

LAURA BUSETTA*

FRAMING INTIMACY: TECHNOLOGY, MEMORY, AND SELF-REPRESENTATION IN VICTORIA MAPPLEBECK'S FILMS

Abstract

Over the past decade, Victoria Mapplebeck's work has explored the intersection of technology, intimacy, and personal storytelling, using the smartphone as the preferred tool to document autobiographical memories. In works like *160 Characters* (2015), *Missed Call* (2018), and *The Waiting Room* (2019), she addresses themes such as social connection, health, and single motherhood. Her latest project, *Motherboard* (2024), employs long-term storytelling through personal photos and videos to portray everyday life and the complexities of motherhood. Mapplebeck's films reflect on how digital devices not only record but also shape our memories. This contribution situates her work within the genre of mobile-documentaries, where filmmakers create fragmented micro-autobiographies using amateur and digital storytelling techniques. Within contemporary debates in media and gender studies, and drawing on concepts from gender and motherhood studies, it offers a close analysis of how mobile media influence self-representation and memory. The smartphone emerges as both an expressive audiovisual tool and a technology of the self, capable of expressing intimacy, vulnerability, and resistance.

Keywords

Memory; archive; autobiography; mobile filmmaking; motherhood.

ISSN: 03928667 (print) 18277969 (digital)

DOI: 10.26350/001200_000243

Creative Commons License CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0

1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout the last decade, Victoria Mapplebeck's work has explored the intersection of technology, intimacy, and personal storytelling, particularly through the use of the mobile phone as the preferred tool to document autobiographical memories. From *160 Characters* (2015) to *Missed Call* (2018), to *The Waiting Room* (2019), Mapplebeck uses the mobile phone to investigate themes of social connection, health, parenting, and the evolving forms of communication in the digital age. Central to her practice is the representation of her own journey of motherhood, reflecting on the joys and struggles of raising her son as a single parent. In particular, in her recent work *Motherboard* (2024, a sort of response to Richard Linklater's *Boyhood*, 2014), Mapplebeck uses long-term storytelling and personal pictures and video to represent everyday life and discover private and intimate aspects of motherhood. While smartphones have changed the way we re-

Contributo sottoposto a *double-blind peer review*.

* University of Messina – lbusetta@unime.it.

cord, share, and archive our personal histories, Mapplebeck's work highlights the ways in which these devices not only capture moments but also shape the way we remember them. In this sense, her films reflect on broader questions about memory, identity, and the role of digital technology in documenting personal relationships and preserving our most private and vulnerable experiences. By using the mobile phone as an audiovisual tool, she redefines how intimacy can be represented and experienced in today's landscape of digital culture. This contribution analyzes Mapplebeck's work within the context of contemporary uses of the smartphone in first-person documentaries, in which the filmmakers often construct micro-autobiographies, proceeding through a fragmented aesthetic and elliptical micro-narratives. In *mobile-mentaries (or mobile-documentaries)*, subjects experiment with audiovisual techniques, incorporating amateur forms and digital storytelling practices typical of the contemporary media landscape and its ephemeral way of sharing digital content.

Within the framework of contemporary debates in media studies and first-person cinema, and drawing on concepts from gender and motherhood studies, this article offers a close and textual analysis of Victoria Mapplebeck's films. It examines how mobile media shape processes of self-representation and autobiographical memory, focusing on the filmmaker's formal and narrative strategies. Particular attention is given to the smartphone as both an expressive audiovisual device and technology of the self – a means of articulating intimacy, vulnerability, and resistance through visual form.

