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ON

WOMEN'S FILMS

ACROSS WORLDS AND GENERATIONS

BLOOMSBURY

19

"Once Upon Her Time?"

The Cinema of Valérie Massadian,
or, Living and Creating at the
Periphery of Patriarchy*Jeremi Szaniawski*¹*She comes from the animal that I once was, that I still am,
and that I think I will never let go of.*

VALÉRIE MASSADIAN

A little girl is sitting on a couch covered in a colorful, thick, woolen knit patchwork. She is playing with a jigsaw puzzle, talking to herself. Her name is Nana. She is wearing a long-sleeved garnet t-shirt doubled with a short-sleeved light and dark purple striped jumper, a denim blue skirt, crimson stockings, and pink galoshes (Figure 19.1). Changing light, the sound of the wind and birds chirping, and a couple of twigs behind her, protruding against a white wooden panel, betray the fact that the scene takes place outside: it is a sunny, early spring day. Nothing strange here upon first glance—a child playing alone outside her home, talking to herself, as children do.

At this stage of Valérie Massadian's award-winning debut feature *Nana* (2011), we can only intuit that the eponymous little girl's chatter is filling a void left by her absent, single mother, on this remote corner of a farmstead.



FIGURE 19.1 *Nana* (Valérie Massadian, 2011; valerie massadian—gaijin).

But as the little girl curses, only partly comprehending the profanity of the language she freely blends with more innocuous utterances, it becomes safer to assume that the child may be unwittingly berating and invoking her absent mother. Duration, repetition, and play with scale of shots subtly undergird this hypothesis: the first, medium shot is a variation on a nearly identical scene earlier on in the film, when Nana similarly plays and talks to herself—but without cursing, and with her mother nearby. That she is now alone is reinforced in the next, almost crushing long shot (Figure 19.2): it reveals the old farmhouse and dwarfs the couch, on which the little girl now barely registers—emphasizing less a bucolic and pastoral setting and much rather her isolation. Still, she goes on playing, animistic and magical thinking pervading her speech (“Go away, Sun . . . Oh, alright, if you want to, then, stay”).

In a matter of two shots, the scene captures, beyond the *photogénie* of the child, in her haphazardly colorful attire and blending of various registers of speech; in the ramshackle home; in the couch set in an outdoor space that is neither really garden nor mere clearing—a discreet *off* quality, a sense of conflated registers and categories. The scene is neither dark nor disturbing in tone, but ever so slightly unnerving. The child has indeed been left to her own devices, her talking to herself and to the nature around her filling out the void left by the mother's disappearance. In doing so, she inhabits and reclaims this space. In more ways than one, the project of Massadian's cinema as a whole is allegorized in this scene: the director slices out a share of territory for her audiovisual expression and makes it her own.

A former Nan Goldin model and later photographer of note in her own right, Valérie Massadian possesses an inescapably singular and powerful



FIGURE 19.2 *Nana* (Valérie Massadian, 2011; valerie massadian—gaijin).

gaze, through which she scrutinizes the bodies of mostly non-professional actors in disaffected spaces, which she symbolically redeems from the brink of abjection or oblivion. The director thus reveals the rich and layered behind the guise of the mundane or the everyday, and the infinite density that each moment may contain.

The similarities between the director's first two feature films (after *Nana* came *Milla* [2017]) are numerous. The hitherto short oeuvre (which four shorts complete) is cogent in its aesthetics: few if any camera movements, careful static compositions shot in video, editing of deliberate poise, with shots averaging at around one minute in length each. Themes and motifs recur: childhood, fatherlessness, and living on the margins/in nature. Overall, characters find themselves alone, away from the *socium*, as studied through the angle of child- and motherhood (biological or surrogate). While the female protagonist remains entrenched at the core, other characters come and go, their appearances and disappearances, through consummate work with ellipsis, often unaccounted for—as in the case of *Nana*'s mother—all the while allowing for new spaces, territories, domains, to emerge or be negotiated within already existing zones.² Massadian's self-professed interest lies in margins: the notion of transitional moments, social outcasts, disaffected spaces, is particularly useful to an inquiry of her cinema. It allows us to understand the way she engages not only with narrative, with filmmaking, but also with loci of marginality—both realistic and archetypal. It also reveals the director's preoccupation with “marginal” narrative genres and art forms and media, which also account for her work with scale and size, crucial to a fuller understanding of her cinema.

