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Orchids, intersex and the auto/biographical project

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Abstract
Auto/biographical documentaries ask audiences to take a ‘leap of faith’, not being able to offer any real ‘proof’ of the people and events they claim to document, other than that of the film-maker’s saying this is what happened. With only memory and history seen through the distorting lens of time, ‘the Authenticity of experience functions as a receding horizon of truth in which memory and testimony are articulated as modes of salvage’.

Orchids: My Intersex Adventure follows a salvaging of the film-maker’s life events and experiences, being born with an intersex condition, and, via the filming and editing process, revolving around the core question: who am I? From this transformative creative documentary practice evolves a new way of embodying experience and ‘seeing’, playfully dubbed here as the ‘intersex gaze’.

Keywords
documentary practice and theory
evidence
memory
intersex
gaze
autobiography
Write your self. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth. (Cixous 1976)

Traditionally, subjectivity has been seen as the antithesis of the documentary project, which strived for objective truth or actuality. However, today such objectivity is considered untenable (Winston 1995). Even documentary film-makers disengaged with the autobiographical project acknowledge the impossibility of obtaining objective truth, and the need to claim their films as a subjective versioning of reality (Jarl 1998). Yet, documentaries by definition, commit to some level of veracity, even if flawed production processes render the text unreliable or, at one extreme, deliberately flaunt the factual film’s ‘truth claims’ in the ‘mock’ or ‘fake’ documentary.

Auto/biographical documentaries (also known as autoethnographies) in particular ask audiences to take a ‘leap of faith’, not being able to offer any real ‘proof’ of the people and events they claim to document, other than that of the film-maker’s saying this is what happened. With only memory and history seen through the distorting lens of time, ‘the authenticity of experience functions as a receding horizon of truth in which memory and testimony are articulated as modes of salvage’ (Russell 1999).

In 2004, I began a master’s project (later to become a creative practice Ph.D. project) called ‘Orchids: Intersex and identity in documentary’ at the Queensland University of Technology, Australia (Hart 2009). My aim was to creatively examine how the ‘intersex
experience’ comes into being. As a person with Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome (AIS), a genetic intersex condition whereby I am a woman with 46 XY (male) chromosomes, and as a practising documentary writer, producer and director for more than a decade, I felt I was in a unique position to ask this question.

Since completing the research in 2009, the resultant feature autobiographical documentary entitled *Orchids: My Intersex Adventure* was broadcast nationally on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation in early 2012 (Figure 1). *Orchids: My Intersex Adventure* follows myself and my sister Bonnie (who is also AIS, my collaborator and my cameraperson) taking a road trip to meet others with intersex conditions and to confront the secrecy, shame and stigma we experienced growing up in our family. To my surprise and delight, the film continues to win awards and find an audience, as it has been or is about to be broadcast in several territories and screened at more than 40 film festivals internationally.

**Figure 1:** ‘Title Frame’. Still from *Orchids: My Intersex Adventure*, 2010 ©hartflicker.

In brief, the film documents the literal and metaphoric journey of self-discovery to embrace my future and reconcile the past shame and family secrecy surrounding my intersex condition. Despite my mother’s outright refusal to be in the film, I decide I must push on with a quest to resolve my life story and connect with other intersex people on camera. With the help of my sister Bonnie and support from my husband James, I hit the open road and reflect on my youth.
My happy and carefree childhood comes to an abrupt end at puberty when I am told I would never menstruate nor have children. But the reasons why were never discussed and the topic was taboo. At the age of 17, my mother felt I was old enough to understand the true nature of my body and the family secret was finally revealed. I then faced an orchidectomy, invasive surgery to remove my undescended testes, the emotional scars of which are still raw today. My road trip around Australia exposes me to the stories of other intersex people and holds a mirror to my own experience. I learn valuable lessons in resilience and healing but I also begin to see the pervasive impact my circumstance has on all of my relationships.

Continuing on, the film documents my home life, where James and I want to start a family, but dealing with infertility and the stress of the adoption process puts pressure on our marriage. I start to understand the difficult decisions my parents faced and I am excited but apprehensive when they eventually agree to be interviewed for the documentary. Finally, the film comes full circle, with me finding some acceptance of my body, my life and my family and therefore discovering hope for the future.

