pialoux (1999, 2nd ed.2005).³ But these academic analyses and cinematic representations register precisely the process of fragmentation and declining visibility of the industrial working class that I wish to highlight here. Not only has industrial labour ceased to

occupy the place it had in politics and the media in what might be termed the period of high Fordism in postwar France, but the new representations of workers and factories that have come to the fore, notably in the coverage of factory closures, often operate in such a way as to relegate these people and places to a time and space outside the contemporary social world.

The eclipse of industrial labour clearly has something to do with the process of deindustrialisation which has reduced the physical presence of industrial sites and industrial workers in France, as in other highly industrialised countries, since the 1980s. Indeed it has become commonplace to think of manufacturing as an activity conducted somewhere other than in Western Europe—‘Il n’y plus d’usines en France’, I have been told repeatedly by casual observers since I began to work these issues a year or two ago. Although it is true that one way of making labour less visible (and making working conditions more difficult to scrutinise) is to move it physically to another country, the industrial sector still employs 20.1% of the active population in France.⁴ In terms of socio-professional category, in 2008 22.6% of the working population and 34.8% of men in work were classed as ‘ouvrier’ (a term which covers manual trades as well as those working in industry) and these figures do not include a further 665 000 ‘ouvriers’ who were unemployed.⁵ It is perhaps worth noting that the agricultural sector, employing only 3.3% of the population, is miniscule by comparison with industry but has long exercised a disproportionate hold on the French social imaginary and, until recently at least, on the political landscape (see Hervieu and Viard 2001). The visibility or invisibility of certain social groups or forms of labour is thus by no means a simple reflection of demographic reality. In other words, it is not because there are no factories left that industrial labour is less visible in France; rather, it might be argued, the discourse that consigns factories and those who work in them (or used to work in them) to the past is itself one of the most common mechanisms by which a *France ouvrière* that does exist is conjured away before our very eyes.

Certainly, much has changed since the period when Fordism was at its height in France during the so-called ‘Trente glorieuses’ (Fourastié 1979). The productivist ideology of postwar state capitalism and the linkage between industrial growth and national *grandeur* meant that the industrial worker and the factory (or the mine) could be mobilised as symbols of progress not just by the labour movement but by the state and the *patronat*, while for those further to the left—in a period marked by the global

clash between capitalism and communism—industrial workers were imbued with the ultimate significance as a revolutionary class. Before and after the war, the *métallo de chez Renault*, the archetypal Fordist worker, embodied the power of organised labour in bastions such as Billancourt, which had itself become a symbol of the French working class. At the Liberation, miners were cast as national heroes, embodying a patriotic working-class masculinity in the propaganda surrounding the Bataille du Charbon (see Diamond 2011)—in a sense, a cultural nationalisation of the figure of the miner took place even before the economic nationalisation of the mining industry. At Moulinex, which was created in the 1950s and expanded rapidly in the 1960s and early 1970s, photos of factories at work were a staple part of the company’s visual language in documents ranging from product catalogues to Annual Reports.⁶ It is worth remembering therefore that while the factory and the industrial worker were central, practically and symbolically, to the movement of May-June 1968, it was not just the critics of the Fordist model who put them at the heart of their representations of the socio-economic world in this period.

This régime of ultra-visibility has been rapidly dismantled since the 1980s, as both French industry and capitalism itself have undergone significant restructuring. One feature of this has been an increase in the power of financial capital over industrial capital. The liberalisation of international trade and the financial markets has fostered a culture of ‘paper entrepreneurialism’ in which—in a context of fierce competition from low-wage industrialising economies--it is often easier to make a profit by speculation on the stock market than by producing goods (Harvey 1995, pp.161-3; Boltanski and Chiapello 1999, pp.19-20). At the same time, the threat of unemployment, the ‘flexibilisation’ or *précarisation* of employment contracts and the recourse to an organisation of work and remuneration which emphasises individual performance rather than collective integration, have contributed to the erosion of workplace solidarities. The level of trade union membership, which was already lower in France than in many neighbouring countries, suffered a significant decline from the late 1970s, dropping from 20% of the salaried population in 1976 to about 9% by the end of the 1990s (Boltanski and Chiapello 1999, p.347). The ideological realignment that accompanied the collapse of state socialism in Eastern Europe, the decline of the Parti communiste and the abandonment of the rhetoric of class in the Parti socialiste in the 1980s is also part of this story of the dismantling of the postwar model and the mythologised representations of industrial labour that went with it.