At work and play: Non-professional (and) child actors

With *Nana*, Massadian inscribes herself in a tradition among French female filmmakers, identified by Emma Wilson, making the “female child, rather than the mother, their sentient, sensing and apprehensive subject” (2007, 171). The director reveals, of the child, on the one hand, the vibrant vitality and *photogénie*, and on the other hand, the great ability to observe, absorb, imitate, and replicate (indeed, to invoke). This undercuts the idea whereby children are imperfect or nascent versions of adults: *Nana* wants, and to an extent needs—before being forced to by circumstances—to be responsible and self-sufficient.³ In a touching scene, after her mother has showered and rinsed her, the little girl dons a bathrobe and brushes her hair with a comb, both objects oversized for her small body and hands. She plays “grown-up” with a mix of mimicry, coquettishness, and dignity.⁴ As Massadian has recounted, the spirited child actress (Kelyna Lecomte) wanted to assert such an independent, adult-like stance herself, pretending, for instance, to be able to read and write. This attitude informs numerous scenes in the second half of the film, where we see *Nana* putting on her clothes by herself, or reenacting a fairy tale she had read with her mother,⁵ which she has memorized and retells almost to the “t,” although endearingly inverting two episodes. In so doing, the little girl ever so slightly betrays her actual inability to read—both in real life and in the film, blending the fact of being in front of and for the camera, and in and of herself as child and fictional character: she is Kelyna Lecomte and *Nana* at one and the same time.⁶

This idea of doubling, of hybridizing, speaks to Massadian's cinema as one in which traditionally heterogeneous layers are combined. In a couple of scenes, Lecomte's glances at the camera indicate a little girl, and no longer a character, playing with the actress-mother and the filmmaker-invisible friend, or running offscreen after having started a fire, clearly following safety instructions from the crew. Yet, this breaking of the proverbial fourth wall ruins nothing at all, the film having established a world and seemingly unshakable rules of its own. This has to do with the compelling nature of bodies, in which Massadian has claimed to have greater trust than in words.⁷ Or, put differently, a trust in what the bodies express, both as real physical bodies of actors and those of fictional characters, rather than what lines of dialogue they may utter. The durativity of the shots only reinforces the physical presence of the actors, even as they are alone and do very little in a traditional narrative sense. Says Massadian of *Nana*: “I knew what I wanted to look for—the relationship to death, solitude, the physicality of a child and how often [children are] shown as fragile little things when they're like monsters and are so strong” (in Hubert 2012).

Children are not only exceptionally resilient creatures, able to cope with a great deal of psychological adversity, devising various strategies to deal with abandonment or loneliness; they also proceed to acquiring knowledge and a sense of the world by a mechanism of repetition—think of the pleas for repeating the same story, over and over again, in what seems like a universal phase in any child, around age three to six. We see a strong parallel here between this drive for repetition in children and the method Massadian devised for her film: the director worked for over a year with Lecomte, and the two regarded the shoot as a vast experiment in play and repetition, yielding a staggering eighty hours of footage—which only video technology could enable. The amount of time dedicated to capturing the right moment accounts for the director's approach to time and modes of being, again blurring the lines between filming and living, playing and working, outside of received financial and temporal film production norms and constraints. As a consequence and function of her method, Massadian's films are endowed with a "becalmed yet intense charge" that has not escaped the commentators of her work, and attesting to a complex approach to cinematic time—replayed here not just in terms of length, slowness, or contemplation (as Jay Kuehner points out [2017]) but indeed in terms of layering to the point of embodiment.

The notion of embodiment carried by the *photogénie* and pure presence of the non-professional child actor, to which the director adds cinematic duration, echoes distantly conceptions of a cinema of "being" discussed by thinkers such as Epstein, Kracauer, Bazin, and Deleuze, about the purported possibilities of cinema to provide pure presence, to capture a world of pure sensation, enabled by the non-human capabilities of the camera (see Cramer 2016). I would like to suggest that Massadian succeeds where many of her male counterparts have faltered: embracing this cinema of being not through transcendence (and by trying to evoke "being" through construct) but through immanence (channeling the "being" around us); not by pitting herself against history, the *socium*, or summoning the aesthetics of past masters and gatekeepers, but by acting from the periphery, where being is seen and revealed with and by a renewed eye. At the same time, her cinema entirely resists any alignment with the categories usually associated with that mode of "being" ("art cinema," "second cinema," "auteur cinema," but also, and even more crucially, "contemplative" or "slow" cinema).

In Massadian, time is rich, dense, and layered, but history (as male construct?) is almost totally canceled out, something her work with ellipsis and avoidance of most specific urban/technological markers also underlines. Instead, what we are given is a more immediate, timeless, and immanent relationship to nature: the sound of the wind, the barking of dogs, the chirping of birds, like nature's own nursery rhyme, are what imparts its rhythm to this world, an indifferent sonic landscape to everyday occurrences. Yet, this extraction of the characters and narrative from a given history does not

mean that Massadian's cinema is not political for all that. It lays out a very concrete topography and delineates two major zones or territories therein: the patriarchal on the one hand, located at the center (discipline, slaughter, dominate nature and make it a servant) and the matriarchal on the other (cohabit, inhabit, understand nature, at the risk of being absorbed by it), clearly relegated to the margins, where new adventures and possibilities await the filmmaker, the characters/actors, and the viewer.