For years I wanted to create an autobiographical documentary on the subject of my intersex condition. However, it took some time before I felt that the conditions to begin this project were ideal. While, in part, this reluctance to commence was a maturing process, a key factor was also the need to find the space to create this film, free of the homogenizing pressures of the current Australian film and television industry. In 2004,
my 30th year of life, the long-awaited opportunity to develop and produce this task as a doctoral creative practice project at Queensland University of Technology, finally presented itself.

Initially, I allowed eight months to develop the project parameters and theoretical underpinnings before undertaking principal photography with my younger sister Bonnie as my co-conspirator, confidant and collaborator. This consisted of a road trip – a family trip of sorts – on the east coast of Australia from Brisbane to Sydney, Melbourne, rural New South Wales and eventually to my hometown of Townsville in Far North Queensland, with the express purpose of interviewing other people with intersex conditions, ‘outing’ ourselves as hermaphrodites in the process. On my return, I have continued to film, edit, write and reflect on the themes of my life, my relationships, significant events and motivations that led up to (and have continued beyond) the commencement of this project.

On a professional and personal level, *Orchids* presented me with many challenges. At an early stage of research and development of my project, I made a conscious decision that *Orchids* should be largely autobiographical in nature. This decision was important for me on a number of levels, and represented a huge step. *Orchids* is a project that deals with my secret condition, significantly influenced by an atypical coming-of-age experience, and having been a site of trauma for me in my early adulthood. Subsequently, the condition has had an impact on my life decisions since. To this day, the issue of Bonnie’s and my intersex condition remains a sensitive subject in my family. My film-making
style, prior to this project, was one of direct encounter; rarely did I overtly inflect such subjectivity onto the issue at hand. My background was also firmly rooted in the commercial television environment, and therefore, as a prerequisite, any content I created had to have entertainment value over artistic merit. *Orchids* has been a pleasant but taxing reversal and reworking of those production priorities for me. Furthermore, in terms of access, this documentary was the most challenging I have worked on, not least because it involves the people I care about most, each of whom has a high stake in his or her own representation in this film project.

Approximately a decade earlier, I had tried to document another family secret, relating to my grandfather’s Aboriginal half-brothers whom he only met in his 80th year of life. My great-grandfather had a relationship with a Gambiilmugu woman while living on a property north of the current Aboriginal community of Hopevale, which produced a parallel and unacknowledged side of the family. For a few reasons, the film has never been edited and the rushes sit in a box in my filing cabinet. I think that family feelings on the subject were too intense, which I shied away from at the time. Perhaps, also, I was too young, too unsure, and I did not have enough exposure to different ways of storytelling; nor did I know how to deal with people I felt I should respect due to their position in the family. Now I am in my 30s, married, established in my career, and less concerned and affected by the irrational fears of others. I felt that it was time to take on what I believe has been the greatest challenge of my film-making career thus far.
Without doubt, I work with a sense of having survived a trauma of a particular kind. In my early life, my condition was kept a secret from me; I was confused, I was told to keep quiet about who and what I was. Later, I was subjected to medical scrutiny, surgery and pathology. It was a painful coming of age. These experiences led me to question the underlying factors that caused my teenage years to be a nightmare, and continue to make the process of ‘coming out’, even now, extremely challenging.

After speaking with many men and women with intersex conditions over the course of a decade or so, it has become evident to me that most are happy to be intersexed but unhappy with the attendant ‘social’ problems of having an intersex condition. People with intersex conditions suffer as a consequence of the social stigma of being intersexed, being seen as ‘different’ or ‘freakish’ by society, and treated by doctors and family members accordingly (Preves 2003). Medical treatment contributes greatly to a sense of social inferiority and shame, as cosmetic surgery seeks to normalize aberrant bodies, making individuals with intersex either (more) male or female. In effect, such pathology represents a social shift to sequester people with intersex conditions (as well as other sectors of social life that connect individuals to ‘issues of morality and finitude’) from the normal population (Giddens 1991). Orchids presents as a portrait of survival and courage, revising societal and historical perspectives of the body with intersex by creating understandings of difference, which originate from a highly subjective space.

