



# One Stop Doc Shop

## Episode 6. Victoria Mapplebeck



### Introduction

*(Intro music starts – cinema film reel whirring, and countdown beeps)*

Hello and welcome to One Stop Doc Shop, a podcast that celebrates and encourages diversity in non-fiction filmmaking. In each episode, a guest filmmaker will share their secrets on how to make award-winning documentaries.

I'm your host Angela Clarke and this series was made possible with the support of Screen Alliance Wales, Ffilm Cymru Wales and BFI Network funding from the National Lottery.

My guest today is multiplatform artist, and BAFTA winning producer and director Professor Victoria Mapplebeck.

For the last two decades, Victoria has experimented with the frontiers of documentary and creative technology, focusing on telling stories in small intimate spaces.

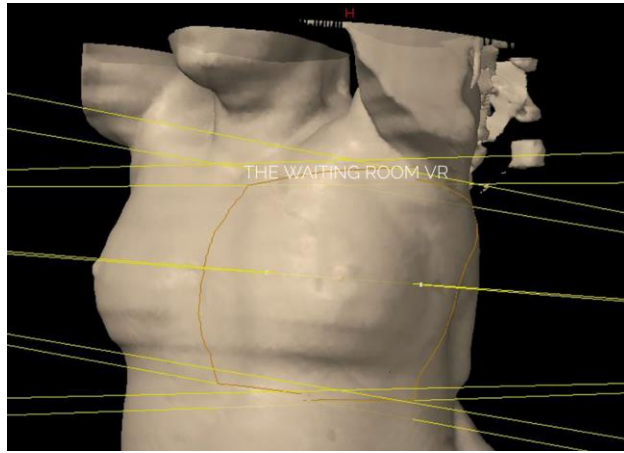
Her first smartphone short **160 Characters** won Best Documentary at the 2017 Short of the Week Film Awards. Her follow up doc **Missed Call**, filmed on an iPhone X, picked up a BAFTA and a Broadcast Digital Award.

In 2019, **The Waiting Room** - a VR project that captured her experience of breast cancer from diagnosis to recovery won the IDFA DocLab Award for Digital Storytelling.

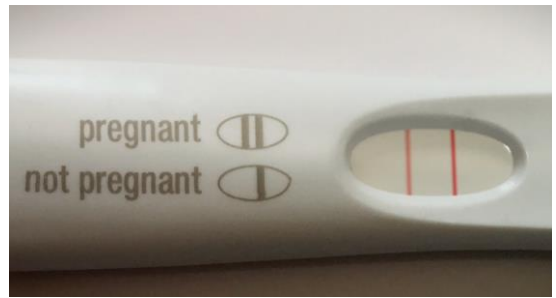
During the podcast we discuss the highs and lows of making autobiographical work, finding the perfect editor, and the importance of humility when making documentary films.

We also explore the evolution of texting, the power of voice mails and how best to bring both forms of communication to life on screen.

I hope you enjoy listening.....



The Waiting Room



160 Characters



Missed Call

**Angela Clarke** - Victoria – Hello and welcome to the One Stop Doc Shop...

**Victoria Mapplebeck** - Hullo and thanks for inviting me on...

**Angela Clarke** - In addition to you being a seasoned filmmaker, you are also a professor in Digital Arts at Royal Holloway University so I think there is going to be a lot to pack in to this interview.

**Victoria Mapplebeck** – Great!

**Angela Clarke** - But before we start discussing your more recent work, what path did you take into the industry?

**Victoria Mapplebeck** – Sure. So I had a disastrous first year of university where I choose a very old-fashioned film and television course at what was then Manchester Poly! It was awful, it was all these retired producers from the Manchester BBC and my god it wasn't good on inclusion and diversity back in the early 80s. So the women were encouraged to vision mix, because it was a bit like typing I think in the gallery production! *(laughing)* And the guys were offered extra sort of tuition in shooting on the studio cameras and I just remember thinking this is so wrong for me. I was so miserable, but at that time you could go back to your local authority and say, 'Oh I've made a huge mistake and I want to do fine art over at Sheffield Poly' and so they said 'Fine' and I was able to start again after that disastrous year.

So Sheffield actually had a really good reputation then for its fine art degree and then you could do a pathway which was photography, film and performance and it was really radical and so we would shoot on Super 8 and we would do these kind of weird performances and I also did lots of photography. And then I came down to London and did a postgraduate course at what was then St Martin's; it's now Central St Martin's, and that was during the first recession. So I was coming out of the course and graduating into quite a difficult recession in the 80s so I waitressed and cleaned for really quite a long time. And you know it was difficult then because you couldn't really just make films without some funding and so I had quite a long time of doing those kinds of jobs.

And then the thing that saved me was a part time course at what was then called London LCP and it was amazing. If you were on benefits you could do a part time MA course for £15 a year and it only ran for a couple of years. I had started to get very interested when I was in St Martin's about women and terrorism and a film came out of that. I've always been interested in sort of parenting and family, and sort of dysfunction and the kind of challenges and pleasures of motherhood and those women in the Baader-Meinhof group were all mothers and I made a film about Gudrun Ensslin's son and about what that was like, you know growing up if your mum was effectively on a Wanted Poster and was deemed a terrorist! And when I was on that MA it was really good actually, because it gave me deadlines to develop the proposal and then I got my first bit of funding which was an Arts Council/Channel 4 collaboration scheme and I got £35,000 which

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seems like an enormous amount for your first commission now, but then it was seen as peanuts, but it was totally liberating. It was called ***Between a Rock and a Hard Place*** and it was that was my first television documentary and it went out on Channel 4 about 9pm, which again you could not imagine something with that subject matter getting that time slot, and so that was great and was the beginning of I suppose the first half of my freelance career as a self shooting director...

**Angela Clarke** – I'm still blown away you had an MA for £15. (*laughs*)

**Victoria Mapplebeck** – (*laughs*) I mean I know - when I think what my students now are paying £9000 of fees, and my international students even more! I mean it was fantastic but it didn't last long yet it was totally liberating and I couldn't have done it without it.

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**Angela Clarke** – Mmm.

**Victoria Mapplebeck** - So it was great...

**Angela Clarke** - Yeh and also back in the day when you could change degree as well!

**Victoria Mapplebeck** - Yeh like it was really generous, I had a full grant and you know I didn't pay any fees, but I still got deep into debt probably because I spent too much money on booze and going out but you know it was really different times wasn't it. (*laughs*)

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**Angela Clarke** - So you start off then in TV, and then one of the shows I wanted to ask you about is ***Smart Hearts***.