Life and death at the periphery (and center)

This notion of patriarchal center/matriarchal periphery is expressed very clearly in the diegetic universe and structure of *Nana*. The film opens with a documentary-like shot (Figure 19.3), revealing a barren and gray farm courtyard somewhere in France.⁸ There, two male farmers kill a pig, under the gaze of Nana and two little boys. The action is shown as dispassionate, homey, even: one farmer affectionately praises the restless animal for its beauty, while the other swiftly stuns and gores it. The children look on, asking, when the thick dark liquid spurts from the open wound into a bucket, whether it is paint or blood. The scene and this apparently innocuous line of dialogue is of course telling in several ways: the children (the two boys grew up on the farm, while Nana may be a more recent import) know very well that the pig has been slain. But they coyly negotiate the violence of this matter-of-fact confrontation with a foundational taboo. In so doing, they create this symbolic space wherein things are yet to be reduced to categories, where language can still have multimodal valences, and where magical thinking reigns supreme. This will have significant bearing on the proceedings, once the film lapses into less-than-documentary realms, with oneiric elements subtly blended in the mix.

To this realistic, near documentary, anthropological aspect, conveyed by the undistinguished and odd framing of the opening shot (to which a cut to a zoomed-in shot of the dead pig adds an even more *vérité*, unrefined quality), Massadian adds the archetypal dimension, centering male/patriarchal order around the ritual sacrifice, meant, very literally here, to symbolize the evacuation of the abject and its reappropriation as a means of community building. In the three-minute shot, the filmmaker establishes a realm, where man slaughters, while also meaning to build an order (it is noteworthy that both farmers express concern for the pig's integrity and value, making sure the animal does not break its leg in its uneasy dance with death). In not so un-Lévi Straussian or Girardian terms, the animal slaughter stands in for human sacrifice, correlating with taboo and cementing patriarchal civilization. This male-typified farm is a place of killing-as-usual, production, and consumption, where death is accepted by denizens of the farmstead, neither unfazed by, nor alienated from it. All this symbolic charge



FIGURE 19.3 *Nana* (Valérie Massadian, 2011; *valerie massadian—gâijin*).

accounts much for the ineffable eerie sheen of the otherwise drab and gray rural location.⁹

This male locus is set against the equally symbolic space of femininity—the derelict cottage, somewhere on the property, where Nana will spend the rest of the film, partly with her mother. It is soon apparent that the adult is mentally unstable, suffering likely from some sort of borderline personality disorder. Her rash actions, her constant state of disgruntlement and anger, only abate during moments of play with her daughter. Otherwise, the young woman only begrudgingly fulfills her motherly duties: gathering sticks for the hearth, bathing and feeding her daughter (but not helping her cut her meat). And then, about midway through the film, she leaves—an act of abandonment that seems part of an oft-repeated pattern, to which the child has quietly grown accustomed.¹⁰

Much as in the opening scene of the pig slaying, the social and anthropological commentary—the single mother unfit in the eyes of society to raise a child whom she leaves alone for extended periods of time—is doubled and reinforced by the archetypal and symbolic: the mother recreates a matriarchal realm, bereft of most modern comforts and technological appliances, and where objects seem to have shifted from a functional to a vaguely decorative, or possibly shamanic, register. There, the child has to learn to function on her own, at a very early age, in order to survive in what appears at first like a charming and pastoral if decaying space, but which in time reveals itself to be quietly uncanny, once the mother physically removes herself from the situation. Yet, she remains symbolically present in all of Nana's actions, who repeats her words and actions, and thus invokes her.

While *Nana* features no biological father figure, the grandfather, Pappy, attempts, however imperfectly, to be the benign and quiet caretaker to the little girl during the long spells of absence by her mother, from whom he is clearly estranged (she only seems willing to address him through aggressive and senseless notes left on the windshield of his car). After the killing of the pig, Pappy entertains Nana by showing her piglets. "They are little roasts," she exclaims, wise beyond her years, and untainted yet by cynicism. Then, the two go on a bucolic walk through the fields and forest. What appears like the opportunity for some bonding acquires a very different sheen when Pappy shows Nana how to set a trap to kill small rodents. Nana looks on, always willing to imitate and emulate her adult caregivers. The import of the scene, as in many other instances throughout the film, will only be revealed much later.

Indeed, after the mother has left, Nana finds a dead rabbit ensnared in the trap she watched Pappy set up. She carefully untangles the animal and brings it home. There, in a moment that summarizes the collapsing of realism and magical thinking that characterizes the film, she plays with the rabbit (earlier on she does so with a fox's fleece, too), in the hope perhaps of seeing it magically return to life—much as she quietly wishes for her mother's return. She then decides to give it a proper funeral, burning it in the hearth, much the way she saw the farmers scorch the dead pig.¹¹

This is the place to address the ease with which Massadian concatenates death and life, beyond the countryside setting, where people are far less alienated from death in its various forms. The rich engagement with the simple marvels of life is enabled here by the care with which she frames her shots: even when showing idyllic pastures, the director carefully includes dead trees among the otherwise budding green and lush emerald of grassy fields. Simply put, life and death happen and coexist, without any pathos, even as grief or loss is negotiated in a variety of ways, not least through parodies of funerary rituals.