Orchids follows my salvaging of life events and experiences and, via the filming and editing process, I have played the major part in the creation of my own story, inscribing
what I would like the world to see or not see, revolving around the core question: *who am I?* In the process of writing this exegesis, and reflecting upon the creative practice, I wondered if something essential of *me* has been lost or gained. It is perplexing, but the person on the screen looks and sounds like me, yet, at the same time, does not. Indeed, the auto/biographical film-maker is ‘doubly self-fashioning’ creating an on-screen persona while simultaneously writing his or her own self into being, a self-inscribing process (Clifford in Chanan 2007). Simultaneously, while self-inscribing, I have inscribed the world as I see it and how I wished it to be seen at a fixed point in time.

This seeming disconnect raises a number of questions of embodied selfhood on-screen, including what is happening during the process of writing myself into the text and creating *I*. After all, I am difficult to grasp; I am neither completely male nor wholly female. My likes and dislikes, dreams and goals, needs and desires change over time. My body ages, and the people who populated my life at one point move on or evolve in their own life journey.

In recent years, a number of individuals – intersexed artists and activists – have begun to tell their stories each in his or her own distinct voices, using documentary as a means of expression. Del LaGrace Volcano is one example of an artist deeply embedded within queer politics and their works express potent struggles for identity. Volcano is a gender variant visual artist and film-maker who now lives in Sweden with his or her partner and young child. *Journey Intersex* (Volcano and Lavan, 2000) follows an investigation motivated by Volcano to aid his cousin, Heidi (born ‘Travis’), an intersexed woman. The
documentary explores the mystery surrounding Heidi’s unexplained medical treatment in infancy, and follows the pair as they travel to confront family members on the secrets surrounding Heidi’s birth and subsequent rearing as a girl. Volcano’s artistic work extends across most visual mediums, including photography. His or her objective is to challenge ‘sexist and hetero-normative constructions’:

I want to be seen for what I am: a chimera, a hybrid, a herm. After seven years of living as a herm I have to question if it is even possible for others to see beyond the binary and validate those of us who choose to live outside its confines, as well as those who have never been given the chance to. (Volcano and Windh 2005)

Like Volcano, I am a chimera – I cannot be arrested or fully explained by the moving image (nor anyone else for that matter). I can only measure the success of this auto/biography, which ultimately I must, I by increments of political, cultural, social and personal transformation.

Emerging out of a long-standing literary tradition of memoir and autobiography, the literary memoirist uses lyricism to retrace past events and discover patterns that have shaped the author’s life today, and uncover an expressive truth (Birkerts 2008). Similarly, film-makers use the conventions and poetics of cinema to create an authored impression of the remembered past; to reveal why they are the way they are today by gathering the captured fragments from personal histories, and assembling those glimpses into a
representation that approximates the present I. The process of self-inscription also requires a mapping of certain geographical and temporal spaces, an orienting of the place where one belongs in the world.

Writing about the first-person film-maker’s impulse to engage with the subjective creative project, the unearthing of I, Michael Renov identifies a critical roadmap that both identifies and informs the direction of my autobiographical journey:

The exploration of displacement and cultural disorientation bridges the divide between self and an Other who is specifiably kindred. (2004)