2. PERSONAL CINEMA AND THE MOBILE-MENTARY

Technological transformations driven by the spread of mobile devices and digital platforms have progressively redefined the boundaries of documentary cinema on the one hand, and audiovisual self-representation on the other. The use of smartphones as tools for film production has become a well-established practice within contemporary documentary filmmaking, evolving from an underground practice to a recognized form of filmmaking. This trend reflects the widespread adoption of devices whose primary function has shifted in recent years from audio communication to visual expression. While mobile phones have long been associated with lightweight, accessible, and low-cost filming technologies, the latest generation of smartphones introduces a distinctly social dimension. Thanks to constant internet connectivity and the ability to share content instantly, these devices are not only tools for capturing images but also platforms for real-time interaction and dissemination. While mobile filmmaking was not recognized for about a decade in the film industry, "it operated very much situated in an independent space and in grassroots and bottom-up approach, opposing the hierarchical structures in the film and TV industry"¹. As Schleser writes in his text on the theory and practice of smartphone filmmaking: "Although mobile filmmaking has been around for more than a decade, smartphone filmmakers are continuously defining a new film grammar and continue to expand the boundaries in filmmaking, moving-image arts and the dynamic environment of screen production"². If we think about smartphone filmmaking – a practice in which cinematic works are created entirely using mobile devices – we can mention, among others, films such as *Nausea* (Matthew Noel Tod, 2005), *I would like to Share*

¹ M. Schleser, *Smartphone Filmmaking: Theory and Practice*, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021, 35.

² *Ibid.*, 19.

the Spring with Someone (Joseph Morder, 2007), *Why Didn't Anybody Tell Me It Would Become This Bad* (Cyrus Frisch, 2007), *Moscow Diary* (Adam Kossoff, 2010), *Midnight Traveler* (Hassan Fazili, 2019), and the short film *The Brown Line* (Rachid Djaidani, 2010), but also *Vedozero* (Andrea Caccia, 2009), *Vedozero2* (Andrea Caccia, 2016), and *Selfie* (Agostino Ferrente, 2019). Mobile strategies have also often been chosen for personal storytelling, as seen in films such as *Zero Bagget* (Michele Coppini, 2015), and *iSola* (Elisa Fuksas, 2020), a diary film shot with an iPhone during the Covid-19 pandemic. Many of these films adopt a digital and mobile-mentary aesthetics, which is able to reveal storytelling strategies “with which HD (high definition) and 4K cameras cannot compete”³. In an audiovisual landscape increasingly shaped by agile, low-budget technologies, British director and artist Victoria Mapplebeck has established herself as a distinctive and original voice. Her work, deeply rooted in autobiography and a meditation on mediated intimacy, lies at the crossroads of documentary, self-representation, and diary filmmaking. Constantly pushing the boundaries of first-person documentary, she experiments with new forms of storytelling. Mapplebeck’s films also occupy a unique space within current discussions surrounding the documentary genre and the use of mobile phones as a tool for storytelling. Her projects – such as *160 Characters* (2015), *Missed Call* (2018), *The Waiting Room* (2019), and her first feature film *Motherboard* (2024) – delve into themes of intimacy, memory, and personal narrative. The mobile phone serves both as a means of documenting daily life and as a central motif, through which she captures the often-unseen details of human experience, especially her own journey through motherhood.

In mobile movies, as Roger Odin observes, there is a shift from the eye to the hand: shooting with a mobile phone means showing the viewer what the hand sees, rather than the eye:

Films made with mobile phones abound in images that reflect the immediacy and impulsiveness of the act of filming (filming with a phone is like pointing): “see and film” – there is no time to think or even to frame; what matters is that people understand the things and events around them⁴.

This is also a method of image capture that presupposes physical contact with the device, as the smartphone truly becomes an extension of the body⁵. And if today mobile filmmaking is a fairly established and recognized practice (consider the *Pocket Film Festival* in Paris, which is entirely dedicated to mobile films, or the many Smartphone Film Festivals around the world), it often intersects with first-person filmmaking, currently one of the most significant filmic forms in contemporary – and particularly documentary – cinema production. In the context of contemporary media transformation, in which interaction with technologies, platforms, and devices has profoundly redefined the rhetoric of subjectivation, autobiography and self-representation have become central. They oscillate between the transformation of more traditional and established forms of self-representation and the more recent dynamics of personal “oversharing”⁶. In this

³ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁴ R. Odin, “Spectator, Film and the Mobile Phone”, in *Audiences*, edited by I. Christie, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012, 155-169 (165-166).

⁵ A. D’Aloia, F. Parisi, “Snapshot Culture: The Photographic Experience in the Post-Medium Age”, *Comunicazioni sociali*, 1 (2016): 3-14 (7-8).

