

Documenting deindustrialisation: Slow memory and contrasting narratives in Luxembourg and Belgium

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Abstract

This article used documentary analysis to examine how deindustrialisation is remembered differently in Luxembourg and Belgium, focusing on *D’Lëtzebuenger Stolkris* (2011) and *Des larmes d’acier* (2017). These films produce contrasting memory narratives, shaped by their countries’ fundamentally different economic trajectories. By combining slow memory theory with the concept of deindustrialisation’s ‘half-life’, the analysis reveals how present circumstances can shape the interpretation of the past. While Luxembourg’s state- and corporate-produced documentary adopts a future-oriented perspective, celebrating the successful transition from steel to finance, Athus’s worker-led narrative maintains a past-oriented focus on loss and continuing economic dependence. The production contexts, determined by economic success or failure decades after factory closures, fundamentally determine what actors narrate deindustrialisation. The findings challenge declinist interpretations by demonstrating how similar industrial transformations can generate different memory landscapes, depending on subsequent economic outcomes and the voices that narrate them.

Keywords

Belgium, deindustrialisation, documentary analysis, Luxembourg, slow memory, steel industry

Introduction

Deindustrialisation is one of the most transformative processes of the late twentieth century, with long-lasting economic, social and cultural consequences that extend far beyond factory closures. Studies of deindustrialisation have long focused on significant events from the past, such as plant shutdowns or workers’ strikes (Strangleman, 2025: 12). These early studies have considered the impact of industrial decline, often referred to as ‘body count’ (Cowie and Heathcott, 2003: 5). However, it has become clear that deindustrialisation is not a discrete event, but rather ‘a

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longer-term shift with problematic economic, social, cultural, and political impacts', as Linkon critically points out in her concept of the 'half-life' (Linkon, 2025: 33; Linkon, 2018). The effects of deindustrialisation reach beyond those immediately affected by closures, becoming deeply intertwined with memory and representations of deindustrialisation across generations. This article engages with this temporal complexity by applying the concept of slow memory. Slow memory recognises the need to study slow processes by shifting attention from eventful, situated pasts to slow-moving ones like deindustrialisation (Wüstenberg, 2023: 60).

This article examines how deindustrialisation is remembered differently in Luxembourg and Athus, Belgium, through an analysis of two documentary films. It investigates how the slow, uneven process of deindustrialisation – unfolding over decades – has directly shaped these contrasting memory narratives. Applying the concept of slow memory, the analysis addresses two central questions. First, it examines how the prolonged aftermath of deindustrialisation, rather than discrete factory closures, determines which voices narrate it – framing it either as a resolved crisis or as an ongoing challenge. Second, by taking the time to examine a case where deindustrialisation is remembered as a successful transition rather than decline, it identifies what alternative narratives emerge beyond the commonly studied 'memory of despair' (Berger, 2025: 369).

The paper employs a comparative documentary analysis to examine how specific filmmaking choices construct particular historical narratives (Sayer, 2018: 36). This transnational comparison focuses on Luxembourg and the Belgian border town of Athus, two locations that shared the same industrial history yet developed contrasting memory cultures. Both locations were integrated through the cross-border *Métallurgie et Minière de Rodange-Athus* (MMR-A) company, experiencing identical economic shocks from the oil crises and steel industry decline of the late 1970s and 1980s. MMR-A operated plants on both sides of the Luxembourg–Belgium border until 1977, when the Belgian site closed and the Luxembourg plant was modernised, remaining partially operational to this day (Verschuere, 2013: 27).

The documentaries examined, *D'Ëtzebuenger Stolkriss* (Luxemburger Wort, 2011a) and *Des larmes d'acier* (TVLux, 2017), emerged 30 to 40 years after factory closures, having developed in markedly different social and economic contexts. This reveals how shared industrial origins can produce fundamentally opposed narratives of the same historical process.