At film's end, Pappy comes and picks Nana up, indicating her return to the patriarchal center, and an oft-repeated cycle and tension between two modes, two temporalities (one realistic, the other, imaginary or magical), with which the little girl has learned—and taught us—to grapple. At which point it becomes clear that a mere realistic, psychologizing, or even anthropological interpretation is insufficient: *Nana* (and *Milla*, for that matter) expands the boundaries of realism. And so, in view of the archetypal and the magical thinking at play in the films, we turn to the evocation and invocation of the fairy tale—and not only just its structure and themes, but also the politics it contains.

Once upon her time

As critics have noted, Massadian's films are strongly connoted as fairy tales or fables (see Kuehner 2017; Lanthier 2013 and Guest 2015). Both

of Massadian's feature films deal with stages of transition in both women/mothers and children (acquiring social and survival skills in *Nana*, surviving as a single teenage mom in *Milla*, and coping with death and constitutive absences in both films). It is therefore only logical that her films acquire the feel and spirit of the fairy tale, the function of which is to negotiate coming-of-age, the roles of the *socium*, and death. The director herself has made clear her intentions of pushing this aspect further in her upcoming opus, wherein a group of pubescent children will find themselves in an abandoned castle, evocative of the scenario of Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, only "much better" (in Girish 2018). While *Milla* may be somewhat closer to the social drama, it too replays a prelapsarian fantasy of sorts in its first half, wherein two young people live together, away from society, in a precariously utopian arrangement: an abandoned home, somewhere in a seaside town, which they reclaim as more than just a squat. While meager money supplies last, the two youths do not seem bothered by the absence of electricity or running water. In the second half, however, after the young man dies while away on a fishing boat job, Milla, now pregnant, has to navigate a sea of a different sort: the world of work, to make ends meet for her child—first as a maid in a hotel, then as a grocery store clerk. But her universe remains eerily empty, populated merely by lone female figures who better fit in the schemas of Propp and Greimas (as "adjuvants") than social realist drama. As for *Nana*, its settings boast an even clearer fairy-tale sheen: the farmstead, the lair of the ogre qua benevolent farmer, and the cottage, a witch's house somewhere deep in the woods.

It is no secret that fairy tales often resort to animal imagery and symbolism, and *Nana* functions similarly, with its menagerie of pig, piglets, and rabbit.¹² This animalistic quality is extended, though by no means literally, to its human characters as well. If the gentle Pappy is similar to an ogre in sheep's guise, and the mother has the qualities of a witch, there is also something about the supine grandfather that evokes the bear as a debonair if potentially deadly character of fairy tales, and the mother's fidgety actions in the forest, a starved fox or wolf—something the scene in which *Nana* plays with the fox's fleece harks back to.¹³ *Nana* herself need not be associated with a stock-animal figure: a young cub, or kitten, or any other young animal is sublated here in her pure presence, in the natural *photogénie* she shares with any animal. When asked where *Nana* sprang from in her imaginary, Massadian makes it clear: "She comes from the animal that I once was, that I still am, and that I think I will never let go of."¹⁴ An animal, the director adds, which she became out of loneliness, wandering by herself as a child in the woods, like *Nana*, left to her own devices, while her parents busied themselves with other matters.¹⁵

The majority of fairy tales have been codified in writing (and therefore reappropriated) by male auteurs, much as cinema has been a male-dominated industry for over a century, and explained by male theorists and

critics. But the oral transmission of fairy tales was traditionally entrusted to women, and just as the genre was co-opted by patriarchy, women's films have constituted a site of resistance to the hegemonic male gaze in film. In this sense, we must understand the act here of textualizing, of inscribing a fairy tale—a matrilinear domain at first—by a woman on film, as a potent, if understated, act of reclaiming and resistance.

Not that the fairy tale is in any sense the province of women alone: it inspires children of both genders alike, and many filmmakers, irrespective of gender, have to a smaller or greater extent taken it upon themselves to address this type of narrative and its anthropological, allegorical, and political functions in cinema as a commercial medium. But while, to make a gross generalization, male filmmakers have tended to literally transpose (and render more linear) fairy tales, summoning their more gruesome or traumatic dimension in indexical terms (think of Dario Argento's *Suspiria* [1977] or Neil Jordan's rather unsung masterpiece, *The Company of Wolves* [1984]¹⁶), female filmmakers have looked at the genre from an informed angle as an oppressed group or minority, and in many ways made it far more rich and engrossing. Several French female filmmakers, in particular, have been keen to tackle the genre, in its many possible guises, ranging from the discrete scene of reverie to the outright *fantastique* or gothic treatment. I would like to point to three examples in particular, where the political and critical dimension, which the fairy tale as feminine genre carries, is exemplified.