⁶ A. Pinotti, A. Somaini, *Cultura visuale. Immagini, sguardi, media, dispositivi*, Torino: Einaudi, 2016, 265.

framework, there is a growing variety of textual forms that reflect personal lived experience. These are life-writing practices that extend across different disciplinary fields, ranging from verbal forms not necessarily written (testimonies, reminiscences, and private narratives) and that cut across visual arts, photography, cinema, oral history, and so on⁷. These hybrid practices – halfway between essay film, self-portrait, confession, and autoethnography – constitute the broad field of personal cinema, which continues to redefine itself and spill over into new forms⁸. The personal staging in contemporary documentary thus frees itself

from the institutional grandeur of the narrated person to embrace the life stories of ordinary individuals. What is at stake is no longer the relevance or fame of the subject, but the originality of the process of shaping it: not the simple representation of a story, but the processual nature of the experience, both cinematic and lived⁹.

We are observing, in fact, a broad phenomenon of return to subjectivity which, as Laura Rascaroli writes, encompasses the entire media system and also impacts cinema. It must also be understood as a response to the increasing fragmentation of individual experience, alongside a “liquid” dimension that characterizes the contemporary media context¹⁰. The contemporary autobiographical impulse of the documentary film should be read in this direction as an attempt to inscribe the subject within a regime of meaning, in the face of an increasingly disjointed perception of the self. In light of these premises, in this contribution I intend to analyze the work of Victoria Mapplebeck, placing it within the framework of personal documentary and smartphone filmmaking, highlighting on the one hand the aesthetics of intimacy, and on the other, the reflection on gender representation in the wake of gender and motherhood studies.

3. *160 CHARACTERS, MISSED CALL, AND THE WAITING ROOM:* THE AESTHETICS OF INTIMACY

Victoria Mapplebeck uses the smartphone not only as a technical tool, but almost as an extension of the body, as well as a device for bearing witness. Her works – including the aforementioned *160 Characters*, *Missed Call*, *The Waiting Room*, and *Motherboard* – are examples of a new audiovisual practice in which self-narration intertwines with broader, collective reflection. These works question affective relationships, illness, motherhood, memory, temporality, the evolution of technology, and communication practices. Often set in domestic or hospital environments, her films provide a subjective

⁷ M. Jolly, *Encyclopedia of Life Writing*, London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2001, IX.

⁸ On first-person filmmaking and the field of personal cinema see M. Renov, *The Subject of Documentary*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004; L. Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera: Subjective Cinema and the Essay Film*, London: Wallflower 2009; A. Lebow, ed., *The Cinema of Me: The Self and Subjectivity in First Person Documentary*, Columbia University Press, 2012; M. Tinel-Temple, L. Busetta, M. Monteiro, eds., *From Self-portrait to Selfie: Representing the Self in Moving Image*, Oxford: Peter Lang, 2019; F. Villa, ed., *Vite impersonali. Autoritrattistica e medialità*, Cosenza: Luigi Pellegrini, 2012. On autoethnography see C. Russell, *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video*, Durham-London: Duke University Press, 1999.

⁹ M. Bertozzi, *Documentario come arte. Riuso, performance, autobiografia nell'esperienza del cinema contemporaneo*, Venezia: Marsilio, 2018, 26.

¹⁰ Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera*, 4-5.

and intimate gaze that breaks with the conventions of traditional documentary and places her firmly within the tradition of first-person documentary:

First person film goes beyond simply debunking documentary's claim to objectivity. In the very awkward simultaneity of being subject in and subject of, it actually unsettles the dualism of objective/subjective divide, rendering it inoperative¹¹.

The technical intimacy of the smartphone, often used in everyday and private settings, fosters a subjective narrative that stands in contrast to the distance and impersonality of the traditional camera. The use of the smartphone as a recording device introduces a specific aesthetic, marked by low resolution, imperfection, physical proximity to the filmed subject, spontaneity of framing, and the fragmentary nature of visual material. These elements are not mere consequences of a "limited" device but become defining traits of a deliberate poetics and grammar of smartphone filmmaking, with a constant and explicit reference to the digital environment in which these texts and images are produced. Mobile cinema is built upon an aesthetic of immediacy, where apparent technical imperfection is offset by a greater sense of perceived authenticity.