**Victoria Mapplebeck** – Mmm.

**Angela Clarke** – And so that was a bit of a game changer really in terms of form for Channel 4, and it was marketed as Channel 4's first big interactive documentary series wasn't it? So can you tell me a bit more about how that project came about and what was it about?

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**Victoria Mapplebeck** – Sure. So for me the idea of it came out of my frustration but interest with the Bridget Jones kind of writing and the impact of that book and it actually spawned a couple of documentaries that I thought were really insulting and incredibly sexist in terms of how they represented women as sort of desperate for a relationship and all men fleeing commitment! It didn't represent how nuanced relationships and particularly decision were for women about whether to have kids or not and how that would change their life and so I felt that there was a real drought of ideas that really looked, particularly from a woman's perspective, at ideas of long-term relationships and commitment and intimacy. So I was pitching that to Channel 4, Adam Barker who was then head

of independent film and video in about 1999. He was interested by it, and he also knew that I was interested in camera technologies and that I had a very intimate shooting style and that I was a self shooter, so he asked me to go away and think about how I could use current technologies to do something interesting and capture the sort of private intimate space of a relationship.

**Angela Clarke** – Mmm.

**Victoria Mapplebeck** – So it got a commission and *Smart Hearts* was really quite a sizeable budget. It paid for webcams to stream into the homes of these two friends of mine who were the only friends that I actually knew had been married Brendon Quick and Claire De Uong. And when I approached them to see if they would be interested in having their marriage under the microscope to this degree, they had actually just broken up after their first and only session of marriage guidance and counselling!

**Angela Clarke** - Oh god.

**Victoria Mapplebeck** - Amazingly they agreed to sort of document the break up which was incredibly brave of them and I think was probably helped by the fact that they were artists, and risk takers and they didn't have the usual sort of relationship with privacy, so it wasn't so terrifying for them to be public. And then the other thing was there were really huge differences because it was a sort of an art house version of *Big Brother* so the subjects had full consent. You know *Big Brother* was very different; they really didn't have much power. It was sort of controlled by the commissioners but I was very interested in interactivity because you know our audience could watch the making of *Smart Hearts* and it was probably the first live documentary in the making.

**Angela Clarke** – Mmm.

**Victoria Mapplebeck** - Because the cameras were streaming, basically you could watch it online but not always with audio so that obviously gave them quite a lot of protection. But I was interested in the triangle between filmmaker/director, subject and audience you know. I suppose I had always been interested in reflexive work, which is questioning the whole process of documentary and the ethics of it. What you are looking at, and the subjectivity of the gaze. And there was so much traffic, the website crashed because you can imagine also then the website was much cruder than it would be now.

So all of those things felt quite exciting firsts, but it was also an incredible challenge because we weren't super tech savvy, and so we were had to reboot webcams on Boxing Day and all of that side of it was really challenging and difficult.

**Angela Clarke** - One of the things I wanted to ask you about that was how arduous was that edit process? There must have been lots of stuff that was filmed. How do you start to decipher that kind of information?



**Victoria Mapplebeck** – Yeh it was a long edit and again, probably a luxuriously long edit for a commercial documentary so I remember editing for at least three months possibly four months.

**Angela Clarke** – Gosh.

**Victoria Mapplebeck** - Possibly five you know. It really was a long, long time. And it was a difficult thing because; initially when I knew Brendon and Claire I was probably closer to Brendon. But then as the series progressed I became much closer to Claire and began to find Brendon increasingly difficult. And it was probably one of the hardest projects I've ever been involved with but I'm also really glad that I did it. I learnt a lot. I learnt huge amounts I think - particularly around consent. And I would say *Smart Hearts* probably gave me the most skills. I feel like there was a lot I learnt and I got much better at on that series regarding relationships with your subjects and the tricky access of unfolding narratives, which in fact are their own lives. You know when I'm teaching the Autumn term project, when my students begin it's an autobiographic project and I say to them, 'Even if you never make one again, and you decide it's not for you, you will see how hard it is disclosing intimate and vulnerable things about your life.'

And I think every documentary filmmaker should have a go at experiencing that, because until you've made an autobiographic film, you really don't take on board enough how difficult and fraught that is. Because ultimately you are giving control to someone else and a lot of documentary subjects are putting their trust in the director or producer to treat their lives appropriately, and to say something that feels truthful about something that could be quite personal and difficult in their lives and that is huge. And it's amazing that people are willing to do that and I think you have to be very respectful of it you know.

**Angela Clarke** - Yeh absolutely and I think that when I watched it you know it kind of blew me away because from the point of view of a filmmaker there are so many things to juggle. You're dealing with a very intimate subject and them coming to terms with something that is a really big issue for them. They're processing the breakdown of a relationship and I think when you watch and listen to you off camera, there is a real sense of learning that art of when you go and ask the difficult questions and when you just let the action unfurl. And that is the thing that is really tricky to get that balance right, and I think you know it's still really mesmerising to watch that because you are right in that room next to them as somebody is realising something pertinent in that moment. And there is a real intimacy I think, so that is a great point that you make about if people did make something of their own, I do think it would make you think differently.

**Victoria Mapplebeck** – I think humility in documentary when you are working with other people is really important actually.

**Angela Clarke** – So you make another couple of films for Channel 4, and then I'm going to fast forward to 2014. So you are still teaching, still working at university all the way through that period of time but then talk me through 2014/ 2015. That is when you start the second part of your career; where you embark on your first smart phone short film **160 Characters**. So tell us a bit about that film, and what was the inspiration or motivation behind that story?

**Victoria Mapplebeck** – Sure, sure.

**Victoria Mapplebeck** - So actually the way into that funding that I received from Film London in 2014 to make the first smart phone short was actually I had written a book. And I think writing is actually underestimated as a way into a creative process for women but there are a hell of a lot more successful women novelists than there are women feature documentary filmmakers. And I think it's because writing can be done for no cost and worked around family commitments and day jobs much more easily than filming. And so I had this vintage Nokia and in that Nokia I realised when I was doing an upgrade, was a text thread between an ex and myself who is Jim's dad!