In many ways, Agnès Varda's *Happiness* (*Le Bonheur*, 1965) is as grim a fable as can be, essentially a gothic tale of female abjuration and sacrifice, drained of melodramatic pathos yet bathed in the vibrant colors of magazine covers and ads under consumer society and the *trente glorieuses*, the dark side of which it ironically and non-dogmatically unveils. So the story goes: a married man meets a woman and takes her as a lover. He wants to share his happiness with his modest and loving wife, but she prefers to remove herself from the situation by committing suicide. Smug to the point of angelic idiocy, the husband never seems to extract himself from his status of happy representative of a blissful working class. As for his lover, she learns of the tragedy and replaces the dead wife in the most affectless manner—a hybrid of the stepmother of Cinderella (now "nice") and the de-eroticized, aseptic beauty of models used to extol the virtues of modern home appliances and consumer durables in commercials decried by Debord, Barthes, Lefèbvre, and Godard.¹⁷

Later on, Claire Denis proposed another inverted or "post-classical" fairy tale with *Trouble Every Day* (2001), conflating the captive princess/victim and monster/perpetrator in Béatrice Dalle's cannibalistic character. Now married and on the lookout for a cure for the disease he too has contracted, her ex-partner, played with equally demented gusto by Vincent Gallo, is reunited with his former flame. After a tender exchange, he kills

her, in a devastating moment of realization of the impossibility of finding a cure for either their love or tropical malady. Of course, as in Varda, the social and economic aspects of contemporary France are never far from Denis's concerns, as the man's cannibalizing a maid at the hotel where he and his wife have checked in makes crystal clear. As Sophie Maier, following Marina Warner, has argued regarding another, more directly social Denis film (*35 Shots of Rum/35 rhums* [2008]), the fairy tale here meets "new versions of harsh economic realities out of which . . . surviving versions of fairy tales arose" (2016, 128). One thinks, too, of the gruesome slaughter of children—a story reminiscent of the massacre of the innocents—in Denis's *White Material* (2010), set in a troubled postcolonial African republic.

Of all filmmakers under scrutiny here, it is Lucile Hadžihalilović, with *Innocence* (2004), who most explicitly channeled tropes of the genre, thematizing the rite of passage of young girls from childhood to adolescence, in a manifest fairy-tale setting, a "timeless" boarding school for girls situated in the middle of a forest" (Vincendeau 2005, 68), reinforced by gothic imagery. Presenting "a collective child imaginary, a polymorphous perverse world warped and colored by infant elaboration and enchantment, distortion and enhancement" (Wilson 2007, 172), it is in the end revealed that the film's setting disguises an exploitative system wherein a semblance of matriarchy is merely embedded within a broader patriarchal and/or capitalist order. Yet, the latter itself is embedded in a female filmmaker's gaze, revealing a common trend among these cinematic fairy tales by women. As Wilson notes, "[t]he film puts on show the children's pleasure in this aesthetic, in a single-sex environment, disconcerting in its very exclusion of the male gaze" (174). This exclusion, I like to think, not so much disconcerting as it is refreshing and liberating, is present in various instantiations in all four filmmakers aforementioned.

The distanced shock value of the wife's death in *Happiness*, the aestheticizing of the horror of bloodshed in Denis's films (a triumphant and oblique celebration of the infamous "monstrous feminine"), and the subtly perverse "institutionalizing" of puberty, confinement to a regulated space, and mysterious disappearances of girls in *Innocence*, all suggest an essential trope of the gothic relayed in some fairy tales (think of *Bluebeard's Castle*—allegedly a Charles Perrault fable): the dread that accompanies the condition of the woman confined and feeling threatened in the household.¹⁸ This affect and notion of menace or dread is altogether absent from Massadian's films, even as they have death and disappearance at their core.

No doubt Massadian's oeuvre remains closest to Varda's *Happiness*. With its charged and ironic title, the film constitutes a case in point to this discussion of the fairy tale and *merveilleux* affect lurking under the pretense of realism. On the surface, Varda's film, telling a story of adultery

in a working-class milieu, adopts the form of the social drama. But in the quasi angelic hedonism of François and the sacrificial saintliness of his wife Thérèse, as well as in the seemingly idyllic recomposed family that closes the film, we discern, beyond the social commentary, an ironic fairy tale for the late capitalist age: it retains the cruelty and matter-of-factness of the traditional tales, combined with a realistic depiction bathed in oversaturated color, "more than merely gorgeous or lush, purposefully exaggerated almost as if Varda had re-painted reality to over-signify its falsehoods," as Ivone Margulies points out, "the power of the film lying in its purposefully dislocated emphases."¹⁹ Tonally, we sense the film's grim and very tough worldview, extolling and denouncing female sacrifice as part of "happiness" in patriarchal culture—the feminist charge and critique of Varda's film as unambiguous as it is non-pontificating. The director crucifies Thérèse's sacrifice just as she sees it as darkly inevitable within the constrictions proposed by this "idyllic" realm. Thérèse, of course, drowns herself at the peak of what can be considered working-class family happiness, circa 1965 in France—*congés payés* and all—a beautiful summer day spent in the countryside, crowned with putting the children to sleep under a net sheltering them from bugs, then making love to François. The image of characters peacefully reclining in nature (Figure 19.4), just minutes before Thérèse's death by drowning, contains the idea of many a fairy tale, wherein a walk in the forest (a stand-in for coming-of-age and awareness) by an unsuspecting character may lead to a monstrous or fateful encounter. In Massadian's films, we find the exact same image of two characters peacefully reclining: Nana and her mother (Figure 19.5); and Milla and her boyfriend, Léo,



