

**Major Grant Proposal
Presented to the Colgate Research Council**

**Project Title:
“Nuts” (an experimental documentary film)**

**Submitted by:
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Department of Art and Art History
January 24, 2014**

INTRODUCTION

This grant proposal to the Colgate Research Council is to support production of an ambitious feature-length film project called *NUTS*. *NUTS* has a total budget of \$245,000; this proposal is for \$7,500, which would support a key phase in production I am planning for May-June 2014. The intended outcome of this phase is the production of a 20-minute fundraising sample to be completed before August 2014. The expected public premiere date of *NUTS* is spring 2015.

PROJECT SYNOPSIS

NUTS is an innovative, feature-length documentary film telling the amazing true story of John Romulus Brinkley, who in 1917 discovers that he can cure impotence by transplanting goat testicles. Tens of thousands of men beat a path to his door, and Brinkley's empire is born.

Using an energetic mix of documentary footage, animated reenactments and a hilariously unreliable narrator, *NUTS* traces Brinkley's rise from poverty and obscurity to the heights of celebrity, wealth and influence in Depression-era America. Along the way, he transplants thousands of goat testicles, amasses an enormous fortune, is elected Governor of Kansas, builds the world's most powerful radio station, invents the infomercial, the sound truck and Border Radio, hosts some epic parties and annoys the heck out of "the establishment" until finally his audacious actions force the federal government to regulate the practices of medicine, advertising and radio. How he does it, and what happens when it all comes crashing down, is the story of *NUTS*.

Once all the twists and turns of Brinkley's story are revealed, the movie more than earns its title. Although it's sure to be the funniest documentary anyone's seen in a long time, *NUTS* is more

than just a colorful biography or entertaining romp through American history. Using vivid illustrations and colorful animations, *NUTS* informs as it entertains, for there is much to be learned from this careful study of one of the greatest conmen who ever lived. *NUTS* is ultimately a cautionary tale about the seductive and dangerous power of the charlatan.

Note: A 3-minute video teaser for NUTS can be viewed at the following URL (enter the password "Milford2013"): <https://vimeo.com/70642123>

STORY STRUCTURE ("MAKING THEM BELIEVE")

The structure of *NUTS* is deceptively simple. On one level, it is a straight historical biography that proceeds chronologically through the major events of Brinkley's life. I believe it is possible for a casual viewer to watch the entire film, laugh a lot along the way, and say, "Gee, that was funny documentary about a guy who cured impotence using goat balls. Who knew!?"

On another level, however, the film is carefully arranged to offer an indictment of the tactics of the conman (or the unscrupulous documentary filmmaker). The tone, the style, the information that is and is not shared, and when it is shared – all are designed to create the greatest possible chance that viewer will side with the colorful, flamboyant Brinkley against the boring, gray men who want to shut him down. Ideally, you will be so thoroughly entertained that this identification happens subconsciously.

This identification with Brinkley as the hero, however, is undermined. At first this is done subtly and gradually, through a few stray pieces of action and narration that don't quite make sense. Eventually, this undermining is done overtly, in a climactic trial scene that presents key facts

about Brinkley's life and career that were deliberately left out of the documentary along the way.

The facts presented in the trial are such that had you known them earlier, you would have felt very differently about the events unfolding on the screen. The trial scene is crucial: it reveals that the filmmaker hasn't been playing it as "straight" as it seemed. Thus, *NUTS* is carefully constructed to illuminate exactly how a charlatan operates: *by offering you a colorful story that makes you want to believe, a story with just enough truth to make it seem believable, a story that flatters you by telling you what you want to hear, the conman sets you up for the sell.*

STORY ELEMENTS AND STYLE

- ANIMATIONS. Approximately 1/3 of *NUTS* consists of animated reenactments of key scenes from Brinkley's life. The animations are hand-drawn on paper and finished digitally. The animation style changes slightly over the course of *NUTS*, to both reflect the passing of time in the story (from the 1880s to the 1970s) and to subtly change the viewer's perception of things. For example: 1, The first act is all sepia-toned; color is not introduced until Brinkley heads for Mexico (it's a "we're not in Kansas anymore" kind of moment); 2, Brinkley seems a bit shorter, fatter and less imposing during the humiliation of the climactic libel trial; 3, Certain key scenes are revisited (in flashback) and cast in a different light through framing and color, in order to cast doubt on what is true and what is not.