We can consider the director's first "small" film, entitled *160 Characters*, and made in 2015. It is a short film that explores the end of a relationship through the on-screen display of a series of SMS messages exchanged between the director and the father of her son. As Mapplebeck herself states: "*160 Characters* brought to life a three-year SMS thread between myself and my son's father which charted the story of how we met, dated for just a few months, broke up and subsequently dealt with an unplanned pregnancy"¹².

Mapplebeck combines footage shot later with her smartphone with a selection of SMS messages received from the father of her child at the beginning of their relationship, while the film frequently evokes the aesthetic of early mobile phones. The first image of the film shows, in fact, a SIM card with the title "160 Characters" written on it; we immediately hear the sound of the phone vibrating. The story begins with the discovery of an old Nokia phone in a drawer. A green screen appears with the words "Apr 2003." The font and the green color clearly recall the Nokia phone aesthetic. The voice-over tells us that in that box there is a story the woman had tried to forget for a long time. Next, we see a nighttime image of London, over which the first text message appears: "Thank you for a wonderful night. Love, J." "We met through a dating agency", the voice-over reveals. As more messages between the two lovers appear on screen, sped-up everyday images pace the narrative (a coffee cup, the subway, people walking down the street, the kitchen tap running, the Mac screen, the sound of fingers on the keyboard, and finally a new message accompanied by the sound of the phone vibrating). The rhythm of the text messages breaks when J. writes he cannot see V. The voice-over says, "I called him", while we see a shadow standing at a subway stop, and V.'s body is absent from the screen. A new screen tells us it is now May 2003. Now there are images of a pregnancy test and an ultrasound (with the sound of the fetal heartbeat) that reveal that V. is pregnant. The voice-over – always in the past tense – tells us about the doubts and worries that followed the discovery of being pregnant: "Each morning I worked feeling sick. Was the baby ok? How would I have managed? How would I have worked again?". We now see

¹¹ Lebow, *The Cinema of Me*, 5.

¹² M. Suid, *Daring Autobiographical Doc Explores the Impact of an Absent Father. Interview with Victoria Mapplebeck*.

a phone number appear digit by digit on the screen (still reminding us of the Nokia font), then the word “Dialling” appears. We understand that Victoria called J. to inform him. She tells us he changed his mind many times about being involved (or not) in the pregnancy. Another title card: “Jan 2004”. After the birth of their son Jim, we see letters from messages appear, get deleted, and rewritten. She sends him a message; he doesn’t reply. Now we see images of the baby, pacifiers, diapers thrown in the trash. We hear ambient noise, then the Nokia ringtone. He calls a week later. A series of baby photos of Jim appear. The voice-over tells us they met up once, but there are no pictures of the event: “My old Nokia had no camera. This is the only day out Jim had with his dad, but there’s no photograph”. There is a further leap in time and the year “2015” appears. This time it appears in a different font, and on a white background, evoking Apple’s minimalist aesthetic. The voice-over says: “We now have a decade of our lives archived in technology old and new. This Christmas I gave Jim his first mobile. It already says low on space”.

As we can see from this brief description of Mapplebeck’s first audiovisual work, the mobile phone thus becomes a “witness” to the relationship, but also an archive of emotions and communications that can be reprocessed with time. As Mapplebeck notes about the following project *Missed Call* (a commissioned short film which was awarded with BAFTA Best Short Form Film award in 2019): “All the family archive I’d shot on smartphones (post 2012) was backed up to the cloud and sometimes, I would use that archive to find additional material”¹³. Mapplebeck herself describes the project as an exploration of her relationship with her son, and their tentative to reconnect with the son’s absent father:

How do you reconnect with a father who’s been gone for so long [...] what do you say, what do you text? *Missed Call* begins with the last message he sent in 2006 and ends with the first call to him over a decade later. The film explores the many ways in which our lives are lived and archived via the phones we hold so close¹⁴.

160 Characters shows aesthetic strategies that tend to recur in Mapplebeck’s films, such as the following *Missed Call*, including the use of photographs, smartphone messages, and a voice-over that links the images.