**Angela Clarke** - Jim being you son?

**Victoria Mapplebeck** – Yeh. And it charted the three years from when we met, had a very brief relationship, we were only together about three months, broke up, and then I found out I was pregnant. And then the texts obviously become..., I didn't tell him I was pregnant by text we did meet up. But I think he found the whole situation very hard and so it all became a text thread and that three years of text threads begins in a 'honeymoon sort of phase' of what a fantastic 24 hours, it was lovely to meet you to ending three years later when my son was just two and his dad asked for a paternity test. And so the final text thread in that particular body of texts was 'Yes I got the DNA results, I need to know, I'm moving to Spain' and that was it! I remember thinking what a lot of drama it was and it's only about 100 texts, which of course is a tiny amount.

**Angela Clarke** – Nothing, nothing...

**Victoria Mapplebeck** - You know teenagers can do that sort of conversation before lunchtime, (*laughs*) and I remember thinking what amazing big epic issues there were within that. And so I began writing a short story using those Nokia text messages, writing the story from my point of view and then that turned into a 40,000 word memoir, which Curtis Brown took on, which was great initially.

But then it wasn't a very easily publishable book so it languished with them for a long time and then I think by that time I wanted to make it into a film and so it was Southark Council, Borough Film London funding and I was lucky enough to get £2000 and then I won a prize for a multi platform project that I'd been developing and so I put that prize money into it and so **160 Characters** was made for a £5000 budget and it was just at the point, in 2014 when the camera

phones on Apple smart phones had begun to be good enough to shoot with. This was a film about the way we use phones to communicate and about a shift towards text based communication instead of in person communication, particularly around those difficult relationship discussions that are painful.

And you know it is even apparent in the sort of phenomena of ghosting now that there was a time in terms of dating etiquette that you at least had a phone call to say this isn't working (*laughs*) and usually you would feel it would be better to meet up to say that. And I think that was the beginning of those times where people began to communicate big important issues differently, like are you going to be involved in the parenting of your child or not, should not be handled in what was then actually – that is why it is called **160 Characters** – because in the Nokia years that was the limit of characters you could text.

**Angela Clarke** – Yeh.

**Victoria Mapplebeck** - So those big decisions and questions about parental involvement and fatherhood – should not have been reduced to sort of two sentence texts message, particularly the final one, when Jim's father says 'Yes I've got the DNA results' – which were you are 99% you are Jim's father – and then saying 'Thanks I needed to know and now I'm moving to Spain' end of! That should never have been done in a text message.

**Angela Clarke** – No.

**Victoria Mapplebeck** - And by the time I made the smart phone short **160 Characters**, many years had gone by and I think that really helps, and I was really determined not to name and shame him so he is completely anonymous within the film. But I also didn't want the tone to be vengeful. I don't understand how he could have done what he did and I know within some respects the film raises that question, but I also didn't want to be judgemental and that was really important to the tone of it. I remember I worked with a fantastic editor, Lisa Forrest and I thought she was just brilliant on that film and getting the tone completely right, and I think another thing we worked on was in term of being a feminist, was not wanting to look like I was this abandoned Victorian waif, (*laughing*) you know left on the streets abandoned and that this was a complete tragedy, that if you didn't have a man in your life to raise a child, everything was a huge lack.

I think I wanted the film to really celebrate this, and that's not to acknowledge that it gave Jim and myself some painful things to deal with about rejection from his dad but ultimately there is a real celebration about Jim became the most important thing in my life and I think it also made absolute sense that he became a subject I suppose in my life as well.

**Angela Clarke** – Well if people haven't seen the film, I'd urge them to watch it. It's a really beautiful little film but I wanted to ask from a kind of process point of view then, so obviously you've found this phone and you've got these 100 texts...



**Victoria Mapplebeck** – Yes I mean that was a hundred texts over 3 years...

**Angela Clarke** - Especially when as you say you are covering the level of dramatic arc that you've got...

**Victoria Mapplebeck** – Yeh.

**Angela Clarke** - So from a process point of view how did you start to work out how you were going to visualise those words/messages?

**Victoria Mapplebeck** – So it was quite scary. I think at the beginning I remember laughing with my editor Lisa on that the first days edit when she turned up I almost wanted her to cancel. I didn't have filmmakers block but it'd been a long time since I had been in an edit and it was a challenge. How do you bring to life a past tense story and also bearing in mind as Jim was born and went up till say the age of 10 years old, we didn't really have camera phones. And so I had a PD150 camera from when I had been a self-shooting director and there is some quite nice footage of him, which was useful archive from when he was born.

I still actually regret I didn't film him being born, but I remember thinking for the first time can you just live something and not document it but I regret it now! *(laughs)* Anyway, so I had that footage and I knew I had a nice archive of him and I had lots of photographs of him, and being a photographer that has always been really important to me. But I decided the texts were really crucial and so I made a decision that all of my text messages would be on the left handed side of the screen and that some of them would be live typed so you get that nice quality of the way we used to sort of, well we still do to a degree, sort of compose and re-compose and scratch, particularly on the difficult texts.

And I think the most powerful sequence using that is when Jim has just been born and I'm sort of high on morphine and really not knowing, I felt I should just contact him *(Jim's dad)* and let him know Jim had been born so it's like 'I've had a baby – you've had a son...' and I'm changing those words all of the time and in the end I think it's, 'I've had a baby' and so I think that that was a really useful device and that his texts are all preformed on screen because I don't know what was going though his head.

So I'm wanting you to sort of inhabit my life and thought processes at those moments of 'Oh my god I've just given birth to my son and how do we actually let the father know when we've not been involved at all really throughout the pregnancy.' And then the other thing I decided to do was place became really important in the film. And the sort of shooting device I deployed was to go back to where I had sent or received those texts, and then the Nokia interface is super imposed over those tableaus again to give a sense of real time and presence. I've always been interested in durational real time moments in documentary and feature films that are made in one take and give a sense of presence and being

there. I'm not mad about like constructing post-production sound that takes you out the presence of that moment. It's another reason I don't much like voice over – or I only use voice over very sparingly because again it can take you out of the moment you are in. And so those tableaux give a sense of being outside a hospital or in a hospital corridor, or in the paddling pool, or looking out from my balcony and they become really sort of important moments.