A still from the first animated reenactment, where Brinkley “discovers” his miracle impotence cure.

- PRINT ARCHIVAL. This story element consists of hundreds of photographs, newspaper clippings, books and advertisements I’ve collected in over five years of research. These elements will be filmed in a studio environment and used as b-roll (cutaways) throughout the film.



One example (out of thousands collected) of a print archival element.

- EXPERT INTERVIEWS. Formal interviews with four historians give historical context to the action. The historians are: Pope Brock, author of the definitive Brinkley biography Charlatan; Jim Reardon, a Kansas historian who made Brinkley his life project; Gene Fowler, radio historian and co-author of Border Radio; and Megan Seaholm, a medical historian.



Pope Brock, best-selling writer and Brinkley biographer.

- ARCHIVAL FILMS. A 1921 “science” film demonstrates, in lavish detail, just how the goat gland procedure “works.” This is important evidence early in the film that will be totally contradicted in the trial scene. Also, beautiful color home movies of the Brinkleys show their lavish lifestyle: yachting, flying in their private airplanes, touring the grounds of their enormous mansion.



A 1921 “science” film explains how the goat testicle cure works. (That’s a goat testicle there.)

- THE NARRATOR. The role of the narrator is crucial. The narrator is written and performed as an objective reporter of facts. This veneer occasionally and subtly cracks, as he occasionally

pops in a line or two that seems a bit odd. But the action rushes along and you don't have too much time to think about these little things. Finally, during the climactic libel trial, about two-thirds of the way through the film, you discover that Brinkley once paid someone named Clement Wood to write a "biography" of him called *The Life of a Man*. The observant viewer will recall that in the opening credits, *NUTS* is said to have been adapted from this same book. As the lawyer reads from this book, and *you recognize all of the lines as direct quotations from the narration of this documentary you have been enjoying for over an hour now*, things become quite uncomfortable. What's the deal with this movie, anyway? Is it just copied word for word from this fake biography that is full of lies? Perhaps you now feel uneasily as if you have had "had," once by Brinkley and again by the filmmaker. It is in this state of glorious and productive confusion that the trial concludes, and Brinkley comes to a swift and brutal end.

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

It took many years to develop the thematic and dramatic structure of this film. I find straight biographical documentaries boring and really didn't want to make one. I finally realized that the best way to pay tribute to a man like John R. Brinkley was to mimic what he did so very well, which was to take essentially true things and weave them into a tale that was more seductive and more fantastic than reality: a better "sell." Brinkley's storytelling approach was a bit like Dorothy Gale's: he took a black and white world and put it in color. Accordingly, *NUTS* takes a potentially normal biographical documentary and makes it... well, nuts.

Whenever I describe this film to people, the first question they almost always ask (with respect to the goat testicle cure) is: "Did it work?" Because I am a truthful person, I have to tell them that no, of course it did not work; it was and is pseudo-scientific nonsense that at best worked

as a kind of placebo and at worst caused physical trauma or even death to those unlucky folks whose surgery didn't go so well. This inevitably disappoints my interlocutor. In this simple exchange lies the essence of this film: *people want to believe in miracles*. Like all conmen, Brinkley knew this. I want people to understand the seductive and dangerous power of the charlatan's appeal, just like the old man at John R. Brinkley's funeral who said, "I knowed he was bilking me, but I liked him anyway."

NUTS is a documentary by anyone's definition of the word (I think!). It's at least as true as most documentaries are. But you must take care to watch the whole thing. It is only by the end of the film that you see that what appeared to be a simple journey through one man's crazy biography is actually a cautionary tale about why you shouldn't believe everything you're told, even (or especially) if you want to believe it. Confirmation bias is a powerful tool used by scammers – and unscrupulous documentary filmmakers.