The Moulinex archives present us with a particularly stark example of the shift in representation that took place as the definition of what it was to be a ‘modern’, forward-looking business changed in this period. In the company’s Annual Reports for the 1980s, the photographs of busy factory workshops that had operated as a primary marker of the firm’s visual identity since the early 1960s simply disappear, as Moulinex’s performance ceases to be measured in and symbolised by the human endeavour of industrial expansion. Instead, it is embodied largely by objects. Photos of factory machinery still appear but they are typically close ups without workers or semi-abstract images, lending the technology a kind of autonomous power. Alongside these are similarly decontextualised shots of Moulinex products, staged against blank backdrops or sometimes with accompanying foodstuffs, but almost never with a human presence.⁷ Some such images had already begun to appear in the late 1970s as Moulinex sought to internationalise its business, establishing subsidiaries to distribute its products in 14 countries and new plants in the USA, Canada and Mexico to supply the American market by 1979.⁸ This internationalisation of the audience for documents like Annual Reports and the company’s desire to project an international image may explain in part the drift from images of domestic production (often in specified locations) to deterritorialised objects. In any case, by the 1980s the Fordist representations of the factory had given way entirely this new visual repertoire. Thus, while the factories of western France—and many elements of their Fordist organisation—remained largely intact, the labour of those who worked in them was masked by commodity fetishism and the mythologisation of technology.

At the same time, a process of memorialisation of lost industry has been apparent in France in the last twenty years or so. This process is most apparent in relation to those industries that have experienced the most radical decline, such as mining and steel production, industries which have now become heritage objects in themselves. In Lorraine, for example, the old blast furnace at Uckange in the Vallée de la Fensch and the mines of the Carreau Wendel to the east are now museums (see Tornatore 2005, pp.683-85), the latter staging an annual *son et lumière*, *Les Enfants du charbon*, in which local people perform their mining history. Consumers of industrial heritage can acquire relics of dead industries, such as the souvenir piece of coal that came as free gift with a copy of the *Républicain Lorrain* when the last mine in Lorraine closed in April 2004 (Tornatore 2005, p.679). Similarly, the unlikely

genre of the deindustrialisation coffee-table book allows its owner to hold onto traces of a world that apparently no longer exists—testimonies and glossy images of working-class life before 1950 in the case of Michel Etiévent's *Fils d'usines* (2005), or highly aestheticised photographs of the haunted spaces of decaying factory workshops in Antoine Stéphan and François Bon's *Billancourt* (2004). Although the work of memory and mourning that takes place in such texts and cultural practices is by no means univocal and is in some sense about transmission and continuity with the past, it is also predicated on a not unproblematic assumption that the industrial world is dead and gone.⁹ Significantly, it is not just a factory or industry that is lost in these narratives but a social and economic order and the working-class world that went with it. Often implicit, this slippage becomes explicit in texts such as Aurélie Filipetti's novel based on her family history in the Italian immigrant mining communities of the Pays-haut in Meurthe et Moselle, *Les Derniers jours de la classe ouvrière* (2003). Filipetti, who is now a socialist député close to Ségolène Royal, has even been described by one journalist in *L'Express* as a 'rescapée d'une culture morte' (Karlin 2003). While this language of class death registers a process of social and economic restructuring that is real, it does little to get to grips with the fact that the people who populated the old industrial order still exist. Indeed, one of the problems with this discourse is that in seeking to honour the past, it tends to present as complete and inevitable a process which is incomplete and historically contingent. In doing so, it consigns *la France ouvrière* to the past, symbolically erasing it from the contemporary social map.