We view documentaries as cultural artefacts that actively contribute to the ongoing process of creating meaning around industrial transformation (Linkon, 2025: 39). Rather than treating these films as transparent historical records or external observations of completed history, we view them as cultural products that operate in two interconnected ways. First, they emerge as by-products of the ongoing consequences of deindustrialisation – the production contexts and individuals involved in creating these films reflect the gradual effects of factory closures and economic transitions. Second, documentaries serve as a means through which communities can actively make sense of the past in relation to their current needs (Sayer, 2018: 29).

Our analytical approach examines the contexts in which the films were produced to identify the institutional actors and social networks involved, while investigating how visual compositions, testimonial content and editorial decisions reflect and shape collective understandings of industrial decline within specific social and political contexts (De Groot, 2009: 167; Sayer, 2018: 35). The analysis considers three interconnected dimensions: the production contexts that determine which voices narrate deindustrialisation; the narrative threads through which filmmakers construct coherent accounts of complex historical processes; and the temporal orientations that frame industrial change as either a concluded episode or an ongoing transformation (Pentzold et al., 2016: 1). These documentaries play a part in how communities continue to process, negotiate and create meaning from industrial decline, even decades after factory closures. This article therefore analyses both the

slow unfolding of deindustrialisation and the time required to understand why memories of this process diverge so significantly.

Despite their geographic proximity and shared industrial history, the two regions have developed different memory cultures. Memory patterns in Athus reflect common post-industrial experiences across Western Europe and North America, where narratives of loss and disruption dominate (High, 2013: 1002; Berger, 2020: 292). The closure in 1977 resulted in over 700 job losses within months, marking a profound rupture (Biren and Dondelinger, 2019: 292; Protocole d'accord, 1977). Despite cross-border reindustrialisation efforts, Athus has struggled to regain economic independence and has become increasingly reliant on employment in Luxembourg (Diop and Lamour, 2014: 5; Leduc, 2000). In contrast, Luxembourg's dominant narrative, shaped by state and industry actors, portrays deindustrialisation as a successful transformation and an act of resilience (Scuto, 2014: 189). The decline of the steel industry after 1974 coincided with the rapid expansion of the financial sector, which is widely characterised in Luxembourgish discourse as a 'success story' of economic transformation (Birchen, 2020). This narrative was reinforced by the state's crisis management and the so-called 'Luxembourg model' (Birchen, 2020: 166; Poos, 1977), which emphasised institutional cooperation and social peace.

This study contributes to deindustrialisation research by demonstrating how the lens of slow memory, in conjunction with the concept of half-life, reveals industrial decline as a gradual and uneven process – one that is remembered differently across time and space. Documentaries, as products of deindustrialisation's half-life, do not simply reflect historical events but actively shape specific memory narratives of industrial transformation. The comparative analysis shows that the same historical rupture can generate radically divergent memory landscapes: one oriented towards resilience and adaptation, the other towards loss and mourning. While existing transnational research on this region has primarily focused on comparisons between Lorraine and Luxembourg (Raggi, 2019), industrial heritage (Reichler and Iuga, 2025), or European reindustrialisation efforts (Diop and Lamour, 2014), no comparative study has yet examined how deindustrialisation is remembered in Luxembourg and Athus. This article addresses this gap by highlighting how memory cultures diverge not only due to historical events, but also through the long-term consequences and present-day conditions that shape who is authorised to speak. While memories of deindustrialisation are often framed through personal narratives of hardship, nostalgia, and community trauma – what Berger (2025: 369) terms the 'memory of despair' – this study also foregrounds alternative memory formations that emphasise resilience and successful transition, which have often been overlooked in deindustrialisation studies (Strangleman, 2025: 12).

The following sections examine how each documentary constructs its respective memory narrative through visual and editorial strategies. Section '*Des larmes d'acier* (2017): narrating loss in the past and present' analyses *Des larmes d'acier*, focusing on its past-oriented, worker-led memory culture in Athus. Section '*D'Ëtzebuenger Stolkris 1975–1984* (2011): narrating success and transformation' turns to *D'Ëtzebuenger Stolkris*, exploring how institutional actors in Luxembourg frame deindustrialisation as a story of resilience and transformation. Through this comparative lens, the article reveals how documentaries shape the remembering of deindustrialisation and are part of its half-life.