CURRENT STATUS AND NEEDS

The script is complete and a full-length assembly with temp voiceovers, storyboards and temp music has been created. This represents almost six years of work, including: intensive archival research in New York City, Washington DC, Arkansas, Kansas and Texas; conducting videotaped interviews in Kansas, Texas, Maine and California; writing (first on my own and later with a dedicated writer, Thom Stylinski); storyboarding (a pre-production process related to animation); commissioning of animations from award-winning animator Drew Christie; and preliminary editing.

The most immediate need I have is to produce a fundraising sample that functions as “proof of concept.” In order to produce this sample, I need to hire a Director of Photography and Grip (the grip handles lighting and studio setup) to film the archival b-roll (cutaways to things like newspapers, old photos, old books, etc.) in a studio environment. I’ve already discussed this project and these specific needs with three different studios, and have selected BULLET POINT FILMS as the best of the field. Not only have they lowered their standard rates significantly to accommodate my (somewhat measly) budget, but their passion and creativity will be a great benefit to the project. BULLET POINT FILMS is based in New York City and the shoot will take 6 days. I am requesting Research Council support to rent their studio and to contract their services for this period. This studio shoot is crucially important because I need this footage to produce a fundraising sample that functions as “proof of concept.” Without this sample, raising the finishing funds will be nearly impossible.

RESEARCH STATEMENT

NUTS is the follow-up to my debut feature film, *OUR NIXON*. *OUR NIXON* used the Super-8 home movies of Richard Nixon’s aides to reveal a surprising and intimate side of the Nixon White House. The film won numerous awards and was released internationally in 2013 by CNN Films and Cinedigm. *OUR NIXON* and *NUTS* form the first two-thirds of a planned trilogy of feature-length films about history, archives and narratology in documentary film.

Additionally, in terms of scale, *NUTS* is the most ambitious art project I have ever undertaken. At each stage of production, I am learning cutting-edge video techniques that directly impact what happens in my studio art courses here at Colgate.

TIMELINE

The target public premiere date for *NUTS* is spring 2015. This is the best season to release a new documentary film, with film festival opportunities including SXSW, Hot Docs, Boston, Full Frame, San Francisco, New Directors/New Films, and Ann Arbor (all of which my previous films have appeared in), as well as other film festivals I have not previously had the opportunity to attend.

January – April 2014:

- Script finalized.
- Archival research complete.
- Complete rough edit.
- 10% of animations are done.
- Storyboards for all additional animations are edited into picture.

May – June 2014:

- Shoot all archival images with BULLET POINT FILMS. **This is the stage for which I am requesting Research Council support. It is a crucial point of the project which will define the visual identity of the film, and will allow me to create a well-made and clear 20-minute fundraising sample needed to complete the project on time. I do not currently have funding available for this stage.*
- Produce fundraising sample.
- Casting.

July – August 2014:

- 25% of animations done.
- Sound studio recording: all actors' performances finalized & edited into picture.
- Plan Kickstarter campaign.

September 2014 – November 2014:

- Launch and run Kickstarter campaign to raise finishing funds.
- 50% of animations done.
- Picture editing (fine cut).

December 2014 – February 2015:

- 75% of animations done.
- Original score commissioned and recorded.
- Attach a sales agent and begin securing television/digital pre-sales.
- Festival submissions begin.

March – April 2015:

- Target premiere date.
- Final post-production: 100% of animations done, plus sound design, color, titles, online edit and mastering.

Research Council Budget Form - Major Grants and Picker Fellowships for 2014-15

totals will calculate automatically

TRAVEL	description	amount
Airfare		
Airfare 2		
Train / Bus fare		
Taxi / local transit		
Car rental		
# miles, personal car:		-
Tolls		
Parking		
Other (describe)		
Other (describe)		
Travel subtotal		-

LIVING EXPENSES	# days	location / description	amount
<i>Per diem, location 1</i>			
Days 1 - 10			-
Days 11 - 30			-
Days 31 - 60			-
<i>Per diem, location 2</i>			
Days 1 - 10			-
Days 11 - 30			-
<i>Per diem, location 3</i>			
Days 1 - 10			-
<i>Other, e.g. lower per diem</i>			
<i>Long-term stays</i>			
Estimate rent per wk x # wks			
Est. groceries per wk x # wks			
Living Expenses subtotal (max. \$7,500)			-