The auto/biographical and subjective documentary film-making honours primarily the auteur, the ‘self’ whose wish it is both to examine one’s life and history from one’s own point of view. I am at the centre of the text. Presented in this study and surrounding me are my ‘specifiably kindred’ – my sisters, my parents, my community – the ‘Other(s)’ who share a relationship with me (the film-maker) by blood or genetic ties. Through the text, I communicate to the ‘kindred Others’, as I attempt to untangle the unruly mess of ‘displacement and cultural disorientation’ by building ‘bridges’. It is by undertaking these architectures of social interaction that I have begun to understand and define ‘self’ within the institutions of family and community. In effect, the auto/biography permits the documentary film-maker to discover one’s own place, and relate to individuals who are part of those inner and outer worlds. Auto/biography, a flexible term where the definition of one is found in the other, much like the body with intersex, allows for the ‘exploration’
of both ‘self’ and ‘kindred’ simultaneously. Already the practice and theory of auto/biographical film-making has created a space for further versions of a subjective, personal truth. It is a way of creating a legitimacy that has a far-reaching ability to explore notions of ‘self’ and ‘kindred’ community, and to subvert the pre-inscription of ‘historical subjection by occupying the subject position’ (Couser 2006: 401). Rather than being bound by the stultifying and limited subject positions traditionally available for people with intersex conditions – as monsters, as shameful, as victims – I have attempted to revise and control the production of history by telling my story. It is a creative undertaking that writes an identity that is, on the one hand, ‘fluid, multiple, even contradictory’ but also, on the other, linked closely with civic debates and discourses (Renov 2004: 178).

Thus, I am presenting Orchids as an exploration of my memory and history, and, concurrently, an examination of the encircling institutions of family, community and society. It is arguable that Orchids will be accessible to conventional, mainstream audiences, especially when considering viewers who are potentially unfamiliar with people with intersex conditions and our issues. However, during the creative practice process, I have struggled with the politics and aesthetics of attempting to engage such a broad audience. In my mind’s eye, I imagined who might be watching the final film at its initial screening. In part, the film is my message to my mother, and my family, who brought me into the world and shaped my understanding of it. Significantly, I am also speaking to others with an intersex condition, saying this is how I see it, and asking do you see it too? It is an intimate message, which, in many ways, is latent in the text,
perhaps unwritten, made manifest by those who understand its language. It is a language written on the intersex body; a language of cuts, lies, sensations, feelings and fears. It is a way of looking, a way of speaking, seeing and knowing what is unspoken and unseen or unknown by others.

The auto/biographer can ‘inscribe themselves’ on three different levels: as speaker via unmistakably subjective narration, seer or creator of the gaze and seen – a body image on-screen (Russell 1999). Absolutely, as the auteur of Orchids, it was my voice speaking, my eyes seeing and my body that is seen. During the making of Orchids, the intended audience of this aural and visual creation is, as per Renov, the ‘Other who is specifiably kindred’ (2004: 179). In other words, the implied, privileged viewer is the ‘Other’ or the person or persons who share a common bond or experience with me, the auto/biographer, and the intersex viewer who sees my intersex gaze. In part, this was my key intention: to include the excluded, and create a film by and about a person with intersex conditions for people with intersex conditions, including the latter in the film as they are relevant to my own sense of self.

As such, the ‘intersex gaze’ (playfully penned in homage to Judith/Jack Halberstam’s influential treatise, The Transgender Gaze (2005)), could be defined as emanating from the seer who has an intersex condition and is watching, subjectively engaging with the seen on-screen. Analysing films that deal with the subject of transgender, Halberstam deftly identifies three modes of looking. The first mode compels an otherwise normative audience to ‘rewind’ when a character, at first, appears to be “properly” gendered and
passes as male or female, and only later to be exposed as transgendered, such as the character Dil in *The Crying Game* (Jordan, 1993). Audiences must then go back and ‘reorganize the narrative logic in terms of the pass’ (Halberstam 2005: 78). The second type of gaze is ‘ghosting’ where the transgender character haunts audiences after death, like Brandon in *Boys Don’t Cry* (Peirce, 2000). Most interestingly, ‘doubling’ occurs when the character is shown in a community ‘rather than [as] a freakish individual’ (Halberstam 2005: 78), and by doing so rejects a medical gaze that renders the characters abnormal, and a hetero-normative gaze that makes them invisible.

Doubling represents ‘transgender identity as… a result of intimate bonds and queer, interactive modes of recognition’ (Halberstam 2005: 92). Halberstam cites the documentary *Southern Comfort* (Davis, 2000), and the low budget, independent feature film *By Hook or By Crook* (Dodge and Howard, 2001) as examples that ‘double’ transgender characters. In the former, larrikin cowboy Robert Eads appears with his similarly transgendered partner, Lola, and in the latter, the ‘butch’ character Shy hits the road on a messianic mission only to meet the egotistical Valentine. In both cases, the bond portrayed by the film-makers shatters the perception of the transgendered individual as a stigmatized, lone figure, and acknowledges the subcultural, social cues that govern shared understandings of what it’s like to be like this.