**Angela Clarke** – The other thing I was aware of when I watched it, I thought – oh there is no music. I wasn't sure whether that was a stylistic choice or not, but I just thought, you can create a lot of atmosphere without it. You didn't need music to drive it forward and it's also a lovely example of really good short film in terms of how you tell a big story that has gone over a long period of time in effectively what is about 11 min?

**Victoria Mapplebeck** - 11 mins yeh.

**Angela Clarke** - As you come to the end of that process, then Jim starts to ask more questions about his dad, which leads you into making your next iPhone short which is *Missed Call* so do you want to explain a bit about that film?

**Victoria Mapplebeck** – Sure, so he was probably about 11 when there was an interesting shift for Jim. There was a really nice thing happened when Picture House along with Doc Heads did a programme of shorts that played at the Picture House Cinema and the Ritzy and Tristan Handson asked myself and another couple of the filmmakers to do a Q & A. I can't remember whether it was him or I that suggested Jim potentially being there too and I remember being really scared for Jim.

I felt that it was fine for me to get up in public and talk about these quite painful, and at times personal issues, but at that time Jim was maybe just coming up for about 13 years old but he did do the Q & A. It was myself, Lisa Forrest and Jim in the Q & A and Triston Anderson who asked interesting but not too difficult questions handled it really beautifully. I didn't want Jim to have to talk about at that time what he thought of his absent dad, but he did answer some really difficult questions about what was it like having your personal life become so public.

And it was it was an amazing moment for Jim where he became confident I think about being out and proud about growing up with a lone parent and not having my dad in my life, and I think it did inform perhaps a year or so later Jim asking me, saying he would like to meet his dad for the first time. And I had thought, a bit like children that are adopted, that potentially might happen when he was 18 and that he would need to be 18 before he was ready and then I suppose, I'd been at a conference called *The Story* and I was doing a presentation on **160 Characters** and Adam G was there (*Little Dot Studios*) and Adam said to me I'd be really interested in funding a sequel, and I decided that Jim requesting for me to make contact with his dad for the first time, like the questions, and the difficulties and challenges of that moment could make an interesting short film,

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but I wasn't entirely sure, but when I got the commission, Adam G was amazing in that he never pushed it too far.

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Of course from a commissioner's point of view, what you might be hoping is that the kid will meet up with his father for the first time and that you will get these big grand narratives, but there was never any pressure that came from him, and I think that as a commissioner, he had a great duty of care about the fact that Jim was a minor. It was a difficult issue to navigate because I was both director and mother, and that is a difficult circle to square. I also had a fantastic executive producer, Amanda Murphy who it was like a sort of 4<sup>th</sup> emergency services on all of those big decisions.

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And I did lots and lots of long phone conversations with Amanda outside of Jim's earshot about what happens if I send the text and there is no reply? What effect is that going to have on Jim and is he ready for that? And am I able to manage his expectations? Because you know his father had previously rejected him and I thought there was a good chance he might continue to reject him, but what I think Adam G and myself and Amanda were in agreement about was that process in itself was actually a really interesting storyline in the film. And you know again the issues about technology - so if you haven't been in touch with the father of your child for 11 years, well then surely you can just cold call them! And so I did in the end and it took me a while but I decided to sort of send a text as the first message, and what do you put in that text?

**Angela Clarke** - Yeh I mean do you keep it breezy? *(both laughing)*

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**Victoria Mapplebeck** - Yeh yeh. And I think it was a good decision that I'm saying to Jim what do you want me to put in the text exactly and Jim said 'You know it's been a long time and I think it's time that we met.' That's what was put in that first text and I think it's a film that's about Jim and I both becoming ready to make that contact with his dad and accept the potential pain that could come with that, as well as potentially good things. And Jim definitely got there before I did in terms of being ready - I think he was ready, and even thought it didn't work out brilliantly, Jim has got no regrets he felt that it was really good for him, and he got rid of a lot of baggage about really not knowing.

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You know, he used to sort of walk down the street and imagine somebody was his father, and he used to have a fantasy that one day his dad would wait outside his secondary school to pick him up and I didn't know any of these things until we began to make the film. And again it became a bit like family counselling, particularly the sort of Zoom audio only recording's that we did, which quite a lot of those are in the film. And he would really open up to me in ways that he would not have done without the film.

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**Angela Clarke** - I think what I loved about it as well, it was all about the process, the process of him digesting that information, you as mum digesting it, and you handled that really sensitively, the points at which you told him the 'big chunks' of information that were possibly going to be quite upsetting. When you start to Google Jim's dad and you find out there is another child in his life - did

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you make a conscious decision to say I'm not going to record telling him that? How did you approach those moments? Did you think I'd rather tell you face to face and then reflectively discuss it the following day?

**Victoria Mapplebeck** – You know I think it went 10 days from when I sent that text, to receiving the reply so I think in that time I really thought he is not up for being in touch again, and Jim is now going to have to deal with this sort of second rejection which was hard. And I think there was a conscious decision that the really difficult moments for Jim, they would never be filmed live. They are for me and we agreed I would talk to him (*Jim's dad*) in the January, when I sort of sent the text in the December before and that is obviously filmed live.

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But I didn't expect to get upset and yet I did, but I did a Google search and found out that he did have another son, and that was always something that Jim told me he would find very difficult to handle and it might also change whether he wanted to see him or not. So I knew that was going to be very difficult, so I told him the night before and there is a scene where I am filming him on the sofa and he looks very pale, and he says how difficult he finds the idea of the fact his dad has got another son but in the end he says he did still want to meet up with him, but it had shifted things for him, and he seemed much sadder about that realisation.

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But obviously he needed to know and begin to accept it, and get through it, and there was no way when I dropped Jim at the gastro pub where they were going to meet, I didn't want to film that. I didn't even film my journey back from that gastro pub worrying about what might happen. And so it wasn't until about three or four days later we talked, so yeh I've always felt like I'm not going to doorstep Jim and film him at those incredibly vulnerable times, but I don't mind doing it to myself, and I think the phone call was a really good moment actually.

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And then the other challenge we had, we had a lot of challenges. The film was commissioned and it was actually quite a fast turnaround. It was commissioned in Oct 2017 and the text message was sent in Dec 2017 and then I got the response 10 days later saying, 'Yes I'm willing to talk' but in that few days, I also got a letter about needing a repeat mammogram. I'd had my first mammogram, and then I'd had a call back to say we need to do more tests and I didn't have any lump or any sort of symptoms so it was a real shock, when three days before that Xmas I was diagnosed with breast cancer.