The return to personal history, the deliberate presentation of a private point of view, and the triumph of the image-maker’s subjectivity have become central trends in recent documentary filmmaking, where the authorial presence becomes the explicit fulcrum of a text that unfolds for the benefit of its viewers, precisely through the director’s performative presence – traditionally erased¹⁵. In this perspective, the so-called “voice of God” of traditional documentary – often criticized as authoritarian, due to its expression of power and its position of total knowledge over the diegesis – becomes, in autobiographical audiovisual texts, a privileged channel for accessing the authorial subject’s inner world, as well as a primary mode of direct address to the audience¹⁶. This openly partial point of view inevitably takes on a programmatic significance: in the shift from

¹³ Suid, *Daring Autobiographical Doc Explores the Impact of an Absent Father*.

¹⁴ As described on the artist’s website: <https://victoriामapplebeck.com/films/missed-call/>. Accessed May 15, 2025.

¹⁵ M. Bertozzi, *Documentario come arte. Riuso, performance, autobiografia nell’esperienza del cinema contemporaneo*, Venezia: Marsilio, 2018, 9.

¹⁶ Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera*, 39.

authoritarian discourse to autobiographical discourse, we see no more an expression of a “vision of the world” but, more specifically, a “vision of my world”¹⁷.

Using a smartphone allows the filmmaker total control over the images, and offers the viewer a radically subjective perspective. The ability to film independently, without invasive equipment, also allows Mapplebeck to record moments of extreme vulnerability, such as those set in domestic or hospital settings – as in *The Waiting Room*, made in 2019 and shot exclusively on the iPhone X, in which she documents her experience of cancer diagnosis and treatment. The film alternates between hospital scenes, domestic footage, and confessional sequences that reflect the difficult relationship with her sick body and with medical institutions, “an unflinching portrait of the blood, sweat and tears of cancer treatment”¹⁸. Mapplebeck documents her experience of illness with an intimate and personal approach, speaking openly about the physical and emotional challenges of treatment. Her use of the smartphone allows her to maintain a narrative control, offering a direct and vulnerable window onto her experience, while the mobile “functions as a channel for self-expression and for conveying nonverbal experiences and perceptual states as they are lived in the immediate present”¹⁹.

In this sense, the unique relationship between the filmed subject and the device used in mobile shooting harks back to the roots of amateur filmmaking, particularly as it emerged within underground, independent, and experimental cinema, where operator mobility plays a central role²⁰. First-person documentaries that utilize images captured by new digital devices become experiments in archiving everyday life and fleeting experiences, while also prompting reflection not only on the smartphone’s role as a key production tool, but also on the inherent fragility of the images it produces.

4. *MOTHERBOARD*: THE NARRATIVE OF MOTHERHOOD, AND GENDERED SELF-REPRESENTATION AS A POLITICAL PRACTICE

Many of the reflections emerging in Mapplebeck’s earlier short films find their culmination in the British director’s debut feature. In an international context where the use of smartphones as cinematic tools has, as mentioned, become rather formalized²¹, *Motherboard* can be considered a “mobile movie” yet designed for viewing on the big screen. Once again, the choice to use the smartphone as the preferred filming device is not merely pragmatic: it is configured as both an aesthetic and political act, asserting the

¹⁷ J. Lane, *The Autobiographical Documentary in America*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002, 24.

¹⁸ I quote from Victoria Mapplebeck’s website <https://victoriामapplebeck.com/films/the-waiting-room/>. Accessed May 15, 2025.

¹⁹ Cati analyzes the vulnerability of the migrant subject, see A. Cati, “The Vulnerable Gaze of the Migrant: Eye-witnessing and Drifting Subjectivity in Documentary Web Series”, *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, 18 (2019): 54-69. DOI: 10.33178/alpha.18.05.

²⁰ See M. Deren, “Amateur versus Professional”, *Film Culture*, 39 (1965): 45-46; D. James, *To Free the Cinema: Jonas Mekas & the New York Underground*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992. For a recent reflection on amateur filmmaking see also L. Rascaroli, G. Young, B. Monahan, *Amateur Filmmaking: The Home Movie, the Archive, the Web*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014; A. Sabatino, *L'autore amatoriale. Configurazioni audiovisive del Sé dal cinema ai social media*, Pisa: Ets, 2024.