Closing Down

A similar logic tends to operate in the news coverage of factory closures, particularly on television. As Manuella Roupnel-Fuentes has observed (2011, p.13), the mass redundancies that accompany such closures are often represented in terms reminiscent of the language used to describe natural disasters: the towns and regions affected are 'sinistrées' by 'de nouvelles vagues de licenciement', as though these events were the result of unstoppable forces of nature. While natural disasters are generally sudden events, however, the air of inevitability that surrounded the closure of Moulinex derived more from the long-running coverage of the company's difficulties—so much so that one news bulletin covering the *dépot de bilan* on 7 September 2001 opened simply with the words 'C'est donc fait...' (France 3. *19-20 Edition nationale*), as

though a long awaited event had finally come to pass. The lunchtime bulletin on the same channel had described this outcome as ‘inéluctable’ even before it was announced. Certainly, once the shareholders had withdrawn their support the previous day, there was little alternative to receivership, but the media coverage evoked a much broader sense of inevitability, retrospectively portraying the workers’ struggle in the preceding months as futile. The eight o’clock news on France 2 reported that ‘les salariés ne se faisaient guère plus d’illusions’, though not all the workers who featured in their package were on message. Some footage shot only the previous day featured a protesting (female) worker still insisting ‘tout est possible! Il faut aller jusqu’au bout!’, but this was offered merely as an illustration of the ‘illusions’ that had now dissipated: ‘retour à la réalité cet après-midi...’ intoned the journalist’s voiceover as if bankruptcy meant that the natural order of things had finally been restored.

This was reinforced by the mainstream media’s tendency to turn factory closures into a spectacle of suffering and victimhood. A particularly telling example was the lunchtime current affairs programme *J’ai rendez-vous chez vous* on France 2 on 21 October 2001 (the day before the Tribunal de commerce de Nanterre approved the partial buy out by SEB). ‘Vous entendrez en direct les cris d’angoisse [des] salariés’ promised presenter Rachid Arhab at the top of programme, reducing the words that would be expressed by protesting workers to little more than emotional noises. To reduce words to noise is, in Jacques Rancière’s terms (1995, pp.19-20, 43-4), to deny the speaker the very quality that makes human beings different from animals and qualifies them as members of a political community: *la parole*. The fact that many Moulinex workers were women doubtless made it all the easier to cast them in such a role: although women constituted only a slight majority (54%) of those who lost their jobs (Roupnel-Fuentes 2011, p.25), they were much more likely than men to have been employed in low grade production jobs, and were disproportionately visible as victims, as journalists frequently turned to them for individual stories of suffering that would give the mass economic event a human face. All those called on to bear witness in this way in *J’ai rendez-vous chez vous* were women, while only the male trade union leaders (spatially separated from the women) were invited to offer a more political analysis of the situation. Even so, the women interviewed failed to fall into line compliantly with the account proposed in Arhab’s leading questions: one paused with tangible discomfort when asked whether she felt abandoned and forgotten,

before calmly replying, ‘je pense à ceux qui sont autour de moi’—an answer that offered not a cry of helplessness but an expression of solidarity.