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And so what was very difficult was then going into 2018, when I was talking to Jim's dad for the first time and arranging where they would first meet, I was then dealing with full on breast cancer treatment and by the time Jim went to meet his dad I was already, I was just coming off one cycle, the first cycle of chemotherapy and so we decided in the January of that year not to make it (*my cancer*) part of the film because it was too new. I think we also felt it would dominate too much and I think there was also a sense, I had an acute sense of it's a different story and that did become a separate film for The Guardian.

**Angela Clarke** – It's a beautiful, delicately handled film and when you watch you really understand the power of all those lovely non-verbal moments you got with Jim, just taking time to sit with somebody when you can see they are physically digesting information and processing stuff. And I think capturing the small moments and not always having to chase those bigger moments, I think it's just a much more revealing film for it because it was just a beautifully done piece of work. And I was going to ask, what advice would you give to somebody having gone through that, before we talk about your next film, what advice would you give to somebody that is about to embark on a subject that is quite personal? When you're filming intimate moments with your family like what did you learn by the end of that process?

**Victoria Mapplebeck** – I think you know it is similar advice I give to my students. You may as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb and you can't be half-hearted about it. There is not a lot that I won't expose, particularly in the cancer film you know that is the one that I really find difficult to watch again. And when I'm teaching, I tend not to show that one just because I find it really painful seeing me when I'd lost all my hair and I looked 90 years old, and how women do look when they are going through breast cancer treatment.

And for me it was important to make something that had previously been invisible visible. But it was tough and my feeling is you are either in or you're out, and a sort of coy I will show this, but I won't show the rest is not going to work. And the other thing I would sort of advise people is you know it is a lot easier when you are the filmmaker because you can choose, you can either edit yourself or you can choose an editor that you really trust and that you feel in safe hands with. And you know in *Missed Call* I think I just had a real dream team - people that had a great moral compass and I just felt very much in safe hands you know.

And I think I would advise that if you are making a film, a very personal film, you are going to need some support, and perhaps if you are going to author it or be shooting it yourself, you definitely need a second set of eyes and you need somebody to support and hold your hand through that process. I think having that support is really useful and of course even if you're making it completely independently, and have a sort of supported group of trusted friends that you also think are good filmmakers. Again I think those other opinions and voices in terms of the final editorial and the look and feel of a personal project are really vital, so build a team of people around you. It's important on any project to have a team of people who get you, who are supportive of you but I think it is particularly important if the film you are making is extremely exposing, and an emotional rollercoaster and there is a child involved as well, it's really, really important to have that great team of people behind you.

**Angela Clarke** - Yeh it's important to be mindful that while we are still in the process of making a film it's also still somebody's life unfurling in front of them, and not always unfurling in the way that they hoped.



**Victoria Mapplebeck** – Sure.

**Angela Clarke** - And I wondered as well with *160 Characters* as you say that almost had to be made on a mobile phone, there was real tie in with how that story had unfurled on a phone. But I suppose with *Missed Call*, you didn't necessarily have to film it on a mobile phone, you could have chosen, you know albeit it was centred around making a call or sending a text in the first instance but you didn't have to necessarily record on a phone. And so did you do so because you realised filming those kinds of sequences, that the phone gave you a kind of intimacy? What was the choice behind using the phone again?

**Victoria Mapplebeck** – So I think you're really right, I think in *Missed Call* it's a little bit about the interface, the way we use technologies to have those intimate conversations, but probably not as clearly as in *160 Characters* but I don't feel I can go back. So even though *Missed Call* had a better budget. It was £10,000 and that would have been enough to hire a better camera, the thing I have discovered, is the way you become invisible when you are shooting with a mobile phone!

And I think that people often think I am just watching a film on the phone or I'm even potentially in selfie mode and so I can't get over, I think all of my career I've been interested in those really beautiful moments of access and recording the world in that way, and if you are standing in a hospital corridor where you haven't even got permission to film, and you've even got anything that looks like a semi-professional kit with a lens, people are going to ask you what you are doing. And they just don't with smart phones filming; you really can embrace Werner Herzog's advice to documentary filmmakers, which is to ask forgiveness not permission I don't I have any desire to go back and use the better kit because to me I will lose more than I am going to gain by a mile...

**Angela Clarke** - Yeh that is really interesting. I wanted to ask you about kit, so when you watch the films you can obviously see you use little mics and you have a stabiliser, so what have you found to be useful tools to add on to your mobile phone? Can you tell us about what have you used along the way?

**Victoria Mapplebeck** – Definitely the stabilisers, particularly if you are doing an interview say when I'm filming Jim on the couch, a tripod just makes it a bit too rock steady and it's not so moveable but you've got a lot more fluid movement with the phone on the stabiliser. But when you are on the stabiliser that is trickier when you are filming in public spaces, and you don't want people to think is it a professional with a camera! So I've got the stabiliser and I've got a decent sort of mini tripod and with Jim interviews, all of the sync interviews for *Missed Call* are done with a little smart lav microphone for smart phones but it does tether you, you need to be close to each other. And I've just bought, Rode have got a new wireless radio mic that is blue tooth, and I've just started to use that, which will give Jim and I a bit more freedom. I can move beyond a metre away from him, and I've got a little directional microphone that was about £40

that I use with the smartphones sometimes and that is it. But for interview based – if you’ve got dialogue, you would ideally really use an external mic.

**Angela Clarke** – Dialogue has been present all the way through but especially when it comes to the last film *The Waiting Room* where you are documenting your breast cancer journey, but the first two films are fairly stripped back. In the first film its mainly yourself in dialogue because obviously Jim is still quite young, and in the second film there are obviously conversations between you and Jim but in *The Waiting Room* as you document that process of you going through breast cancer what I noticed was you rely a lot more on audio to carry you along, from people like your mum, your friends, siblings etc and I also noticed you’ve used their audio but we don’t ever really see them in vision so what prompted you to tell the story in that way?

**Victoria Mapplebeck** – So I think you know poor Jim, that was obviously my biggest worry through the breast cancer, how he would cope with my treatment and seeing me go through chemo and losing hair and all of the difficult stuff and it was made doubly hard by the fact that I’m a lone parent and Jim wasn’t even 14 when I was diagnosed. How vulnerable that must have made him feel was really big, and so I was a lot more sensitive about asking him to film and felt like I didn’t do it in anything like the amount of time I did it with *Missed Call*, because I felt it was much more painful.