Similarly, *Orchids* uses doubling in order to create a gaze that recognizes the ‘intimate bonds’ of intersex kinship. Most significant is the engaged, creative doubling of my sister Bonnie and me. Chromosomally and physically, we are alike, as are our histories. This
doubling also has an aesthetic mimetic effect, which I will discuss more fully later in this
exegesis. There is a kinship connection between us that somehow goes deeper than
simple sisterhood, an extreme form of closeness that is at times painfully cloying but also
painful to lose. In the intensity of kindred togetherness, Bonnie and I both assert our
differences, both philosophically and emotionally, which did lead to tensions between us
during the film-making process, resulting in a temporary split. As a person with AIS, I
speak and see this connection and disconnection onto the screen, and I know it is there
for my kindred Others to hear and see as well.

In my film, another example of on-screen doubling of characters with intersex occurs
between Tony and Andie. Due to inappropriate gender assignment in childhood, Tony
was raised as a girl, and Andie as a boy. After learning more about their suppressed
histories, both transitioned their gender. Now they are intimate friends, confidants and
during the time I filmed them, living together like husband and wife, Andie caring for
Tony while he recovered from a double mastectomy. Yet, again, despite their similarities,
they are also very different. During production, I often thought of Tony and Andie like
yin and yang: Tony is short, round, dark and gregarious, and Andie tall, slender, fair and
shy. As with Bonnie and me, their relationship is not always harmonious. Although I
chose not to highlight it explicitly in the documentary, Tony and Andie’s relationship was
often on ‘rocky ground’, and Tony has admitted that being around Andie was a constant
reminder of the irreversible damage inflicted upon his body. Again, Aleyshia and her
girlfriend Jennifer represent a queer doubling in my film. Both are women who, by their
clothing, hair, lifestyle and their relationships assert their disavowal of hetero-normative
identifications. At the same time, their collective presence on-screen subverts a purely fetishistic reading (Figure 2).

**Figure 2:** ‘Aleyshia and girlfriend’. Still from *Orchids: My Intersex Adventure*, 2010 ©hartflicker.

While doubling offers access to the intersex and transgender gaze, Halberstam notes that many films also use revulsion, sympathy or empathy in order to grant hetero-normative audiences similar admission (2005: 77). Other commentators argue that identification with a character with an intersex condition may traditionally only be achieved via ‘the perverse pleasure of voyeurism… counterbalanced by horror’ (Grosz 1996). Such a prospect gives me cold comfort, and would suggest that it might be better if I keep myself and the film enshrouded in another form of secrecy, never allowing *Orchids* to be seen by a mainstream audience. However, such an action would negate any possibility for social change. Therefore, I propose that it would be extremely valuable for a non-intersex audience to see what I see, particularly if such ways of seeing are empowering and transformative – other than by doubling – for all parties. The question then arises as to how I can access this language, to write a broader message on my body that transcends mere voyeurism or abjection.

Theories of audience spectatorship encompass a wide scope of study. Laura Mulvey, influenced by the work of French theorist Jacques Lacan, investigated the psyche of the cinema spectator, and described the pleasures of the scopophilic, voyeuristic (male) gaze (Mulvey [1975] 2003). Separated within a dark auditorium and dazzled by a brilliant, flickering screen, ‘a hermetically sealed world which unwinds magically, indifferent to
the presence of the audience’, the spectator is induced into an ‘illusion of voyeuristic separation’ (Mulvey [1975] 2003: 135). In this state, men are the agents of a gaze upon ‘the [erotic] spectacle of the female body’ (Allen 2004), and a ‘shifting tension’ develops between the gaze of the male star and the gaze of men within the audience (Mulvey [1975] 2003). Paradoxically, Mulvey argues that the female form, while fascinating, is also threatening. The female’s power is her psychic ability to castrate and diminish the male viewer’s authoritative gaze, and hence (male) film-makers counteract by sadistically disciplining or fetishizing the female character on the silver screen, as evident in the films of von Sternberg and Hitchcock (Mulvey [1975] 2003: 140–41).