²¹ On the use of smartphone in filmmaking see A. Amaducci, “L’occhio nella mano”, in *I film in tasca. Videofonino, cinema e televisione*, edited by M. Ambrosini, G. Maina, E. Marcheschi, Pisa: Felici Editore, 2009, 143-157; M. Berry, “Mobile Filmmaking”, in *The Routledge Companion to Digital Ethnography*, edited by L. Hjorth, H. Horst, A. Galloway, and G. Bell, New York: Routledge, 2017; M. Schleser, *Smartphone Filmmaking: Theory and Practice*, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021.

author's accessibility and autonomy while engaging with feminist reflections on control over one's body and image in public and media spaces. Moreover, the intimacy and proximity enabled by the mobile device – both in recording and viewing – open up new modes of empathy and identification for the viewer, rendering individual experiences shareable on a global scale.

In her first feature, Mapplebeck resumes the exposure of the everyday already explored in her previous short films (from which certain images and audiovisual solutions reappear), collecting a self-documentation that spans two decades and deconstructs traditional narratives of motherhood. The director stages her own experience of being a mother, distancing herself from the hegemonic and often idealized media representations of maternity. Her decision to document twenty years of motherhood using everyday devices – images and videos captured with smartphones, voice notes, selfies, text messages – questions the very concept of the maternal as a stable and naturally defined category, instead revealing its social and cultural construction.

The film originates, as mentioned, from the need to tell a personal story. Mapplebeck began filming her life and that of her son Jim when she was pregnant and single. Initially using a DVCAM video camera and later several generations of smartphones, the director documented the significant events in her life and her son's growth on a daily basis. Through the use of various iPhone models, one can observe how technology intertwines with everyday life, enhancing and aestheticizing the experience of the world, to the point of becoming an almost natural part of the environment. When she realized that a career as a freelance director was no longer sustainable, she left television behind: "But she continued filming, turning first her DVCAM, then five generations of smartphones, onto her life with her son, Jim"²². *Motherhood* is therefore also a film about the passage of time and technological change, which has, in some ways, been compared to Linklater's *Boyhood*: we witness Jim's growth, as over the course of the film he transforms from child to young adult, while we also observe the evolution of the mother-son relationship.

Another crucial dimension is the representation of time. *Motherboard* is a project that began over twenty years ago and thus takes shape as an autobiographical work in progress, where the linearity of time is deconstructed in favor of an affective, not necessarily chronological, montage (in contrast to the traditional autobiographical form theorized in literature, which relied on chronological dominance²³). Time here is not linear but reflective, constructed retrospectively in a kind of montage of thought, moving toward a micro-autobiography in the present tense²⁴. The maternal identity that emerges is not fixed but subject to change, pauses, returns, and rewritings.

In line with first-person and personal documentary, *Motherboard* embraces an aesthetic of fragmentation²⁵ and imperfection: we see the visual effects of mobile footage, scrolling through nearly endless image galleries, selfie-style shots, the intentional inclusion of dysphoric moments (such as the cathartic crying after Victoria's call with her son's father, who confirms he has another child) – the use of voice-over along with

²² W. Ide, "Motherboard": CPH: DOX Review", *Screendaily*, <https://www.screendaily.com/reviews/motherboard-cphdox-review/5191783.article>. Accessed May 15, 2025.

²³ I refer to the traditional theory of autobiography, see P. Lejeune, "The Autobiographical Pact", in *On Autobiography*, edited by P.J. Eakin, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989.

²⁴ M. Berry, M. Schleser, eds., *Mobile Media Making in an Age of Smartphones*. Berlin: Springer, 2014, 155.

²⁵ The aesthetics of fragmentation is often characteristic of essayistic and personal practices. See L. Rascaroli, *How the Essay Film Thinks*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017.

stylistic devices such as accelerated sequences, rapid editing, freeze frames, a proliferation of photos of her and her son, and the sounds of phones, messages, and smartphone screenshots.