***Des larmes d'acier* (2017): narrating loss in the past and present**

This section examines how *Des larmes d'acier* creates a memory of deindustrialisation based on worker testimony, narratives of loss and betrayal and a focus on the past. The analysis demonstrates how the ongoing economic struggles in Athus shape the memory of the closure, revealing

that memory is formed not only by historical events but also by their long-term consequences and present-day relevance.

Worker-led memory: production context and grassroots commemoration

Des larmes d'acier (Tears of Steel), produced for the Belgian television channel TVLux in 2017, commemorates the 40th anniversary of the closure of the Athus steel mill. The film has a two-part structure: 'La vie à l'usine' (Life at the Factory) and 'Déclin et fermeture de l'usine' (Decline and Closure of the Factory).

Unlike Luxembourg's institutionalised, top-down memory practices, Athus' commemorative culture is rooted in grassroots initiatives. The local museum, 'Athus et l'Acier', which was established in 1998 by former workers, played a central role in the production of the documentary – three of the six interviewees serve on its board, and the museum provided archival materials. This bottom-up approach to memory construction is further exemplified by other initiatives undertaken by the local museum, which has emerged as a pivotal actor in shaping local memory. In 2017, the museum and the media agency L'Avenir commemorated the anniversary with various cultural productions, including an online exhibition (Gerouville et al., 2017). Municipal support strengthens this worker-led memory work. The museum's president, Anne-Marie Biren, and the town's former mayor, Jean-Paul Dondelinger, co-published a comprehensive book on the town's industrial history, emphasising the closure of the plant in 1977 (Biren and Dondelinger, 2019). This demonstrates that local historical literature originates from the perspectives of workers and grassroots movements, with the publications themselves functioning as cultural artefacts that extend the half-life of deindustrialisation (Linkon, 2025: 39).

The production context of *Des larmes d'acier* directly reflects Athus' ongoing struggle with the aftermath of deindustrialisation. Forty years after the closure of the steel plant, the town is still challenged by the disappearance of its steel industry and has become economically dependent on Luxembourg. The number of cross-border workers from Belgium increased from 3700 in 1961 to over 150,000 by 2010, with Belgians making up 25.3% of the Luxembourgish workforce by 2012 (Gargano, 2012; Gramme, 2013). In his foreword to the co-authored book with the museum's president, former mayor Dondelinger (Biren and Dondelinger, 2019: 33) acknowledged that Luxembourg's economic growth creates 'knock-on effects which, like a multifaceted domino effect, are hampering our own way of life'.

This dependency shapes the memory narratives produced in the documentary. Athus residents face the double burden of industrial loss and ongoing economic decline, living in the shadow of their prosperous neighbour. Unlike regions that have successfully transitioned after deindustrialisation, Athus lacks corporate or state actors to narrate alternative stories of recovery (Diop and Lamour, 2014: 5). This ongoing economic dependency explains why worker narratives dominate in Athus; they emerge from communities that are still living with the unresolved consequences of industrial decline (Berger, 2020: 291).

The selection of interviewees – exclusively former workers and a trade union representative – makes it clearer whose voices recount the process of deindustrialisation in this memory landscape. Notably absent are company executives, government officials or European Commission representatives who participated in the restructuring negotiations (Biren and Dondelinger, 2019: 307). Archival materials sourced from the museum and the private collections of local photographers who documented the 1977 strikes further reinforce this worker-centred perspective. This curatorial choice excludes perspectives that might depict deindustrialisation as an economic necessity or opportunity, instead creating a memory that is focused on the past and emphasises loss rather than transformation.

The documentary's main narrative is built on autobiographical accounts from former workers who interpret their personal experiences through a broader community narrative of abandonment and decline. Although Fischer (2008: 39) argues that witnesses in historical documentaries act as 'guarantors of authenticity', these interviewees do more than simply recall the events of 1977: They reconstruct their memories through the lens of Athus's present-day reality – a town that continues to struggle with economic decline, dependency on Luxembourg, and failed attempts at recovery. The interviewees do not position themselves as detached witnesses to a past event, but rather as people still living with its unresolved consequences. After 40 years of economic stagnation, their recollections frame the 1977 closure not as a concluded historical episode but as the beginning of an ongoing struggle that persists into the present. This temporal dynamic reveals a critical insight: had Athus successfully transitioned to a post-industrial economy, these same workers might have narrated the closure entirely differently. Instead, ongoing hardship has made abandonment and betrayal the dominant interpretive framework through which the past is understood. The following section examines how the documentary translates this framework into specific narrative threads of collective trauma, betrayal, and mourning.