So what we did do more of were you know I’ve got a Zoom recorder and two pretty good Sennheiser mics and we used a lot more of that ‘filming device’ where we recorded audio only conversation. And again, like *Missed Call*, I advise students to think about doing audio only recordings because people often will divulge things even if you are recording you know with just a smart phone. That was when Jim would tell me things like, he was having persistent dreams of me dying and every time he dreamt that I died, he ran to the balcony and jumped off it. And things like that were really difficult for me to hear but were also really important for me to hear.

Also he probably got more open retrospectively so I think some of the interviews towards the end are very, very moving, and my friend Glynn said, when he looked at the rough cut, ‘The elephant in the room is that you’ve never asked Jim whether he was frightened of you dying’ and so at the end of *The Waiting Room* I do ask him that. And I used this device where I filmed Jim and he filmed me, which was also a departure from our usual style. So I think that the audio only recordings were good in that respect, in terms of Jim, because it became much more sensitive and darker and difficult. And then you are right, in *The Waiting Room* you can imagine how many more phone calls you are having with friends and family, and I discovered I think the beauty of voice mail, because I think actually if you are recording a lot of phone conversations particularly if they are going on for about 45 mins or 60mins you’ve got this enormous amount of archive, and voice mails are brilliant because they are really economical. There is like a mini narrative and so the voice mails were really great.

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You know with my mum, that was quite difficult during the breast cancer, I mean the McMillian booklet is frankly well meaning, but useless and you know nobody knows how to deal with it and what they should say, and what they should do and how they should help. And my mum would obsess about food, which is her way to nurture and provide and to show that she is there, but of course when you are going through chemo, the last thing that you want to hear is that she has just baked a shepherds pie when you've just vomited for the 4<sup>th</sup> time that morning you know!

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And so I think that the voice mails with my mum talking about those things were interesting and that is definitely a device I've carried on using. And you know I used the voice mails also in *The Waiting Room VR* project too, and they are a big part of the feature film I'm developing. And in a way, I've become more interested by spoken voice in the archive of the phone than written voice, and so I've slightly moved away from text messages. I think that is also to do with the fact what when I first made *160 Characters* there were hardly any TV series or feature films that brought to life text messages and if they did, it was often done in a very clunky way.

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So *Sherlock* was the first time in British TV it was done very artfully and they did a very clever thing, by getting rid of the 'bubble' because in fact it was the 'bubble' that dates the message. So it was very simply, just the actual text and it was very clever and it was the first time it was done very elegantly and creatively. Now of course, particularly in terms of smart phones text messaging, I mean every teen Netflix's series, you know which are 10 a penny use it and so I think particularly that Apple interface featuring onscreen text messages has become so ubiquitous that I've kind of gotten bored with it now and I'm moving away from that.

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And so I just think audio on the phone is so fantastic because it's so nuanced. You hear the worry in my mums voice or you hear the humour in a friends message, and then also we do quite a cheeky thing in *The Waiting Room*, the film for The Guardian, so that we didn't have to use commentary. I don't know if you noticed it, but some of the phone calls are 'fake' because of course I wasn't recording my messages to friends, so if you look at the opening of *The Waiting Room* short, it's a very useful bit, a very economical bit of narrative, that says 'I'm up at Kings they have done another mammogram, they are thinking it's breast cancer' and it sounds like a message that I probably would have left for my friend Glenn, because Glenn was the person I was in touch with that afternoon as I didn't go with anybody (*to the hospital appointment*) but he was there for me to tell him what was happening. So those were quite easy to 'fake' and you know those real time documentary moments are quite easy to reconstruct and so I've used them perhaps about three or four times and in the film.

**Angela Clarke** – Well what I loved about it was when you hear a voice message, you've got intonation and familiarity so even though you don't necessarily know who has left the message you can hear, you know for example your siblings call you by a certain nickname, or you've got that dynamic left over from childhood with siblings that define that tone, and then when you hear your

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mum leaving a voice mail, in a way what I think is even more engaging about that is, it's no longer just *your mum* leaving you a voice mail – everyone then imagines *their mum* leaving that same voice mail! All mums speak to their children in that same tone. And what I think it also captures really beautifully is that awkwardness as you say, those subtle moments of hesitation when you can hear people frantically trying to think 'how do I phrase this' and it may just be 20 secs of audio, but within that 20 seconds you get anxiety and worry and upset.

Again I think it's a really interesting angle to take when you are doing something and it shows you can get an awful lot from effectively quite little doesn't it. Again there is not much music yet you are driving the emotion with those other things, and you are using the pictures emotively and I think it is about how you bring the power of all of that together.

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What's really interesting about that and it's probably out of all your latest batch of films, the one that is most exposing physically and emotionally for you because it's the most intimate. You don't pull any punches in terms of the awfulness of going through that process, and the physicality of change and it's interesting to hear. I was going to ask you how was it to engage with that footage in the edit? You've put blood sweat and tears into it to filming something and you have got all of these rushes and you've got your editor sitting with their compassionate, but albeit objective, eyes because it's not their story and it's not their journey. Is it more difficult when its a personal story to edit it, to leave bits out like how did you find that process?

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**Victoria Mapplebeck** – Difficult. And you know so on *The Waiting Room* I actually had this great relationship with Lisa Forrest who cut *160 Characters* and *Missed Call* and I really, really wanted her to edit *The Waiting Room* but she was perfectly honest with me and said she found the subject matter too difficult and that meant I had to find a new editor, and I did find that really tough because this was the most exposing thing, and it was a bit of an unfolding narrative and it was made as I was going through treatment and then finally making a recovery.

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So it was made during a difficult time and I remember I had one editor that I began with who was a very accomplished editor who got the first rough cut to The Guardian and it was in really, really good shape but ultimately we really really disagreed on tone - I wanted to go darker – and I'm also very sceptical of that cultural sort of 'smile or die approach' which sort of talks about cancer as 'the gift that keeps on giving' because fundamentally it sucks, and fundamentally I wish it had never happened. And particularly regarding what it did to my son and what a really, really profoundly difficult year he had. And so yes I can see there were things about me that improved, and I grew and probably became more resilient and Jim became more resilient, but frankly I could have done without it you know.