Another recurring feature of the coverage of Moulinex’s demise was the retelling of the company’s history and here the point of view of workers tended to give way to a narrative about the company’s place in national life, its early successes under its founder Jean Mantelet and its decline since the 1980s as it became ‘dépassé’ (TF1, *JT 20 heures*, 7 September 2001). Since Moulinex was, as one newsreader put it, ‘a symbol of French industry’ (France 3, *19-20 Edition nationale*, 7 September 2001), this narrative of a golden age followed by a long decline appeared in many ways as the story of the French economy itself. All three main terrestrial channels ran a nostalgia sequence as part of their historical retrospective, appealing to a collective memory of ‘les Trente glorieuses’ with (largely the same) images and archive footage of appliance adverts from the 1950s and 1960s. Thus, an advert for the Légumex vegetable peeler, which featured a smiling housewife gratefully receiving the appliance as a gift and had already been used by France 2 in coverage of earlier Moulinex job losses (France 2, *20 heures le journal*, 24 January 2000), was screened on both the France 3 and TF1 evening bulletins on the day company went into receivership. In this way, the coverage recycled the corporate myths constructed by Moulinex since the 1950s, notably that of the ingenious founder and inventor, Mantelet, who, as the TF1 report put it ‘bricolera ce qui va révolutionner la vie des femmes’ (*JT 20 heures*, 7 September 2001). The conveniently neglected fact that the Légumex was not invented by Mantelet at all, but by a woman, a Mme Badet who licensed it to one of Mantelet’s companies, makes all the more apparent the process of mythologisation that is at work here.¹⁰ Moreover, what was foregrounded in this use of advertising imagery was not the history of producers but the history of consumers: ‘qui n’a pas possédé dans sa cuisine un appareil Moulinex?’, asked the anchorman on France 3 (France 3, *19-20 Edition nationale*, 7 September 2001), as he introduced the retrospective of the company’s history. It was this shared history of consumption that made Moulinex part of the nation’s cultural heritage. Having watched suffering individuals and been reminded that their fate was inevitable, the viewer was thus invited to mourn the loss of Moulinex not as a socially engaged citizen but as part of a national community of consumers.

The resonance of the Moulinex case was such that it was often to be revisited by journalists in the months and years that followed the closure. One current of this

ongoing coverage was notable in that it sought to provide a rather different analysis from that which dominated in the mainstream media. This position was articulated in the documentary *Moulinex, la mécanique du pire* (2003) directed by Gilles Balbastre, a former France Télévision journalist who now works with alternative media outlets such as *Le Monde diplomatique*, Daniel Mermet's radio show *Là-bas si j'y suis* on France Inter and the satirical review *Plan B* (<http://www.leplanb.org/>). Indeed, when Balbastre's film was screened on France 5 on 1 March 2004, Mermet devoted a whole programme to it on the same day, along with his guest, the economist Frédéric Lordon, who had been a consultant on the film and who published an article in *Le Monde diplomatique* to coincide with its broadcast (<http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2004/03/LORDON/10897> accessed 22 July 2011). Here, as in the news coverage of the closures, the Moulinex story was considered as exemplary of wider social and economic processes, though the perspective was less consensual, as Lordon's title—'Un cas d'école. Comment la finance a tué Moulinex'—makes clear. Indeed the very structure of Balbastre's film provided a staging of dissent, as it alternated between interview footage of senior managers and ministers explaining the stages in Moulinex's downfall and a group of workers and trade unionists giving their own account of the events. Thus, for example, when Alain Picard (Directeur de contrôle de gestion at Moulinex 1996-2000) explained, with a slightly dismissive laugh, that the reason for the company's collapse was 'pas un truc très, très compliqué et dogmatique' and came down to the question of whether they could produce a coffee-maker 40% cheaper to compete with South East Asian models, his simple arithmetical logic was juxtaposed with that of Véronique Cauvin, who had worked assembling appliances at Moulinex-Bayeux: 'l'argent rentré – qu'est-ce qu'ils en ont fait?', she asked. This is a question that has also been asked by the French justice system, as several former Moulinex executives including last two managing directors, have been the object of a criminal investigation into their financial dealings at the company prior to its closure.¹¹