Narrating loss: trauma, betrayal and collective mourning

The documentary's central narrative thread portrays the plant closure in 1977 as a collective trauma that remains emotionally raw 40 years later. Workers' testimonies depict deindustrialisation not merely as economic restructuring, but as an existential threat to their identity. Perhaps most telling is the account of a worker who committed suicide on the day he signed his early retirement agreement, as recounted by René Bressard, former president of the workers' delegation. Charles Bianchini, a former worker, characterises the closure as a 'catastrophe' that destroyed his hopes and dreams. Similarly, Guy Boon recounts seeking refuge in his garage to cry after his last shift, a moment the documentary underscores with close-up shots of his teary eyes and sombre music, amplifying the emotional weight of his recollection:

My wife asked me 'Well?'. I couldn't answer her – I went into my garage and cried. I pulled myself together, came out and told her it was over. This time it was really over. And it still makes me well up now, as you can see. (16:50)

This curatorial approach contrasts directly with that of the Luxembourg documentary, which uses suspenseful music to emphasise the economic rather than emotional consequences of deindustrialisation.

Beyond personal trauma, the documentary constructs a narrative of collective betrayal. The film identifies the workers as a community in conflict with company directives, particularly the decision to close the Athus plant while keeping the Luxembourg plant active (Biren and Dondelinger, 2019: 292). The documentary develops this theme primarily through its portrayal of strike movements. Rather than providing a broader context for the strikes within economic and political frameworks, the documentary highlights confrontational moments, such as workers attempting to destroy a bridge connecting the Belgian and Luxembourgish steel plants, and storming the Luxembourg Embassy. The narrator summarises the workers' accounts, describing the demonstrations as 'harsh' and often 'close to confrontation' while emphasising how the movement 'gained the support of an entire region' as communities recognised that it was not just a single factory that was at stake, but the livelihood of an entire region. Through these narrative choices, the invisible voice-over mediates between the present viewer and the past events, selectively emphasising moments of confrontation and solidarity that serve the documentary's broader narrative of betrayal and loss.

Recollections of the strike movement are interwoven with video footage and photographs from the private collections of Pierre Vandenbinden and Pascal Jacob (TVLux, 2017). These materials depict scenes from the month-long ‘Athus, ville Morte’ (Athus, Dead City) strike that gripped the region throughout August 1977 (Biren and Dondelinger, 2019: 312; Verschueren, 2013: 29). The footage captures striking workers occupying railway tracks, setting up street blockades and confronting police forces in demonstrations that exemplify collective resistance. Employing strategic tactics that extended beyond the factory grounds, the workers blocked the Luxembourg border to cut off communications between the two countries and disrupt transport infrastructure, causing unprecedented diplomatic tensions between Belgium and Luxembourg (Verschueren, 2013: 30). This direct action was intended to challenge the steel company, whose headquarters were located just across the border in Pétange, for deciding to close only the steelworks in Belgium and not in Luxembourg. The origin of the footage also reinforces the documentary’s bottom-up perspective. It was originally captured by participants and local witnesses. Consequently, the documentary captures the emotional intensity and community solidarity that characterised the response to industrial closure.