FIGURE 19.4 *Happiness* (Agnès Varda, 1965; Ciné-Tamaris).

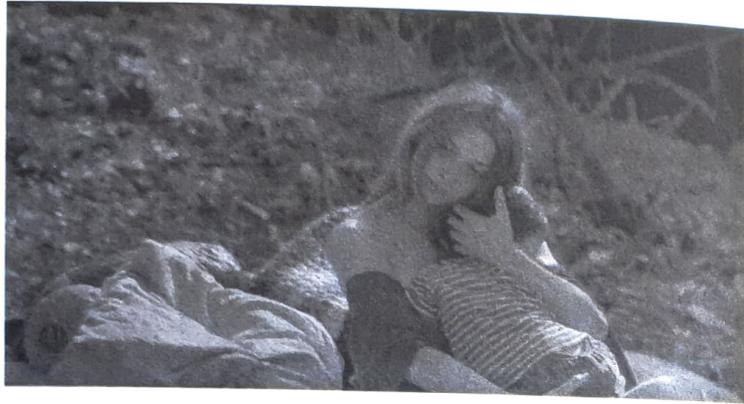


FIGURE 19.5 *Nana* (Valérie Massadian, 2011; *valerie massadian—gaijin*).



FIGURE 19.6 *Milla* (Valérie Massadian, 2017; *valerie massadian—gaijin*).

sleeping together (Figure 19.6). In both cases, these moments of peaceful, loving repose suggest a wondrous, dreamlike state, just as they announce departure, separation, and indeed death.

What distinguishes Massadian's brand of fairy tale from Varda's, however, is their approach to morality. While, again, neither filmmaker is in the least moralistic or prescriptive, the form and tone of Varda's film may be compared (and her symmetric, ultra-classical, almost sinister use of Mozart to the image of sunflowers, in the credits to *Happiness*, hints to this) to an Enlightenment thinker's tale. Her film, in its critique, stands on a par with

Voltaire's ironic stories, with the stark *moralités* of La Fontaine's Fables. While Varda subverts patriarchal morality by a demonstration à l'*absurde*, overlaying it as a commentary that better allows for her non-prescriptive feminist view to stand, Massadian, as Kuehner has identified, strips her films from that purportedly edifying content, which still, in many ways, remains a staple of the male imposition on the genre: the need to sanction, prescribe, or prohibit. Massadian puts this patriarchal frame aside altogether, thereby also effortlessly escaping any narrative constriction that may be considered a trace or ancient mold of male cinema to be used and strayed from at one and the same time. In her genuine pursuit of a voice and gaze liberated from the constriction of the male/patriarchal model, instead of pitting herself against and in distinction from it, Massadian and her characters move away, to the margins.

Marginal techniques, minor cinema, or, the great in the small

In closing, I want to address a less often discussed aspect of Massadian's oeuvre, yet one which seems to speak with even greater intensity to her investment with a layered temporality and peripheral spaces: the director indeed has shown a clear interest in para- or proto-cinematic forms, now marginal media, forgotten, left behind, almost abject, quaint (like the disaffected spaces her characters inhabit), which help make sense of some of her cinematic articulations: the diorama, taxidermy, the lithograph, the miniature, and their correlation with time. Life may vibrate in the apparently motionless or dead, and the great and mighty are in the small, Massadian suggests, the dead animal echoing the live one, and the animal or even "monstrous and so strong" power of the child contained in a small body announcing that which will grow: a potentiality, a concentration, much as the miniature can also represent a site of great intensifying. Likewise, the unassuming, seemingly uneventful and intimate film can reveal itself to be affecting almost to a transformative level.

There is a clear affinity between the stuffed animal (but also the diorama) and the work of cinema, if only in how cinema as a series of still images just allows to give back life and motion to what taxidermy has merely stilled and prevented from decaying. In Massadian, this rapport to stillness, suspended decay, and life is evident in the vibrancy she injects in her long, observational takes. Playing with duration and repetition, the vast majority of *Nana*'s and *Milla*'s shots are static, which only makes the rare instances of pans or camera movements seem more meaningful and momentous. This is literalized in *Milla*, where Massadian introduces what seems to be her own, artfully arranged apartment, a *cabinet de curiosités*, almost. It is filled

with photographs and stuffed birds in glass cases, which the protagonist gazes at and even handles. Stuffed animals in cased set arrangements, their clear intertextual sets of associations with cinema notwithstanding, speak of course to an idea of montage, of stillness and movement, of captured pastness preserved into the present, somewhat morbid, but mostly quaint and moving—indeed obscurely dynamic.