STUDENT WAGES	number of hours (max. 150) and rate	amount
Student Wage subtotal		-

SUPPLIES & SERVICES	item / description	amount
Cameraperson (DP) at BULLET POINT FILMS – Day Rate is \$500/day x 6 days		3,000.00
Lighting person (Grip) at BULLET POINT FILMS – Day Rate is \$500/day x 6 days		3,000.00
Shooting Studio Rental BULLET POINT FILMS – \$250/day x 6 days		1,500.00
Supplies and Services subtotal		7,500.00

EQUIPMENT	item / description	amount
Equipment subtotal (max. \$1,500)		-

TOTAL BUDGET **\$ 7,500**
TOTAL REQUEST, if different:

BRIEF PROFESSIONAL RESUME (3 PAGES)

Education

- 2005** **MFA, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute**
Integrated Electronic Arts
Digital video, documentary, community media
- 2001** **BA, Vassar College (*Pbi Beta Kappa*)**
Major: American Culture
Media studies, media education, community media

Teaching Experience

- 2013-current** **Assistant Professor (Art & Art History), Colgate University**
Full time, tenure stream position. Courses include Introduction to Studio Art, Video Art I, Video Art II, and CORE 152: Challenges of Modernity.
- 2011** **Visiting Assistant Professor (Film & Electronic Arts), Bard College**
Part time. Taught Documentary Film Workshop, a mixed production and theory course.
- 2008-10** **Visiting Lecturer in Art (Video/New Media), Williams College**
Full time. Courses included Video Art, Participatory Media Production, Documentary Film & Video, Junior Seminar in Studio Art, and Advanced Video Post Production. Organized visiting artist lectures and workshops and served on thesis committees.
- 2006-8** **Visiting Assistant Professor of Video/New Media, Hampshire College**
Full time. Courses included Video Art, Advanced Video Post Production, Video & the Internet and New Media Art. Organized visiting artist lectures and workshops , advised students served on thesis committees.
- 2005** **Master Teaching Assistant, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute**
Selected as one in twelve graduate students to train incoming Teaching Assistants in all aspects of being a Teaching Assistant, including pedagogy, grading, diversity, and Institute policies.
- 2003-4** **Teaching Assistant, Digital Imaging & Video/Audio, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute**
Instructor of record. Courses included digital imaging, audio and video production. Responsible for curriculum, grading and attendance.
- 2003 – 2005** **Video Instructor, The Ark (Troy NY)**
Wrote curricula and taught a wide variety of after-school and summer programs for youth in video production, documentary practice and web design.
- 1999 – 2004** **Video Instructor / Project Director, Children's Media Project (Poughkeepsie NY)**
Developed and taught after-school and summer programs for youth in video production and graphic design. Also responsible for grantwriting, strategic planning and supervision of interns. One of a handful of people instrumental in growing this grassroots center into an organization with an annual budget of over \$500,000 and award-winning, nationally-replicated curricula.

Grants / Fellowships / Residencies

2014	Tribeca Film Institute grant
2013	Cinereach grant
2012	Creative Capital grant
2011	Cinereach grant Jerome Foundation grant New York State Council for the Arts grant Tribeca Film Institute Documentary Fund grant
2010	Yaddo Corporation, Artist Residency
2008	New York State Council for the Arts grant
2007	LEF Moving Image Fund grant Experimental Television Center grant
2006	New York State Council for the Arts / IFP Distribution grant
2005	Puffin Foundation grant
2003	Dutchess County Arts Council Film/Video Fellowship