At the end of Balbastre's film the last word appears momentarily to be given to the Socialist politician Christian Pierret, who was Secretary of State for Industry in 2001. Contesting the trade unionists' view that the demise of Moulinex was due to management failure and that managers, unlike workers, seemed to be rewarded even when they failed, Pierret not only expressed his disagreement but characterised any position of critique as one of unreason: 'Si les salariés pensent ça, c'est qu'ils n'ont

pas compris ce monde de compétition, d'ouverture, de concurrence... Nous n'avons pas fait suffisamment—et en particulier nous à gauche—de pédagogie pour expliquer ça... Nous avons des gens qui refusent de manière magique, artificielle comme si on était dans un monde de sortilège, la réalité économique, qui, qu'on le veuille ou non, est une réalité aussi forte que la loi de la pesanteur.' In this way, Pierret sought to reinstate the consensus narrative of inevitability and disqualify from the discussion those who might have traditionally looked to the political left to represent their views. At this point in the film, the credits start to role and a voiceover updates us on the current situation of the main actors who have featured in the film: the well paid jobs and comfortable retirements of former executives (Puy allegedly enjoying a generous departure package, Blayau having taken the helm the Géodis transport company, where Picard joined him as Director of Planning) is contrasted with the fate of the workers interviewed, most of whom were still without jobs in January 2003. In this context, Pierret's suggestion that the former Moulinex workers are ignorant of the harsh realities of the global economy is given a distinctly hollow ring.

La Mécanique du pire is not a film about suffering and consensus, but a film about inequality and dissent. Yet arguably its emphasis on laying bare the infernal mechanism which led to Moulinex's demise means that it too confers a kind of inevitability on the events which it narrates. The treatment of Moulinex as a case study which reveals a structural feature of the economy—the dominance of financial interests in industrial decision-making—and the fact that the film opens with the announcement of the company's closure, establishing the outcome in advance before attempting to reconstruct the choices that led to it, tend to create this impression of impending doom. This is echoed in the companion article by Lordon, who argues that: 'Moulinex est une affaire exemplaire, un cas d'école pour une anatomie de la mondialisation. On finirait presque par croire, rétrospectivement, qu'elle était vouée de toute éternité à en épouser tous les accidents, toutes les contraintes déguisées en raison managériale—et finalement tous les malheurs' (<http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2004/03/LORDON/10897>). Indeed, although the film relates certain decisions taken at Moulinex, it is not so much an assessment of the choices made as a re-staging, through the retrospective rationalisations of the key actors, of the logic that underpinned the events. Unlike those documentaries which focus on life after the factory closures, showing how workers who lost their jobs live on despite their often precarious social situations (*Ex-Moulinex, mon travail c'est capital* and *Moulinex*

vivre après la faillite), *La Mécanique du pire* takes the collapse of Moulinex as an end point in the playing out of this apparently implacable logic. The fact that the talking head sequences which make up most of the film are occasionally interspersed with slow travelling shots of a still and deserted factory reinforces the sense that the film is picking over a corpse that is already cold.

Ouvrière

A somewhat different narrative is offered in Franck Magloire's *Ouvrière*, which is based on the life of the author's mother, Nicole Magloire, who left the Normandy countryside to work at Moulinex-Cornelles in 1972 and lost her job when the company went bust in 2001. Published barely a year after the factory's closure, Magloire's book was widely reviewed, notably by the historians Mona Ozouf and Michelle Perrot (in the *Nouvel observateur* 9 January 2003 and *Libération* 2 January 2003 respectively). That these publications looked to historians (notably those identified with women's history) to review the book was indicative not just of the elements in the text that invited it to be read it as a social document or memory object, but of the assumption that the life of the French industrial worker was now a subject for historians rather than sociologists. Magloire also appeared on radio programmes such as *Les Lundis de l'histoire* on France Culture (27 January 2003) and an edition of *L'Humeur vagabonde* on France Inter (2 June 2003) on the theme 'littérature et réalité ouvrière'.