The great (if unassuming) compositions in Massadian convey a sense of depth in space, and in time, evoking a de-realized realm wherein people are trapped by the frame and engulfed in nature. Since she only very seldom resorts to camera movements, the filmmaker often has her characters evolve in depth of field, coming toward or moving away from the motionless camera, surrounded by more or less inanimate surroundings: forest, field, and cottage interiors. As a result, we feel a quietly uncanny sensation, as though witnessing people in old chromes or lithographs suddenly coming to life. The “lithographic” quality of Massadian’s films summons even richer sets of associations: the way in which the characters evolve uncannily in otherwise fixed (if “fluttering”—the wind, the light and shadows) plays animate each image with what can be best described as a frisson) environments, underlines a miniature quality to Nana’s body in many shots, which is consubstantial with the notion of the child as a miniature version of the adult, and of the fairy tale as a miniature rendering of the world, which it contains, negotiates, and expresses.

George Williamson (1911) reminds us that the term miniature originated not from a matter of scale or minuteness, but indeed color (“minium”—a type of red lead).²⁰ It was only later, with books acquiring more currency and velum paper becoming a sought-after and onerous commodity, that formats and illustrations became smaller, the term miniature following suit and shifting semantically. Williamson notes also how striking the absence of landscapes became a convention of the genre in the Middle Ages. This in almost exact opposite to the celebration of nature and vast expenditure of (nearly free) audiovisual data Massadian deployed for her film. The two economies could scarcely be more different, and yet somehow the association stands, but as a reappropriation of sorts. Again, we find the idea of the great in the small, that a genre, once much greater, was confined within certain limits out of some sort of necessity or market logic, constrained to and redefined as a minute or minor expression. The irony and contradiction here are glaring: cinema, commonly associated with large or monumental scale is replayed here in terms both of miniature as scale and minor in importance—minor, that is, in Deleuze’s and Guattari’s meaning (1986), that of a “minor” language in a major world.

The miniature (the dwarf that Nana becomes when framed in long shots, or when donning her mother’s oversized bathrobe, or the way Milla is turned into a child when donning Léo’s equally oversized sweater, foreshadowing her own dressing of their son Ethan) reminds us that if looked at closely

enough, the minutest detail can appear huge and significant. But this change in habitual scale hierarchies can also carry uncanny associations, by virtue of the *décalage* or out-of-place-ness of sorts that it connotes. However, in Massadian, while the characters evolve naturally in slightly off, disaffected spaces, the miniature as such is never meant to evoke a sense of the bizarre or disturbing; it is much rather associated with a sense of intertwined temporal regimes: longing and past-ness; graspable present-ness; and vibrant futurity, filled with potential. Susan Stewart (1984) has expressed the fundamental relationship of the miniature (the dollhouse, the cameo, etc.) with nostalgia and loss. But the miniature, by virtue of its concentration, its erstwhile regular scale, evokes also an overflow of vitality and energy, and the director productively uses this paradoxical combination of past-ness and present-ness to reinforce her film’s unassuming effects. The work with declassified or marginal media, and change in perspective boasted by Massadian are crucial to any filmmaker operating from a minority position.

Just as the taxidermy cased set, the lithograph, and the miniature suggest multiple temporal regimes (stillness versus narrative motion, death and life commingled, nostalgia/past-ness and intensifying/present-ness), Massadian has a clear sense that cinema (or rather and more to the point, *her* cinema) is not so much a sequence of actions, but an interpolation of temporalities, and the film clearly conveys this sense onto us, and, in the end, exposes it, too: there is the “real,” chronological time, which loses its objective, documentary nature as it is blurred with a fantasy image/dream vision of Nana, complicating the point of view or perspective of the whole film. In said scene—the film’s emotional and aesthetic climax no doubt—Nana and her absent mother are reunited, at night, in a vision of blissful harmony (see Figure 19.5, and this volume’s cover), a wish-fulfillment fantasy that the little girl later renounces. The following day, in what can be considered the film’s most elaborate setup, Nana drags a comforter outside, as though she were dragging the imaginary corpse of her mother. Then, the little girl walks toward a vision of her mother, lying stationary on the ground, and throws at her the album of fairy tales they read together. She does so more dejectedly than angrily, and the continued motionlessness of the mother (herself almost an item out of a *nature morte*) clearly indicates that the film has blurred the line between objective and referential time and perspective, and a time of waking dream and lucid *merveilleux*. Lanthier (2013), commenting on this scene, suggests that the whole world of the film was given us through Nana’s unreliable perspective. It may be—but it was also given to us through the filmmaker’s cogent, and artistically most reliable, vision.