Awards / Distinctions

2013	"Best Editing," Cinema Eye Honors "Michael Moore's Prize for Best Documentary," Traverse City Film Festival "Best Documentary," Seattle International Film Festival Adrienne Shelly Award for Excellence in Filmmaking, Nantucket Film Festival "Ken Burns Awards for Best of the Festival," Ann Arbor Film Festival Schmeer Award for Excellence in Editing, Independent Film Festival Boston "Best Documentary (Nominee)," Gotham Awards
2012	"25 New Faces of Independent Film," <i>Filmmaker Magazine</i> IFP Documentary Lab <i>The Voyagers</i> : Best Short Film, Hammer to Nail Contest <i>The Voyagers</i> : Honorable Mention, Disposable Film Festival
2011	<i>Our Nixon</i> : IFP Independent Film Week <i>The Voyagers</i> : First place, FLEX Festival <i>The Voyagers</i> : Honorable Mention, AFI FEST <i>The Voyagers</i> : Best Experimental Film, New Orleans Film Festival <i>The Voyagers</i> : Best Essay Film of 2011, Short of the Week <i>How to Write an Autobiography</i> : 2nd Place, Athens Film and Video Festival
2010	<i>The Commoners</i> : Audience Award, Detroit Museum of Contemporary Art
2009	<i>Sittin' on a Million</i> : "Most Badass!" Iowa City Documentary Film Festival
2006	<i>The Abortion Diaries</i> : "Best Doc," New Orleans Human Rights Film Festival <i>The Abortion Diaries</i> : Generation Award, Choice USA <i>The Abortion Diaries</i> : "Best Documentary," Carolina Film and Video Festival
2005	<i>We Are The Littletons</i> : First place (narrative short), Athens Film and Video Festival

Commissions

2011	The New York Times – Op-Docs (online video; commission) The WIRED Store – featured project (installation; commission)
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Representative Screenings & Exhibitions (*denotes solo screening)

2005-present	*250+ community screenings of <i>The Abortion Diaries</i> in 42+ states and worldwide
2013	CPH:DOX Copenhagen

	DOKUFEST	Kosovo
	Traverse City Film Festival	Traverse City MI
	Rooftop Films	NYC
	Nantucket Film Festival	Nantucket MA
	AFI Docs	Washington DC
	Los Angeles Film Festival	Los Angeles CA
	Open City Docs Fest	London
	Bildrausch Film Festival	Basel, Switzerland
	Little Rock Film Festival	Little Rock AR
	DOXA	Vancouver
	Hot Docs	Toronto
	It's All True Documentary Festival	Sao Paulo & Brazil
	Ann Arbor Film Festival	Ann Arbor MI
	Atlanta Film Festival	Atlanta GA
	New Directors/New Films	NYC
	SXSW	Austin TX
	International Film Festival Rotterdam	The Netherlands
2012	MoMA: Festival of Film Preservation	NYC
	IFP Filmmaker Labs Showcase	NYC
	Louis Vuitton Cinema	Rome
	*(Almost) True Stories: Videos of Penny Lane	SAW Video Center, Ottawa
	*Sometimes We Get Lossy: Penny Lane	Winnipeg
	Disposable Film Festival	San Francisco CA & NYC
2011	Rooftop Films	NYC
	Impakt Festival	The Netherlands
	AFI FEST	Los Angeles CA
	Festival of (in)Appropriation	Los Angeles CA
	Hot Springs Documentary Festival	Hot Springs AR
	Greenpoint Film Festival	NYC
	Festival Signes du Nuit	France
	Antimatter Film Festival	Canada
	Kickstarter Film Festival	NYC
	Citizen Jane Film Festival	Columbia MO
	Camden International Film Festival	Camden ME
	New Orleans Film Festival	New Orleans LA
	DOXA Film Festival	Canada
	International Short Film Festival Oberhausen	Germany
	Norwegian Short Film Festival	Norway
	International Film Festival Rotterdam	The Netherlands
	Experiments in Cinema	Albuquerque NM
	Dallas Film Festival	Dallas TX
	Athens Int'l Film and Video Festival	Athens OH
	*Microscope Gallery	NYC
	Berlin International Directors Lounge	Germany
	Big Sky Documentary Film Festival	Missoula MT
	European Media Arts Festival	Germany
	Iowa City International Documentary Festival	Iowa City IA
	FLEX (Florida Experimental) Festival	Gainesville FL

PREVIOUS GRANT SUPPORT

In the fall of 2013, I received a Research Council discretionary grant in the amount of \$1500.00 in the category of Non-Student Wages. This funding is currently supporting archival research related to *NUTS*.