The *ouvrière* of the book's title is also the narrator, an (initially unnamed) mother who begins to look back over her life at the insistence of her son, Magloire's textual alter-ego, who has proposed the project of writing a book about her life. The son we see in the text through Nicole's eyes, like the son who is the author of the book, seeks to understand his mother's life across not just generational but class boundaries—unlike Nicole, Franck Magloire was able to sit the baccalauréat and go on to higher education, working as a communications consultant and as a primary schoolteacher before becoming a full-time writer. This gives the early stages of the text a notably dialogic character, as the narrator relates and reflects upon conversations with her son whose political and sociological understanding of class, shaped by his education, feels rather at odds with her own more ambivalent and initially barely articulated outlook, shaped by a lifetime in the factory. 'Comment

dire?’, are the book’s faltering opening words, ‘Je n’ai jamais vraiment eu les mots pour moi...’ (p.7). In one sense, therefore, it might be said that Magloire seeks to give his real-life mother (and others like her) a voice through literature, but by acknowledging in the text that the words are his, not his mother’s (‘des mots qui me ressemblent, mais sans être les miens’, says his narrator, p.30), he invites us to read the work as something other than simply a second-hand testimony. In fact, if his narrator’s account of her son’s views can offer any insight into the author’s outlook, it appears that his aim is less to give authentic voice to the *ouvrière*—which he recognises as an act of ventriloquism—than to give her a *story* and to reclaim the space of literature for such stories:

Pourquoi la littérature ne nous appartiendrait-il pas? Cette belle mixité improbable, comme il dit...[...] il cite même pour m’en convaincre: *Les bourgeois s’imaginent avoir le monopole des itinéraires personnels alors qu’ils n’ont que celui de la parole publique, c’est tout. Les ouvriers (il se permet de dire nous) vivent leurs histoire avec une égale intensité mais en silence. Personne ne naît OS...*(p.30)

The son’s quotation here is from Robert Linhart’s *L’Etabli* (1978), a well-known account of factory life in the 1970s, written by one of the Maoist intellectuals who took up industrial jobs in the years after May 1968 in order to gain a radical proximity to the working-class experience. It is a reference which speaks to the son’s ambition to bridge the class gap between himself and his mother.

François Bon has spoken of his loss-of-industry novel, *Daewoo* as an act of memory: ‘Si les ouvrières n’ont plus leur place nulle part, que le roman soit mémoire’.¹² In *Ouvrière* too, there is a concern with memory, since the text enacts the mother’s process of looking back over her life from the vantage point of the closure of Moulinex. When she recounts her arrival in Caen in the early 1970s at the beginning of the book, her story is already haunted by the ghosts of closed factories. As she recalls arriving for the first time at Moulinex and seeing the neighbouring bastion of Caen industry, the Société métallurgique de Normandie (SMN), she remembers how reassuringly permanent its presence once seemed, before the ‘lente agonie’ of its decline and closure in the 1990s, ‘...ce sera notre tour, nous le disions tout bas, nous y pensions surtout...’(pp.13-14).¹³ Also on her path as she reconstructs

her first journey to Moulinex, is the cemetery on the edge of *cit  ouvri re* for the SMN, with the names of Polish immigrant workers on the head stones, ‘tous tomb s pour la France ouvri re’ (p.16). Here, as in other sources, factory closures are readily talked about in terms of death. In the closing chapter, when the protests around the closure of Moulinex itself are evoked, a fellow worker jokes darkly with Nicole: ‘T’en auras des choses   raconter   tes petits-enfants, camarade, tu leur diras l’histoire de Moulinex....tu leur expliqueras comment nous sommes morts’ (p.151).

Combined with the universalisation of the mother’s individual story that is implicit in the book’s title, and the son’s acknowledged desire for class-consciousness on the part of his mother, this might lead us to expect a rather nostalgic reconstruction of a mythologised working-class subject which has become difficult to sustain. But what is offered is something more complicated. For one thing, the female Moulinex worker, is a rather different figure from the men of heavy industry who have been the object of much of the memory work that has accompanied deindustrialisation. Indeed she is perhaps more representative than these ‘hero workers’ in two significant ways: firstly, by the time Nicole Magloire was hired at Moulinex nearly half of the new jobs being created in French industry were for women (Noiriel 2002, p.213); secondly, Nicole’s lack of identification with organised labour is in keeping with the comparatively low levels of unionisation, not just in France generally, but in this section of the workforce in particular. What Magloire’s book presents is a less unified working-class subject, a sense of the gap that often exists between individual workers and organised labour and a subjectivity that is not ready-made but rather constructs itself through the text. From the faltering dialogue of the book’s early chapters, a more sustained voice and a life story emerge through a narrative which is only semi-linear, composed as it is of remembered moments or fragments.