The use of video calls, messages, screenshots, and selfies introduces fragments of everyday digital languages into the filmic language, reconfiguring lived experience as a technological, emotional, and subjective process. There is no dramatic or overly conflictual depiction of life events: what we see is the ordinariness of daily life and the attempt to capture its uninterrupted flow.

The technological device – specifically the smartphone – assumes a crucial role: it is both a tool of archiving and of self-determination. This is a diluted time, made of waiting and repetition. Mapplebeck makes this “invisible” time visible through the fragmentary and diaristic use of film language, narrative pauses, and moments of relational and communicative suspension. The repetition of everyday images – sterilizing pacifiers, throwing diapers in the bin – tells the story of caregiving routines and the challenges of solo parenting. The reiteration of gestures emphasizes what Sara Ruddick has defined as “the activity of mothering”²⁶, which allows for a new definition of motherhood and mothering to emerge – an activity grounded in the conscious commitment to providing daily care to those who require care, nurture, and training²⁷. The representation of maternal solitude becomes the driving force behind archiving the everyday, denouncing the emotional, economic, and social difficulties of single motherhood. This is a recurring issue in her work – just think of one sequence from *Missed Call*, for instance, which shows Victoria waiting for a message or call from Jim’s father, only to receive a bank notification informing her that she has used over 85% of her credit.

Another political level is linked to the choice of what to show in the film. Mapplebeck does not shy away from presenting life’s dysphoric moments: she films herself crying at home, attending chemotherapy sessions in hospital – staging her body as a site of fatigue, frustration, and vulnerability, but also joy, intensity, and perseverance.

In *Motherboard*, Mapplebeck rejects all idealization of motherhood: it is portrayed as a difficult, solitary, and profoundly individual process – but also as a space of creativity, relationship, and self-determination. A form of representation that echoes Adrienne Rich’s distinction between *motherhood as institution* and *mothering as experience*, elaborated in *Of Woman Born*²⁸, where she shows how motherhood is often made invisible as a daily practice and instead treated solely in institutional and political terms²⁹.

Since the 1970s, feminist studies (and later, motherhood studies) have criticized idealized representations of motherhood in the media, pointing out how these are often used to naturalize (and neutralize) the role of women as “mothers” within a heteronormative and patriarchal system.

Mapplebeck’s self-narration aligns with feminist theory that sees speaking out as

²⁶ I refer to S. Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking. Toward a Politics of Peace*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1989.

²⁷ As Tatjana Takševa write, “this definition frees considerations of motherhood from gender essentialism as well as biological determinism by allowing for maternal care activities to be well performed by anyone, such as othermothers, adoptive mothers, and fathers”. T. Takševa, “Motherhood Studies and Feminist Theory. Elisions and Intersections”, *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative*, 188.

²⁸ A. Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, London: Virago Press, 1977.

²⁹ “The first refers to the daily practice of mothering, which she defines as “the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction – and to children”. The second refers to motherhood as an oppressive patriarchal institution whose aim to ensure that that potential and all women remain under male control”. Takševa, “Motherhood Studies and Feminist Theory”, 187.

an act of resistance. Authors such as Adrienne Rich³⁰ have shown how motherhood is a field of tension between individual experience and patriarchal ideology. In line with these reflections, through the lens of personal experience, Mapplebeck offers an insider's perspective – intimate but always critical – on motherhood as affective, economic, and symbolic labor that is not always recognized.

By showing motherhood as a daily process marked by isolation, fatigue, but also irony and unconventional love, the director rejects the narrative of the perfect mother and embraces a complex subjectivity. Her raw and imperfect aesthetic contrasts sharply with the idealized images of motherhood often promoted by mainstream media.

