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Material Girls

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"Material Girls" explores cinema's representation of girlhoods through girls' tactile and bodily interactions with fabrics in the mise-en-scène, and invites us to think about fabrics, folds, sheets and clothing in films about girls as a way of figuring (the learning of) femininity and domesticity, and processes of entrapment and rebellion, as well as showing how fabrics function to give filmic form to experiences of desire and the senses.

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Curator's Statement

Debbie Martin, University College London

"Material Girls" was created by Isabelle McNeill in June 2024 at the Middlebury College Scholarship in Sound and Image Workshop. Later that summer Isabelle was diagnosed with cancer and she passed away in February 2025, and thus there is no creator's statement to publish alongside this video. "Material Girls," which Isabelle planned to continue working on before submitting it for publication, explores cinema's representation of girlhoods through girls' tactile and bodily interactions with fabrics in the *mise-en-scène*, and invites us to think about fabrics, folds, sheets, and clothing in films about girls as a way of figuring (the learning of) femininity and domesticity, and processes of entrapment and rebellion, as well as showing how fabrics function to give filmic form to experiences of desire and the senses. Like Isabelle's own extensive creative work with textiles, which was so much a part of her self, her thought, and her life, "Material Girls" follows in a feminist artistic tradition of using fabrics to critically explore femininity and female sexuality.

"Material Girls" movingly encapsulates so much of what Isabelle was: love and care, a commitment to friendship and pleasure, a brilliant intellect, as well as a gentle fierceness in her activism and political commitment. In the video's early sections we are immersed in fabric as love, as cocoon, as nurture: fabrics caress and enfold the viewer as they do the girls on screen; loving female vocals also caress and soothe. Here, fabrics are a source of sensory pleasure and a site for film's exploration of girls' play and bonding. Female friendship, and women's care for one another, was a major preoccupation in Isabelle's life, thought and academic work, and it

was something she was particularly concerned to see represented on screen. I am reminded of when Isabelle first shared "Material Girls" with me, in summer 2024, as part of a chat in which we celebrated the transformative experience of creativity she'd just had at Middlebury, as well as an outfit she had recently advised me on. As with the quilts Isabelle made for her children, or the little heart-shaped pillows she sent to her friends, the video reminds us how fabrics, clothes, and material "enfold memories," how they represent and embody continuity, relationship, and love. Later in the video, a tonal shift is effected through a characteristically brilliant use of music, as we hear the opening of Alice Phoebe Lou's "She." As the female vocals shift from soothing caress to more defiant and discordant, fabrics suddenly shift from protective cocoons to a "troublesome prison" that seems to threaten girls with a loss of desire and bodily autonomy, the mood now one of feminist rebellion, of cutting and running, the political argument made brilliantly felt, the video suddenly creating an energy and an appetite for resistance.

Touching fabric, working with material, cutting, splicing, and suturing in both textile and videographic practice, were part of Isabelle's ongoing feminist commitment to bringing creativity, pleasure, affect, and the body into academic work. Through her Tactics and Praxis seminars and her work with the New School of the Anthropocene (where she taught a course on "Patchwork Thinking"), Isabelle envisioned and created alternatives to masculinist and mainstream research and teaching cultures. The spirit of these projects, alongside her videos and writings, are some of the threads that still connect many of us, her friends and colleagues, to Isabelle, to her thinking and her passionate commitments: may we never let go of them.

Cut To Pink

Fiona Handyside, University of Exeter

Isabelle's love for, and joy in, the practice of patchwork crafting would be well known to her friends and colleagues. Patchwork, with its creation of new items out of scraps of fabric given purpose afresh as they are stitched together, speaks to Isabelle's political commitment to finding worth and interest in that which may seem to be ready to be discarded and trying to find a less extractive and more sustainable way of being in the world. It also speaks to her strong aesthetic sense, as it finds new patterns and connections through matching or juxtaposing colours, fabrics, dots, stripes, checks and so on. There are also of course links we can point to which conceives patchwork making as a kind of editing process akin to the making of a film or a video essay. Both forms take fragments, whether of fabric samples or moments

in time and space captured through a recording camera, and recombine them to form a new material object. Isabelle's "Material Girls" weaves together all these disparate threads as it finds patterns and connections between several films where we see girls feel the divergent emotions of blissful joy, reassuring comfort, numbing tedium, and desperate sadness. These emotions are expressed via their interactions with fabric as they variously wear sparkly dresses, jump onto beds and crumple the linen, pull back patterned duvet covers, wrap themselves in white sheets after sex, fold clothes and bedsheets into neat piles, smooth sheets, dance under fabric. We see a glorious cherry pink satin dress impossibly floating, its folds suggesting a voluptuous body but encasing only air; we see a young girl reaching to touch a blue dress embroidered with sequins and cutting her fingers on their sharp surfaces, bright red blood dripping. What Isabelle's carefully curated collection argues is for the multiplicities and ambivalences of girlhoods. She conjures them as a shared affective repertoire of gestures between and within groups of girls, enabled and constrained by material conditions (in all senses of that word).