Crucially, the theme of betrayal operates in a dual temporal context throughout the documentary: it addresses both the abandonment of 1977 and the ongoing sense of abandonment experienced at the time of its production in 2017. René Bressard explicitly describes Athus as having been ‘abandoned’ by the Luxembourg company, while the narrator personifies the town as a ‘wounded girl’ whose suffering continues:

She who once shone with the laughter of passers-by and the roar of voices in pubs is now but a shadow of her former self. She sobs like an abandoned child . . . All that remains of the old lady, a little rusty, are a few traces, a few buildings, some objects in a museum, some street names, memories of a glorious past that will echo in the heart of the town for a long time to come. (21:00)

This narrative of betrayal is reinforced visually through footage depicting urban decay: empty streets, abandoned buildings and ‘For Sale’ signs. This exemplifies what Mah (2012: 3) conceptualises as ‘ruination’: physical remnants that actively mediate between temporal states. These visual traces daylight how the effects of industrial decline continue to evolve and shape communities long after factory closures, capturing the essence of Linkon’s half-life concept and the slow memory approach. The documentary’s 40-year timeframe thus reveals a continuous process rather than a completed event: economic stagnation and social fragmentation actively reshape how the 1977 closure is remembered.

The documentary applies its narrative of loss and betrayal to both 1977 and 2017, enabling viewers to understand current struggles through historical experience. The closing narration makes this temporal link explicit: while Luxembourg has recovered, Athus remains the ‘forgotten girl, physically wounded’. By integrating past events with present circumstances, the film demonstrates that ongoing economic hardship fundamentally shapes how workers interpret the 1977 closure – not as a historical fact but as a lived reality.

The documentary thus constructs a worker-centred memory of deindustrialisation shaped by present-day economic precarity. This past-oriented focus on mourning and abandonment contrasts sharply with the future-oriented memory of successful adaptation examined in the Luxembourg documentary. In Athus, 40 years of continued struggle have enabled worker voices to frame deindustrialisation as an unresolved crisis – the first of the two contrasting memory formations this paper examines.

D’Lëtzebuenger Stolkris 1975–1984 (2011): narrating success and transformation

This section analyses how deindustrialisation is remembered in the documentary *D’Lëtzebuenger Stolkris*, with a focus on the role of institutional actors and the theme of economic renewal. Through the lens of slow memory, the analysis reveals that it is gradual economic restructuring, rather than individual factory closures, that is central to how the past is remembered.

State and corporate memory: the production of successful transition

Produced by the Luxembourgish newspaper *Luxemburger Wort* in 2011, *D’Lëtzebuenger Stolkris* (The Luxembourg Steel Crisis) reflects a distinctly institutional approach to remembering deindustrialisation. Its production coincided with the 100-year anniversary of the Luxembourg steel industry, reinforcing a narrative of continuity and resilience. Unlike the commemorative approach of the Belgian documentary, this film presents itself as offering ‘a look behind the scenes of the Luxembourg steel crisis’, emphasising factual presentation over emotional remembrance (*Luxemburger Wort*, 2011a).

The production context reveals how present-day economic circumstances influence who is permitted to recount the past. The documentary was produced alongside a special issue of *Luxemburger Wort* entitled ‘100 Years of Steel in Luxembourg 1911–2011’ (*Luxemburger Wort*, 2011b), as part of the anniversary celebrations for ArcelorMittal, the successor to Luxembourg’s dominant steel company, ARBED (Scuto and Knebler, 2010: 259). This corporate anniversary framing is significant because, by 2011, ArcelorMittal had not only survived but also achieved further international expansion. This created conditions in which deindustrialisation could be remembered as a strategic transformation rather than a traumatic loss. The newspaper’s political position further reinforces this top-down construction of memory. *Luxemburger Wort* has long-standing ties to the Christian Social People’s Party (CSV), the leading coalition partner in Luxembourg’s government at the time (Hilgert, 2004: 224). These affiliations highlight the institutional nature of this memory landscape, which is further evident in the selection of interviewees in the documentary analysed in the next section.

Together, ArcelorMittal’s involvement and the centenary context reflect Luxembourg’s dominant public memory of the steel crisis, which is shaped by state and corporate actors rather than by workers themselves. This divergence between public and private memory in Luxembourg, as emphasised by Scuto (2014: 189) and Birchen (2020: 169), demonstrates a pattern: where economic recovery succeeds, institutional actors gain authority to construct public narratives of deindustrialisation, while worker voices become marginalised in commemorative spaces even as they persist in private memory.