Moreover, despite being haunted by the ‘death’ of Moulinex, the text resists being read as yet another narrative of class death, and might rather be read as a story of the *ouvri re*’s birth, or more accurately perhaps, her rebirth. Nicole’s life in *Ouvri re* is a journey from acquiescence to revolt. It is this acquiescence that defines her younger self and her early working life—‘je r pondais simplement: Oui, par intermittence...’, she muses in the opening chapter, ‘sans bien me rendre compte de son importance, cette chose qui se r p te, on dit “oui” sans y prendre garde’ (p.7). If she lives in revolt against her condition, it is a ‘r volte sourde et diff r e’ that manifests itself less in political action than in the drawing of everyday boundaries that

limit the factory's encroachment on her body—unlike some of her colleagues, for example, she postpones the moment when she must don the overall and clumsy security shoes that mark her as a factory worker, refusing to wear them for the journey to work (33-4). However, the narrative culminates with Nicole in overt revolt as she participates in the mobilisation against the closures in 2001. 'Je' gives way to 'nous' as she describes how the protesters took their peripheral factory into the centre of Caen, retracing in the opposite direction the journey towards the factory related at the beginning of the book. Occupying the city centre streets, spraying 'Tous des pourris' on the walls of the MEDEF offices, coating the windows of banks in eggs and flour and blocking their entrances with plastic appliance parts (pp.156-8), this 'nous' is no longer fragmented and lost for words but writes its protest in spectacular reappropriations of objects and urban space. The symbolic inversion that operates in such protests, the textual inversion represented by this journey back to the city centre and the birth of a collective subject at the end of the text thus serve to challenge the wider cultural narratives of class death that have tended to surround factory closures. Indeed, when Nicole's colleague uses the language of death to describe the closure ('tu leur expliqueras comment nous sommes morts'...), it is not an inevitable movement of history that is invoked but a betrayal:.. 'morts d'avoir eu des tricheurs et des voleurs dans notre société' (p.151).

These narratives and counter-narratives surrounding the Moulinex closures provide an insight into some of the competing understandings of the loss of industry and the meanings of class that exist in contemporary France in the wake of that loss. The Moulinex case illustrates not only the disqualificatory nature of certain media discourses and the deterministic tendencies of certain positions of critique, but also the extent to which the literary field has provided a space for other kinds of stories to be told. The wider question at stake here is that of what kind of working-class subjectivities – including political subjectivities – are available in post-Fordist France. I have suggested here that this question – and texts like Magloire's – cannot simply be dismissed as nostalgic.

With this in mind, it is worth noting that since the publication of *Ouvrière*, the mobilisation of ex-Moulinex workers in Cormelles-Le-Royal has continued in a different form through the creation of an association, led by the former trade union representatives. A decade after the factory closed, Apic Mx has some 900 members

and continues to defend the rights of former employees, challenging the application of the *plan social* in the courts, working with Mouvement national des chômeurs et des précaires (MNCP) and drawing media attention to the criminal investigation into the conduct of former Moulinex executives.¹⁴ To this extent, there is certainly some evidence that a new form of solidarity really has emerged from the factory closures. Similar associations have been formed in the wake of other factory closures—at Métaleurop-Nord and at Molex in Villemur sur Tarn, for example—and these new manifestations of ‘post-work’ worker solidarity have begun to attract the attention of researchers (Bergeron and Doray 2005; Corteel 2009; Oeser and Tourraile forthcoming). At the end of *Ouvrière* (p.162), Nicole reflects on the social rupture that the closure of Moulinex and similar factories represents: ‘hier...ouvrière – de la fin du mot j’entends insidieusement que mon heure est venue, que mon temps est passé’. Yet both Magloire’s narrative and the activities of Nicole’s real-life colleagues, who continue a different kind of ‘work’ in Cormelles, suggest that, as Nicole herself puts it earlier in the text (p.21), ‘On ne meurt pas si facilement’.