At one particularly significant moment, Isabelle imports a kind of stitching into her video essay. She opens with a pink screen. The shade of pink is important—it is a medium shade, not the raspberry or hot pink that connotes something more rebellious or luscious, or the pale pink that could plausibly fade away into a cream or dusky rose. This is the mid-pink of girls' plastic toys, stereotypically girly lipsticks and nail varnishes, girls' clothing ranges, the teddies bought for girl babies. This is the mid-pink of girlhood and the material world it evokes. Into this mid-pink screen, Isabelle places an image in the top left corner. A second image comes in bottom right, then top right, then bottom left, so we have a pink cross in the middle of the screen. Then the screen fills with images from her corpus, so we have nine images, some just of fabric, some of girls interacting with fabric. She then cuts back to pink, so we have a plain pink screen, onto which she will overlay text in white. The cut to pink is important, an unusual choice in editing grammar in which we more usually cut to black. Isabelle's cut to pink is of course an affirmative choice, privileging the shade that is overwhelmingly associated with girls and girlhood. The pink screen is the structuring principle across the video essay. It stitches into the essay's ruminative contemplative discussion of senses and memory a vital reminder of Isabelle's own intervention in the process, a space of pink that invites further discussion but also asserts – gently, not aggressively – the specificity and worth of her own perspective, coloured through a mid-pink evocative of a material girlhood often culturally derided. We move from the material of the (bed and human) clothes we see in the film clips to the materiality of the film screen itself. The fabric she is representing becomes

co-extensive with Isabelle's own work, echoing the connections Isabelle found in her own academic practice between stitching, patterning, thinking, contemplating, always drawing connections between the manual and the cerebral, the intellectual and the embodied, the body and the soul.

Red Elegy

Emma Wilson, University of Cambridge

"Material Girls" is Isabelle's "final" project made in Middlebury, Vermont, in June 2024. She first shared the essay with me on a summery day that July, shortly before her realisation of her illness. On a first viewing, its billowing images, fuchsia silk, sheets, embroidery, crystals, felt part of the folds of Isabelle's imagination, her sensory, sartorial loves, her style, her fashion, *femme*, girl. It expressed her ethos, her fearlessness, her sensitivity, her joy. It imprints itself more poignantly as I rewatch it now.

In her commitment to her friends, and to her students, Isabelle in the real world was peerless in her response to the cut, the *cicatrice*, trauma. She listened, wrote cards, sewed hearts with embroidered words. She gave time. She soothed. This was part of her living. In a posthumously published 2025 essay on "promiscuous care," about care work and nursing, Isabelle speaks about Alice Diop moving into the frame of her film *La Permanence* (2016) to comfort a howling woman, "embracing her and rubbing her arms," beyond documentary norms. Isabelle's own embrace of this scene is part of who she was.

In her choice of words from Laura Marks in "Material Girls," Isabelle emphasises "never letting go of the thread," "seeking continuities and relationships." Such continuities are part of her editing patterns, the return of motifs, moves in and between images. She seems to show that we are tied, or can tie ourselves, in some lovely way, to our childhoods, to our mothers. The same gestures, in play, in domesticity, in dancing, in eros, continue as part of an embodied being in the world. The materials, sheets, veils, are repeatedly cast, shaken, spread. For Isabelle, "folds of fabric are portals into and out of girlhood."

In a late sequence, moving out of girlhood, we see Aminata (Fathia Youssouf) in Maïmouna Doucouré's *Mignonnes* (2020) open her mother's closet to find the turquoise embroidered dress she, the child, is due to wear to her father's imminent wedding. The dress seems to drip red blood, tears, copious liquid. In this film, and her previous short, *Mamans* (2015), Doucouré shows a daughter respond protectively to her mother's grief. "Material Girls" goes into the quick of girlhood and in its late moments sees also its sorrows. It pulls on the red thread that leads between inner and outer worlds (to borrow

a motif in Alice Rohrwacher's *La Chimera* [2023]). It has cuts, from the bleeding dress, to sheets spread out for sex, to a reclining girl in a wedding frock, to a painful bedroom scene. The sequence runs together puberty, deflowering, assault. The blood is no longer in the images after the *Mignonnes* shots, but it seems summoned as a mirage over the white materials that follow. In Isabelle's words, sheets are membranes, "protecting, exposing."

"Material Girls" is for me a red elegy. It speaks of the cuts and losses of moving out of girlhood, of heartache, of trauma. I think about Gillie, Isabelle's mother, with whom she shared a love of the film *The Red Shoes* (Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, 1948), its scarlet silk, its lipstick, its beribboned slippers. In Mary Hopkins's "The Voyage of the Moon" (1969), almost a lullaby, as "Material Girls" starts, we hear the words, "she seems to linger long." Isabelle's capacious feminism, its shades of pink and red, embraced the pleasures of loving, of playing, yet also, with such grace, the losses of growing up, of being mortal.

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Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.