Recent oral history projects done in Luxembourg reveal a more nuanced picture. Worker testimonies show that personal memories of hardship can coexist with acceptance of official success narratives (Centre national de l’audiovisuel, 2023; Scuto, 2014). Workers have incorporated institutional narratives into their personal accounts, creating layered memories in which official success stories coexist with their own experiences of loss. Former workers simultaneously recall traumatic experiences while affirming the overall success of crisis management.

Understanding this production context is essential as it explains why the documentary constructs memory so differently from the *Athus* film. By 2011, Luxembourg’s economic success enabled institutional and worker memories to coexist, serving different functions. The documentary emerges as a product of the half-life of deindustrialisation, shaped by four decades of successful transformation that validated institutional crisis management.

Narrating resilience and successful adaptation

Based on the institutional production context outlined above, the documentary uses particular narrative and visual techniques to depict deindustrialisation as a successful adaptation. Three interrelated narrative threads shape this narrative: the Tripartite Committee's crisis management, corporate survival and transformation and the transition to finance. Together, these threads transform deindustrialisation from a moment of economic and social crisis into a strategic recalibration.

Notably, it is not individual factory closures that are remembered, but rather the gradual changes linked to national crisis management and economic resilience. The documentary's central narrative focuses on the role of the Tripartite Committee, the national crisis management instrument, which occupies approximately one-third of its total runtime. The Tripartite Committee is integral to the 'Luxembourg model' narrative. Coined by Minister Jacques Poos (1977) and further established by the Information and Press Service of the Government (1982) during the steel crisis, it describes the institutionalised dialogue between government, business, and labour representatives at the Tripartite Conference, which was created in 1977 (Memorial A: Journal Officiel du Grand-Duché du Luxembourg, 1977). While Trausch (1992: 231) labelled this narrative a 'myth', incorporating only top-down perspectives, it remains the dominant framework for interpreting Luxembourg's industrial transformation (Birchen, 2020: 169; Information and Press Service of the Government, 2024).

The selection of interviewees in the documentary – one politician (Jacques Santer), one company representative (Michel Würth) and two trade unionists (John Castegnaro and Marcel Glesener) – directly mirrors this tripartite structure. This reinforces the narrative framing deindustrialisation as an opportunity for institutional innovation. The enduring political significance of this framework is evident in contemporary government discourse, which describes the Tripartite as 'one of the fundamental social and political achievements of the Grand Duchy' (Information and Press Service of the Government, 2024).

The documentary presents extensive archival footage of conference meetings and speeches, including one by former Prime Minister Pierre Werner, positioning this institutional innovation as the primary mechanism through which industrial decline was successfully managed. The visual representation of the Tripartite features photographs depicting government officials, trade union representatives, and company executives engaged in formal discussions around conference tables. A particularly noteworthy sequence depicts John Castegnaro, former president of the OGBL trade union, leaving the Chamber of Deputies in formal attire, accompanied by other Tripartite members. As an interviewee, Castegnaro explicitly characterises the Tripartite as a success, attributing the resolution of the steel crisis to the willingness of all parties to engage in dialogue. He emphasises that without these efforts, the outcome would have been 'dramatic', leading to widespread unemployment – a counterfactual that the documentary presents as successfully avoided through institutional cooperation.

Even the few worker testimonies reinforce this narrative of successful management within the film highlighting initiatives like the 'Travaux extraordinaires d'intérêt général' (TEIG) that provided alternative employment for workers affected by factory closures (Trausch, 2017: 268). Only Nicolas Goertzinger, who coordinated a TEIG group, briefly acknowledges that these experiences were not universally positive for workers – a momentary disruption in the documentary's otherwise seamless success narrative. This exception demonstrates how worker voices are included only insofar as they affirm institutional effectiveness, reflecting the exclusion of worker perspectives identified in the production context analysis. This framing transforms potential social conflict into collaborative problem-solving.

The emphasis on the Tripartite serves contemporary political purposes beyond historical commemoration. The framework continued functioning effectively after the steel crisis and throughout subsequent crises, including the 2008 economic crisis, thus validating both the original crisis management approach and the government's present-day crisis management (Bodry, 2024: 316). For the CSV-led government, reinforcing this memory in 2011 allowed it to highlight its effectiveness during a period when the Tripartite's legitimacy remained politically relevant.