However, Mulvey’s account of the ‘active male agent’ and ‘passive female object’ has been criticized for ignoring the possible viewing positions of those individuals ‘whose class, racial, national, and sexual orientation generally went unnamed’ (Erhart 2004). Researchers have recently turned to the task of examining the mechanics of gay and lesbian cinema spectatorship, and these investigators have frequently found Mulvey’s psychoanalytic work to be lacking ([1975] 2003: 171–72). For example, Chris Straayer states that, according to feminist understandings of cinema spectatorship, a hypothetical lesbian heroine can only be viewed as ‘male’ even though ‘maleness is potentially irrelevant to lesbianism’ (1996). Others (including herself) have also challenged Mulvey’s early work by suggesting that the spectator is rarely passive, engaging with the cinematic experience on manifold levels (Rose 1988; Penley 1989).
More questions have arisen within film studies, challenging how self-identified homosexual viewers are engaged with same-sex characters on-screen, discussing the possibility of women and men as both agents and objects of desire. Richard Dyer, for instance, locates a complex system of identification in gay male viewers of Judy Garland films (2004). Debates over the ‘non-equivalence’ of sexual objectification and narcissistic identification with an object (a legacy again of Lacan) become primary (Erhart 2004: 172). In her analysis of mainstream cinema from a lesbian spectator perspective, Jackie Stacey notes that ‘the rigid distinction between either desire or identification, so characteristic of psychoanalytic film theory, fails to address the construction of desires which involve a specific interplay of both processes’ (cited in Evans and Gammon 2004). Stacey suggests that, rather than the either/or choice of desiring a character or simply identifying with a character, it may be that the two are ‘meshed’ (Evans and Gammon 2004).

In the documentary film, theoretician Bill Nichols has identified not so much an erotic object of desire but an epistephilia, described as the ‘pleasure of knowing’ (1991: 178). However, Renov rebuts Nichols’ assertion that the spectator could only desire knowledge, and argues instead that there are other ‘less rational’ motivations to watch (Renov 2004). Referring to 1920s documentary film-making, Renov locates sites where ‘the journey to discursive sobriety at the level of documentary is temporarily set adrift by fantasy…. Documentary spectatorship is shown to be the site of multiple, even conflictual, desires that traverse the presumed barriers between conscious and unconscious processes’ (2004: 102–03). Therefore, spectator identification can only ever
be understood as ‘shifting, oscillating, inconsistent, and fluid’ (Evans and Gammon 2004).

Under such oscillating conditions and varied theoretical stances, controlling engagement seems near impossible. In my film, I feel I can only come back to how I speak and see, and then present what is heard and seen. I have adopted a psychological approach of assertive engagement in order to create an access point for the multifarious viewer. A part of this approach is the empowered reveal, which represents an invitation to access the intersex gaze. As the speaker, by using my voice-over narration and interviews, I have gradually selected to reveal information about my condition and myself in order to effect a transformative interaction with the varied audience. Many of these revelations have emerged organically during the production process. Initially, I may not have wished them to be known, but as my trust of the camera grew, and my confidence in the power of the project became enhanced, I realized the inherent potential of such revelations. I also convinced Bonnie of this potential, and together we attempted to create a series of self-directed and heart-felt ‘reveals’ for Orchids. In Orchids, revelations such as trying to unsuccessfully insert a tampon, being prescribed dilators by our doctors to lengthen our vaginal canals, our subsequent relationships with our bodies that led us both to have eating disorders, my first sexual experiences – all these elements were conscious decisions to share something intensely private about our lives.