Valérie Massadian’s vision is that of one who has lived on the periphery and carefully sees the world at the center with changed eyes, and to whom cinema offers a means to express this estrangement and attentive gaze. All the while, her cinema reclaims space through the fairy tale and poetry, and produces a specific and novel take on cinematic time. It delivers what is there,

familiar yet strange, and so we are reminded of our own fascination for layered time, our affinity for marginal, possibly atavistic or archetypal, and yet appealing spaces. Perhaps because they are the refuse, the abjection of a society otherwise intent on exploiting and maximizing all space and time. As such the films also resist and react to ever-acceleration, pitted here against the slow and deliberate pace, echoing a layered time of memories, traces, and promises. Much as Nana must learn to live without her mother, and Milla without Léo, we, through Massadian's cinema, learn to navigate a new if unassuming cinematic mode. And to best enter it we must, like the filmmaker herself, leave our shares of (patriarchal) socialization behind and go into these woods, where we are reminded of the child, the monster, the animal we once were, still are, and perhaps will never let go of. And for this, we should be thankful.

Notes

- 1 First and foremost, I wish to thank two people who helped make this chapter a reality: Ivone Margulies, for her numerous and invaluable feedback, and Valérie Massadian herself, for kindly and generously answering some key questions, sharing links to, and providing illustrations from her films. Thanks should go also to Pierre-Simon Gutman for putting us in touch with Valérie Massadian, and to my student Ceren Yavuz, who first introduced me to *Nana*.
- 2 In *Milla*, Massadian herself plays the part of a mother figure of sorts to the protagonist. She too, like the mother in *Nana*, leaves the diegesis as abruptly as she enters it, never to return.
- 3 The word "nana," in French slang designates a woman, not a child.
- 4 *Milla* also brushes her hair with a beautiful old brush found in the apartment of the "mother" figure—echoing the exact same gesture by Nana.
- 5 An Armenian fairy tale Massadian's grandmother used to read her, about God swapping a dead dog's and dying man's hearts, to the canine's delight and man's ire. Young Valérie's schoolmates hardly shared in her enthusiasm for the tale (correspondence with the author).
- 6 There is a genuine sense of bliss that both *Nana* and *Milla* convey when we see children at play. We cannot help but smile wholeheartedly when looking at Nana playing with both her mother and Massadian, through sneaky gazes toward the camera, or when Milla dresses little Ethan, who moves with candor and ease from crying to laughter when he realizes his mother is not fooled by his antics. Playing, lest we forget, is the most important and formative activity for children, and here too, Massadian suggests, we have as much to learn from them as they from adults.
- 7 "J'ai davantage confiance dans ce que les corps disent." (Massadian in *Le Monde*, April 25, 2018.) All translations mine unless otherwise stated.
- 8 The Perche region, where the director spent some years in her youth.

- 9 Besides Nana herself, and a brief incursion by her mother, the only females to be found on the farm are the swine, promised to the slaughterer.
- 10 We may also assume that the mother dies—that much is never accounted for in the film.
- 11 It is interesting to note, too, that burning the dead as ritual connects *Nana* and Lucile Hadžihalilović's *Innocence*, hinting both at the fact that digging a proper grave would be nearly impossible for a little girl, and that burning connects deeply the idea of death to a form of transubstantiation and purification that play an important role in a child's mental makeup (not least in the taboo of concealing one's abjection in improper places, most obviously feces and urine).
- 12 Note how Massadian avoids other "fairy-tale" animal staples, such as the toad. Her focus is with domestic/edible creatures, the ensnared rabbit, for that matter, being no wild hare but a large domestic rabbit meant for food consumption.
- 13 In *Milla*, a striking, quasi surrealist cut moves from the close-up of the baby breastfeeding to a cat drinking from a dripping faucet, thus both playfully asserting another ellipsis (a few years have elapsed, and Milla now lives with two-year-old Ethan and her cat in an apartment) and providing yet another clear indicator of the porousness of the human and the animal in Massadian.
- 14 "Elle vient de l'animal que j'ai été, que je suis encore et que je crois que je ne lâcherai jamais." (Correspondence with the author.)
- 15 Correspondence with the author.
- 16 Both these films, it is worth noting, were based on screenplays by women (Daria Nicolodi and Angela Carter).
- 17 The social aspect of the film, much as Godard's *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* . . . (*Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle* . . ., 1967) has to do with capitalist oppression and exploitation, beyond the bright colors and promises of happiness of the *trente glorieuses* era.
- 18 See, on this topic of the female subject threatened in her home, Waldman (1983), Modleski (1982), Doane (1987).
- 19 Correspondence with the author.
- 20 As Williamson notes, the French school of miniature had a marked preference for fine detail and ultramarine—blue the symbolic color of France to this day. Perhaps, then, Nana's colorful outfit (variations of blue, white, and red, i.e., the French Republic's flag) is another oblique nod at a reappropriation by Massadian, with variations of chromatisms and scale, of la *Mère Patrie* as patriarchal construct.

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