The second major narrative thread is the survival and transformation of the steel company ARBED. The documentary explicitly portrays corporate continuity as being essential to national prosperity. Included in the film is the Prime Minister's 1977 speech, in which he declares that the country is 'confronting a crisis and restructuring of its principal industry, the one that has created its wealth for a century'. The narrator further emphasises this connection by stating that 'the fate of the whole country is linked to the survival of the steel company'. This narrative emphasises corporate persistence through transformation rather than shutdowns and industrial disappearance. This framing serves ArcelorMittal's contemporary self-presentation as a successful global corporation with deep national roots. By 2011, the company's survival and international expansion validated this narrative choice, demonstrating how present-day corporate prosperity shapes the reconstruction of past crises. Where the Belgian documentary focuses on industrial decline and community abandonment, the Luxembourg film portrays corporate adaptation as a symbol of national resilience.

The third narrative thread, Luxembourg's transition to finance, completes the transformation narrative. Historian and expert interviewee Charles Barthel emphasises the 'fortuitous timing' of the financial sector's rise alongside industrial decline. Former LCGB trade union president Marcel Glesener credits this sector with maintaining 'social peace' during the transition, while the narrator asserts that 'the steel crisis reshaped the Luxembourg steel industry, with the rise of the financial centre facilitating the transition'. This framing transforms deindustrialisation from an economic catastrophe into a strategic opportunity, made possible by the financial sector's evident success by 2011.

Together, these three narrative threads – institutional cooperation, corporate survival and financial sector growth – construct a memory oriented towards adaptation and renewal. The documentary's use of music reinforces this focus on economic adaptation rather than emotional testimonies. Unlike the Athus documentary, where music underscores personal testimonies to heighten the emotional impact, *D'Lëtzebuenger Stolkris* reserves musical accompaniment for moments that emphasise the national economic situation rather than individual suffering. Musical accompaniment appears during segments addressing unemployment and economic forecasts, or as an atmospheric backdrop to the prime minister's speech describing the national crisis. This strategic deployment emphasises collective national concerns rather than personal experiences.

The documentary's temporal framing completes its success narrative. The title, *D'Lëtzebuenger Stolkris 1975–1984*, imposes a narrative boundary, framing the steel crisis as a temporally contained episode. However, by suggesting that the crisis ended in 1984, the film glosses over the ongoing changes that continued into the 1990s, such as the closure of the last blast furnace in 1997 (Scuto and Knebler, 2010: 255). This temporal containment contrasts sharply with the inclusion of present-day footage depicting ongoing struggle in the Athus film. The Luxembourg documentary clearly portrays deindustrialisation – or, in its own terminology, 'the steel crisis' – as a resolved issue. Successful recovery enables the past to be presented as a resolved issue rather than an ongoing process.

The documentaries both show that memories of deindustrialisation are shaped by slow changes rather than sudden events. Here, the shift towards finance, the ongoing management of crises, and the persistence of steel companies fundamentally influence how individuals interpret deindustrialisation, positioning it as a period that has been overcome. The institutional infrastructure of the

Tripartite, combined with the expansion of the financial sector and the internationalisation of steel companies, produced conditions in which deindustrialisation could be perceived as a period of transformation rather than rupture.

This challenges the narratives of decline that dominate deindustrialisation studies (Fontaine et al., 2024: 310; Strangleman, 2025: 12). By moving beyond ‘smokestack nostalgia’ accounts (High et al., 2017: 6), and the focus on single-industry towns, the Luxembourg case reveals how a successful economic transition can enable alternative memory formations. *D’Lëtzebuenger Stolkriss* offers no space for nostalgic recollections of industrial life or lamentations of lost community. Instead, it presents a narrative of successful transition, shaped by institutional actors and aligned with national prosperity.