The film does not present a heroic mother figure nor a victim narrative, but constructs a depiction of motherhood as lived experience. Mapplebeck speaks of postpartum, illness, and the not always easy relationship with her son's father – but also of the slow and tenacious rebuilding of the self as narrating, technological, and maternal subject. In *Motherboard*, motherhood becomes a performance, continuously renegotiated and destabilized, never fixed – echoing the idea of gender as a fluid and variable construction, to quote Butler, “gender is not something that one is, it is something one does, an act, or more precisely, a sequence of acts, a verb rather than a noun”³¹. In Victoria Mapplebeck's cinema, then, the self-representation of maternal subjectivity is not merely a biological or emotional condition: it is also an aesthetic and political practice, shaped by technology.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Looking from an international perspective, the last decades have shown how numerous mobile-shot films have adopted a diaristic, ego-centered form³². With the use of smartphones in recent first-person documentary, authors often create micro-autobiographies in the present tense, working through a fragmented aesthetic and elliptical micro-narrative. In mobile-mentaries, the subjects experiment with audiovisual techniques by incorporating amateur forms and digital storytelling practices typical of today's media landscape and its ephemeral forms of content sharing. At the same time, these films construct an archive of personal experience in response to the proliferation of transient forms that dominate our current media environment – forms marked by temporal and spatial precariousness. In this scenario, Victoria Mapplebeck's cinema addresses key issues concerning self-representation within the contemporary media ecosystem. As we have seen, the author uses the mobile device as a tool for both archiving and testimony, highlighting the characteristics of smartphone footage to pursue an aesthetic of audiovisual intimacy. One of the most innovative aspects of her work lies in the unique use of mobile technology, contributing to a broader reflection on smartphone filmmaking as a gendered and self-representational practice. Mobile phones become not just recording tools, but bodily extensions that allow the filmmaker to control her narrative, to film in moments of vulnerability or intimacy, to minimize external mediation. Mapplebeck

³⁰ See Rich, *Of Woman Born*; Kristeva, *Stabat Mater*; A. O'Reilly, *Matricentric Feminism: Theory, Activism, and Practice*, Demeter Press, 2016. As regards to recent texts on motherhood and cinema see G. Faleschini Lerner, M. D'Amelio, eds., *Italian Motherhood on Screen*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. See also M. D'Amelio, *La diva madre. Saggi su maternità e divismo nel cinema italiano*, Milano: Meltemi, 2024.

³¹ J. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York: Routledge, 1990.

³² Odin, “Spectator, Film and the Mobile Phone”, 164.

documents herself to assert the right to self-determined representation. Moreover, in a media system dominated by bourgeois, heteronormative images of motherhood, Victoria Mapplebeck breaks norms by giving voice to a single, working, at times ill – but always resistant – mother. Her body – sometimes tired, exhausted, but profoundly alive – is shown without embellishment, in direct contrast with the polished aesthetics of idealized maternity. In the British socio-economic context, her films implicitly denounce the lack of institutional support for parenting, making motherhood itself an act of resistance. Finally, motherhood as a political practice is manifest in the filmmaker's desire to archive and transmit her experience: twenty years of footage is not just a private memory, but the construction of a digital maternal archive that serves as a mirror outside dominant models. Mapplebeck's self-narration becomes both testimony and political action.

In this sense, Mapplebeck's cinematic work can be read as a narrative that deviates from the normative representation of a female subject – not because it questions sexual orientation, but because it destabilizes norms of gender, family, and temporality. There is no present father, no nuclear family, no singular model of parenthood. The representation of motherhood – and female subjectivity – appears as a process of negotiation, reinterpretation, and experimentation. In this light, mobile filmmaking allows a female subject to speak, to self-determine, using the smartphone as archive, diary, mirror, testimony, and both narrative and political resource. From this perspective, first-person writing and the audiovisual autobiographical forms explored through smartphone filmmaking contribute to practices that play an important role in women's representation: "It is the act of speaking or writing, where personal experiences are given voice through their incorporation into larger cultural scripts, that constitutes the self"³³. Self-representation thus becomes a political act: a form of self-writing that asserts the possibility of narrating oneself as a complex, contradictory, and never fully definable subject.

³³ K. Barclay, S. Richardson, eds., *Performing the Self. Women's Lives in Historical Perspective*, London-New York: Routledge, 2015, 3. See also P. Summerfield, "Subjectivity, the Self and Historical Practice", in L. Noakes, S. Handley, R. McWilliam, eds., *New Directions*, London-New York: Bloomsbury, 2018, 21-44.