So when a friend of mine recommended Emiliano Battista who has edited lots of feature docs and is a very, very experienced editor and he was brilliant and came in and was totally happy for it to be dark and he knew that it was about the really

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hard core and difficult truths about living with cancer and the effect in particular it has on family and I think Emiliano did a really great job with the edit but it's interesting because it is the one I find the most difficult to watch with people. And so when I'm teaching, I'm totally happy to show **160 Characters** and **Missed Call** but I tend to just show a clip of that Guardian film, I do find it really, really painful to watch again.

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And it's interesting because the VR piece that was made at the same time, which formally has a very, very different approach, I really enjoy watching and I actually think it is the stronger piece. I'm obviously proud of them both, but the VR piece uses voice over, in a much more sort of creative writing style and you know is about looking at the history of chemotherapy and it actually came out of what they discovered when mustard gas accidentally killed soldiers during the first world war, when a boat was sunk and they all died. The post mortems discovered it had killed the white blood cells and that's what led to chemotherapy.

So in a much more reflective and writerly way, I reflect on the grandfather that I never knew that came out of WW1 with one lung destroyed because of mustard gas, and then all of these years later his granddaughter that he never met ends up having the same stuff coursing through her veins, so it was very different. I think the film for The Guardian was much more about the visceral unfolding narrative of going through treatment and I think the piece of VR was much more reflective and sort of intellectual I think if I had to watch one of those again, I'd happily watch the VR piece.

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**Angela Clarke** – I can see why it would be a difficult film to watch back and I suppose one of the things I wanted to ask you how do you protect yourself from that as a filmmaker when you start on that path of making a really personal documentary? How do you preserve your own sanity through that process? Do you talk to somebody else about how you feel going through that process at the time I mean how did you handle that?

**Victoria Mapplebeck** – I think I did find the filming cathartic without a doubt, probably the most cathartic I've ever found filming, and I remember thinking on the worst days, because I really did struggle with the chemotherapy in terms of sickness, I used to think well if I filmed a scene where I'm throwing up or I'm on the sofa recovering from that nausea and looking terrible I would be able to perhaps to do something useful with it. You are in a world where you can control so little somehow that critical distance to your pain gives you some sense of being in control somewhere. And so I think that I think that did really help.

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I think its just difficult for me, you know as women we are so wanting to look our best and always feeling we are judged on what we look like so I think it was absolutely the right thing that I showed what chemo does to your skin. Chemo literally aged me 15 years and you know it does come back and I remember thinking that is it now, I'm just going to look a good 15 years older than I actually am now. And it took a long time, but it does actually come back and you do get your skin back and your hair back, but it's taken three years for it to get it to



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grow back to this length (*points to shoulder length hair*). Jim told me once I'd gone through it that he found that really difficult, me losing my hair, but he never told me at the time which I think was just incredibly moving and brave of him, but he did admit later on that he actually found it very hard.

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**Angela Clarke** – And I think that is why the film is really important though because unless people speak about those other issues that would be seen as 'side issues' which they aren't, which is why I suppose for me the two films, with the VR, you have something that gives you a very immersive sense of what it's like to go through the procedural process and what runs through your head when you are going into those machines and all the other stuff, but it's the smaller things too. It's those small moments that you could easily not include, but by including them, give you a different, a much more intense and magnified sense of the journey...

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**Victoria Mapplebeck** – Yeh, so right from being diagnosed, you're allowed now to use the voice-recording app on your phone to record consultations. People do that anyway and I think it's really useful actually because you can go back and listen to it again, because you are so fraught when you are being given news and being told about treatments and often you're not taking it in and I also made a mistake in that I decided I would do everything on my own.

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You know looking back on it, I think that was probably silly, but I think it probably made me film more, the distraction of thinking how am I going to record this became really important and helpful. And I remember there was a hilarious moment when I had had the surgery and that is a very pivotal moment in my breast cancer treatment because during surgery they do what is called a lymph node biopsy and they effectively see whether it has spread from the breast, and sadly the more it has gone into your lymph nodes, the more it could potentially be in the rest of your system storing up trouble for the future in a secondary cancer which wouldn't be curable. And I got this news, which was really difficult because if it hadn't gone into any of the lymph nodes I wouldn't have needed chemo. And so my consultant was telling me this and I knew it was filmmaker gold in terms of the way that he was telling me it had spread to one lymph node, it hadn't spread to many lymph nodes, it had only gone to one lymph node and he described it as...

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**Angela Clarke** – I remember...*(laughing)*

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**Victoria Mapplebeck** – *(laughing)* You cancer is like terrorists and it's like they have got past the border and now they could be lurking, hiding out in Scotland and the chemo is going to come and attack them and he used all these crazy metaphors, I don't remember them all and I don't know whether he regularly used these metaphors but they were completely bonkers and particularly the ones about illegal refugees and stuff.... *(laughing)*

**Angela Clarke** – Oh it was very elaborate I was like - wow that is amazing!

**Victoria Mapplebeck** – And I had the voice app going and when I came out of the consultation in a way which had been bad news that it had spread, not horribly but it had spread and that would mean I would have to have chemo, and I remember sitting in the waiting room and digesting it but I couldn't find the audio recording because it had basically gone up into the cloud and it hadn't quite come down again. But I was more devastated that I thought I had lost the audio recording of what I knew as a filmmaker was gold, than I was by the news, which was utterly bonkers, but also very reflective of lots of filmmakers about the way they prioritise the making more than their own sense of health and wellbeing I suppose. And you know I did have the recording in the end and obviously it's in the film and it's also in the VR piece, it's quite a pivotal point in both projects and I was glad I got it.

**Angela Clarke** – Well I mean that is the thing, it was absolute gold – and that is what I loved about it because you almost sort of chuckle thinking what on earth is that man on about, and I was thinking just imagine being in that room and you're trying to process that information and then the doctor pulls out this random analogy about terrorism - I was like what on earth is going on!  
*(laughing)*

But then again, it was a moment of light in amongst the shade and gives you that sort of *(pause)* it takes you out of the setting for a second. So in terms of funding for those - had you started filming first? And again, I take it by this point you are on a roll with the mobile phone, and you've been using that – it's free and easy to use but again you didn't have to necessarily shoot on a mobile phone - so what happened regarding the process of going to The Guardian and the same with your VR project - how it was tackled?