Luxembourg is a case that is often overlooked in deindustrialisation studies, precisely because deindustrialisation is not widely recognised. Its relative invisibility demonstrates the deep influence of memory on which aspects of the past receive attention in research. Taking the time to examine these alternative memories of deindustrialisation, which slow memory enables, allows us to appreciate its full complexity. As with the Athus documentary, *D’Lëtzebuenger Stolkriss* must be understood as part of the slow process of deindustrialisation and its aftermath, and as a product of specific economic trajectories. Through this lens, we can see and understand why and what alternative memories of deindustrialisation exist. The constellation of actors shaping memory is the direct result of the gradual processes that follow factory closures, be that economic struggle or recovery.

Conclusion

This article set out to examine how deindustrialisation is remembered differently in Luxembourg and Athus through documentary film, and how the slow, uneven process of deindustrialisation has directly shaped these contrasting memory narratives. The analysis addressed two central questions through the framework of slow memory: how the prolonged aftermath of deindustrialisation determines which voices narrate it, and what alternative narratives emerge when deindustrialisation is remembered as a successful transition rather than a decline.

The findings reveal that present-day economic circumstances fundamentally determine who builds memory and how the past is interpreted. In Luxembourg, a successful transition to a finance-based economy by 2011 enabled institutional actors to narrate deindustrialisation as a strategic adaptation and national resilience. The 2011 documentary *D’Lëtzebuenger Stolkriss* reflects this institutional dominance, framing the steel crisis through narratives of effective crisis management and corporate survival. Workers’ voices, while present in private memory, are marginalised in public commemoration – a consequence of economic success that validated institutional narratives. By contrast, Athus’s 40 years of continued struggle, economic dependency on Luxembourg, and failed recovery efforts have allowed worker voices to dominate memory. The 2017 documentary *Des larmes d’acier* constructs a past-oriented narrative centred on loss, betrayal and ongoing abandonment, demonstrating that where recovery is difficult, affected communities preserve memories that frame deindustrialisation not as a concluded history but as an unresolved crisis.

These divergent memory formations serve distinct cultural functions. Luxembourg’s future-oriented narrative legitimises institutional crisis management and affirms national prosperity, making the documentary a tool for contemporary political and economic purposes. Athus’s backward-looking narrative provides a framework for understanding ongoing marginalisation, giving voice to communities still living with deindustrialisation’s consequences. The documentaries are both products of deindustrialisation’s half-life and active agents in shaping collective understanding – they do not simply record the past but actively construct it through the lens of present circumstances.

This comparative approach answers calls to expand deindustrialisation studies beyond narratives of decline. The Luxembourg case reveals what could be termed as a ‘memory of resilience’ operating alongside the more commonly studied ‘memory of despair’ exemplified by Athus and identified by Berger (2020: 369). Significantly, Luxembourg is often overlooked in deindustrialisation research precisely because its successful transition makes deindustrialisation less visible – a paradox that demonstrates memory’s profound influence on which aspects of industrial change receive scholarly attention. Taking the time to examine this alternative memory, what the slow memory lens enables, reveals the full complexity of how industrial transformation is processed. The constellation of actors shaping memory – whether institutional bodies or marginalised workers – emerges directly from the gradual economic and social processes following factory closures.

The study further demonstrates that geographic proximity and shared industrial origins do not guarantee similar memory outcomes. Instead, the economic and institutional developments that follow deindustrialisation determine which narratives are legitimised and which voices are excluded. Documentary analysis, situated within these broader contexts, reveals how cultural production serves contemporary political and emotional needs.

Future research should extend this approach by examining other cultural productions – literature, museum exhibitions, commemorative practices – in regions with varying post-industrial outcomes to test whether these patterns hold across different contexts. Particularly valuable would be investigating cross-border reception: How did workers in Athus respond to Luxembourg’s narrative of successful crisis management from which they were excluded? Conversely, how was Athus’s narrative of loss perceived in Luxembourg? Such research would reveal how memories circulate and are contested across national boundaries (Wüstenberg, 2019: 372), deepening understanding of transnational memory in deindustrialised regions.

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Data availability statement

The data analysed during the current study is publicly available online:

Luxemburger Wort (2011a) D’Lëtzebuurger Stolkris: 1975-1984. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ka27-sl3Qco&t=1189s>.

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