However, part of these ‘reveals’ relies on the invitation to the audience, the watcher, to join us on our journey. This is effectively an attempt to create a contract with the
audience in order to establish a supportive relationship that cherishes our openness. A sense of trust is invaluable to my own ontological security, but also opens a space for a ‘pure relationship’ between me and the viewer(s) based upon mutual disclosure (Giddens 1991). Perhaps this shall be realized by audience discussion after screenings of the film (‘Q&A’), personal correspondence and weblogs via the Internet presence the production proposes to develop. In the introduction to the film, I attempt to establish that multi-layered contract, by stating who I am, my insider credentials, the purpose for making this film and what I hope to achieve by doing so. Although a member of an audience is still able to reject or regulate his or her individual engagement, I feel that I have unmistakably offered an invitation for others to ‘come along for the intersex ride’ (Figure 3).

Figure 3: ‘Road Trip’. Still from Orchids: My Intersex Adventure, 2010 ©hartflicker.

Another way that the empowered reveal was realized relates to my decision to film myself (or to have Bonnie film me) as I ‘outed’ myself to random strangers. There was not much of a system to it; I just selected people whom I thought might be open to what I had to say. The first time I did this in the film was at an ‘op shop’ in rural New South Wales. Fifi, the kind Frenchwoman behind the counter, was curious about what we were doing, and her friendly disposition inspired me to ask if she minded if we filmed her while I told her about the project. Although this woman has little investment in our story or mission, such interaction, now arrested on videotape and edited into the film, serves as a point where normative audiences might grasp that such an exchange could be a
privilege and an opportunity. This creates an open space, and a place for active engagement that may help give mainstream viewers access to the intersex gaze.

The framing of my husband James is another example of a particular reveal, and the invitation to see what I see, although I have agonized whether some aspects of his inclusion could be read as mere titillation or voyeurism. Legally, current Queensland law sanctions our union as man and wife, yet our relationship could be seen as contentious. In the nineteenth century, when gonads were considered the true marker of sex, a woman with testes desiring a man would have been seen as unnatural. In fact, to medical practitioners of the time, it would have made more sense for such a woman to desire other women (Dreger 1997). Not all of these medical understandings and fears have dissipated completely. When James states on camera that he worried that he might be gay at the time when he and I first made love, Orchids attempts to create a space and reach a concern that may be felt by any male, heterosexual viewer. Via such an open declaration, James identifies a homophobic ‘knee jerk’ reaction many men may have to the prospect of being with a woman who is, possibly, male. As such, I decided that it was important to include James’ interview, as it not only serves to reach a new audience, but also it forcefully addresses the multifarious nature of desire, and the complexity of human relationships. This interview with James actually gives a crucial point of access to the intersex gaze, and the possibility of acceptance of non-hetero-normatively gendered and sexualized identities for those people who could or would be Orchids’ most antagonistic or reluctant audience members. Moreover, bodies with intersex are routinely ‘stripped of their ability to pleasure and be pleased’ by medicalization and social erasure. The
positioning of James and I together, sexually strong, is a rupture of ‘asexual preinscription’ (Colligan 2004) (Figure 4).

**Figure 4:** ‘James’. Still from *Orchids: My Intersex Adventure*, 2010 ©hartflicker.

Rather than serving as titillation or the source of fetishistic fascination to a non-intersex audience, scenes such as this encounter as documented in *Orchids* could potentially inform the spectator of new ways of seeing the world and of seeing himself or herself.

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**Contributor details**

Phoebe Hart completed her Ph.D. at QUT in 2009, producing as part of her thesis a long form documentary on people living with intersex conditions entitled *Orchids: My Intersex Adventure*. This multi-award winning film premiered at the Brisbane International Film Festival in 2010 where it was voted the top film of the festival. Since then, the film has travelled the world at numerous film festivals and screenings, garnering many awards along the way, and was broadcast in Australia on the ABC in January 2012.
Previous to this achievement, Phoebe co-directed a part-observational part-essay style documentary series on the state of higher education in Australia for Special Broadcasting Station (SBS) called *Downunder Grads*, which screened in March 2008. She directed and co-wrote a half-hour documentary called *Roller Derby Dolls*, which premiered in a prime time slot on ABC1 in September 2008. The film follows a group of unconventional women who play the rough-and-tumble sport of roller derby.

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