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¹ 2898 Moulinex employees were made redundant but there were also related job losses in firms that worked as sub-contractors for Moulinex. The total number of jobs lost in the region as a result of the Moulinex closures has been put at 3527. See Roupnel-Fuentes 2011, p.22.

² In both cases, the companies had gone into liquidation and the workers were seeking payments beyond the legal minimum.

³ An earlier reflection on the changes underway in the world of industrial workers can be found Azémar 1992.

⁴ This figure and that cited subsequently for employment in the agricultural sector are for 2007, which is the latest data available at present from INSEE at

http://www.insee.fr/fr/themes/tableau.asp?reg_id=98&ref_id=CMPTEF03136 accessed 22 July 2011.

⁵ See http://www.insee.fr/fr/themes/tableau.asp?reg_id=0&ref_id=NATnon03173 for figures on employment by socio-professional category and

http://www.insee.fr/fr/themes/tableau.asp?reg_id=0&ref_id=NATASF03362 for figures on unemployment. Accessed 22 July 2011.

⁶ I discuss this in more detail in a forthcoming article provisionally titled 'Cultures of Production and Cultures of Consumption in Postwar Provincial France: Moulinex and the Making of the Worker-Consumer'.

⁷ The exception is a section in the Annual Report for 1982 which reproduces some of the company's recent advertising campaigns from different countries, emphasising its international commercial presence. Archives départementales du Calvados, 2003 JP 894 2.

⁸ Annual Report 1979, pp.2-3 Archives départementales du Calvados, 2003 JP 894 2.

⁹ Martin O'Shaughnessy has noted a related tendency in French cinema, in what he sees as films that register the defeat and fragmentation of the working class. The new political cinema that he identifies (O'Shaughnessy 2007) is defined by its attempts to move beyond the narrative of defeat and articulate an aesthetic and a politics for the new landscape.

¹⁰ Details of the agreement between Mme Badet and Société d'études et d'exploitation chimique et mécanique which traded under the Légumex name can be found in Archives départementales du Calvados, 2003 JP 1058 2168.

¹¹ Pierre Blayau, who left the company with a golden handshake of 9 million francs in 2000, was charged with the misuse of funds leading to bankruptcy (the offences of 'banqueroute par détournement d'actifs' and 'banqueroute par emploi de moyens ruineux') but the case against him was dropped in January 2011. At the time of writing, Patrick Puy and two of his senior financial managers are still being prosecuted for misuse of corporate assets (abus de biens sociaux) and false accounting. <http://basse-normandie.france3.fr/info/thierry-le-paon-charge-les-banques-66927900.html> accessed 22 July 2011.

There has also been pressure from the prosecuting authorities in Nanterre for charges to be brought against key figures at the Société générale and the Crédit Lyonnais, which were *banques conseil* for Moulinex and sat on its board. <http://www.lemonde.fr/economie/article/2011/01/14/affaire-moulinex-mises-en-examen-requis-a-la-societe-generale-et-au-credit-lyonnais-1465906-3234.html> accessed 22 July 2011.

¹² This text appears on the back cover of the Livre de poche edition.

¹³ The text dates the closure to 1997 but it was actually 1993.

¹⁴ Membership figures given to me by Maguy Lalizel, President of APIC Mx in June 2010. On the associations' efforts to keep the criminal case in the public eye see <http://www.apicmx.com/pages/index.php> and Daniel Mermet's radio programme *Là-bas si j'y suis* on France inter 14 and 15 April 2011.