**Victoria Mapplebeck** – Yes we managed to get just £5000 from Charlie Philips at The Guardian when really it ended up a half an hour film and we made it for £12,000 which was a bit frustrating because I'd had a bursary for Women and Film in TV to develop my feature doc, and in a way because those story lines are also going to be in the feature film, I could use it, but it was a bit frustrating because we had to put a lot of that bursary into The Guardian smartphone short.

But then the VR piece was fantastic in that it was funded at a much more substantial level again and basically I had been really interested in non fiction VR and had started as a critic, I went to documentary festivals like Sheffield Docfest and IDFA and the Venice Film Festival and I had started to review and be incredibly moved by non fiction VR. So there was an EPSRC academic application (*The Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council*), which was run by the University of Bristol and the University of the West of England, and they were looking for one experienced VR director and two filmmakers that wanted to make their first immersive piece.

And I was really, really lucky because they had about 500 applications applying to get one of those commissions and it was £50k which I did find quite frustrating how expensive VR is. I also found the lack of diversity in VR very

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difficult and I felt like most of the people I was paired with were these sort of white, middle class guys and who have cornered a market in unity, particularly the developers, where they can charge 500 pounds a day which frankly I think is ridiculous and your budget just disappears so fast when people are on those sort of rates. But because there are so few people with this skillset and sadly they seem to be nearly all white 30+ guys, that is what it costs you.

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And what I found was a much more accessible way in was to use sound only and so it was when I started to get really much more interested in sound and I began working with this fantastic sound designer called John Wakefield, and we effectively built the story around sound. And then I experimented with 360 filming and that was the way we did it. What was meant to be a test shoot of me re-constructing radio therapy ended up being these fantastic durational takes, and I think those durational takes worked particularly well in immersive and they work even better than they sometimes work in 2D film. And so that was nice to have a really decent budget and to be able to experiment and I made a fee! On everything else I've made, I don't take a fee and to be honest it was really nice to but that was an enormous amount of work, basically making the VR and sound piece and the smart phone short and still working full time as an academic at Royal Holloway. It did nearly kill me and frankly it was too much to take on and although I'm very glad I did it, it was very nice to be able to take a fee for the first time again in a long time which was probably put back into my other filmmaking.

**Angela Clarke** – In terms of developing your first feature doc then – well first iPhone feature doc, how is that going and can you tell us a little bit about it?

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**Victoria Mapplebeck** – For the last year I have been trying to get funding to make a feature documentary to do the smart phone feature **Motherboard** and effectively it will use some of the narratives and some of the footage from the short films and in a way it has got a kind of Act One, Act Two, Act Three structure. So act one is some of the narratives from **160 Characters** – so what life was life at 38 when you find yourself single, pregnant and broke!

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And then I decided to take the route that I took, to have Jim and raise him on my own, and then Act Two is some of the storylines from **Missed Call** about where we make contact with Jim's dad but of course it's different now because in **Missed Call** you never see what happens when he meets his dad but you also now see that was all happening at the same time as the breast cancer diagnosis and treatment, and then just as I thought I was getting better, and had just recovered from some of the long term effects of chemo, I had lost weight and my hair had started to grow back and I was going to the gym regularly then Covid hits, and all of those health worries and anxieties sadly came right back in for me and Jim.

And in some respects, at the very beginning, were even harder than when I had breast cancer because of course my mum was then out of the loop so if I got Covid and had a difficult time with it, I mean single parents up and down, across the world must have really felt this challenge because if your other carer is

13 elderly and you know you have lost them. Jim was just about old enough to be home alone if that ever happened at the beginning but can you imagine if he had been 8 or 9 years old, it would just be really terrifying, so that was really difficult.

And then obviously now Jim is really growing up and he's recently hit 17 and we are living life much more in sort of separate bubbles, you know me in the living room and him in his bedroom, door closed, and so it sort of looks at family life and that closeness that we still have but also me beginning to live with another adult and the changes and the sadness that brings. You have to grieve that a bit I think as a parent and actually one of the things that has actually been really nice about being a mother and a filmmaker its interesting that my career has began to take off again at the very point that he became old enough to do his own thing at the weekends!

14 One of the reasons why I'm just determined to get **Motherboard** funded and made is just to be another middle-aged woman director out there at film festivals with a long form film. You will find there is many more women in shot form and it's because short form films are obviously easier to make with lower budgets and you know can be made around family commitments but **Motherboard** is still only a 100k budget but we need that because it's a big edit phase, and I would like a bit of money for music clearance as I want to use Jim's snap chat videos with Grime tracks and need a bit of music clearance, and possibly a touch of animation. But it is still a very low budget feature but nevertheless for the first time I can't make the film without the gatekeepers, I do need a commissioner or film financier to make that commitment.

15 **Angela Clarke** - Do you think you will ever make another film shot on a normal camera are you to far gone now do you think?

16 **Victoria Mapplebeck** - I think I'm too far-gone! I definitely would like to make another immersive piece, and that is sort of like a new feather to my bow and you know one of the projects I was developing was slightly switching from filming Jim a lot in lockdown its switched much more to recording phone calls in lockdown. I've got this huge archive, and I've come up with this idea to do like a piece of immersive theatre really - you would come in to our flat, and you would put headphones on and it would be like an audio tour, and it would be like a soundscape that happens in Jim's room, that basically tells lockdown from his perspective, and then you come in to the living room and it the soundscape is about my completely separate world. And it could entirely be an audio piece and I like the fact trying out different technologies, different platforms but I think now with regards shooting for another documentary - I don't think I could ever go back from using the smartphone.

**Angela Clarke** - Well that is the thing, it gives you a sense of freedom doesn't it. And as you say so what would be the point. Well look it's been so lovely so lovely to speak to you...

**Victoria Mapplebeck** – This has been lovely thank you so much or having me.

**Angela Clarke** - No thank you for coming on and for anybody that hasn't seen all of your work – they can go to your website Victoria Mapplebeck (dot) com and your films are all on there if they want to watch them and get some inspiration on making a really impactful films with modest budgets, and good luck with *Motherboard* I cant wait to see it when it comes out.

**Victoria Mapplebeck** - Thanks so much and good luck with the rest of the series it's going to be great.

**Angela Clarke** - Thank you.

**Victoria Mapplebeck** – Cool thanks a lot.

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