

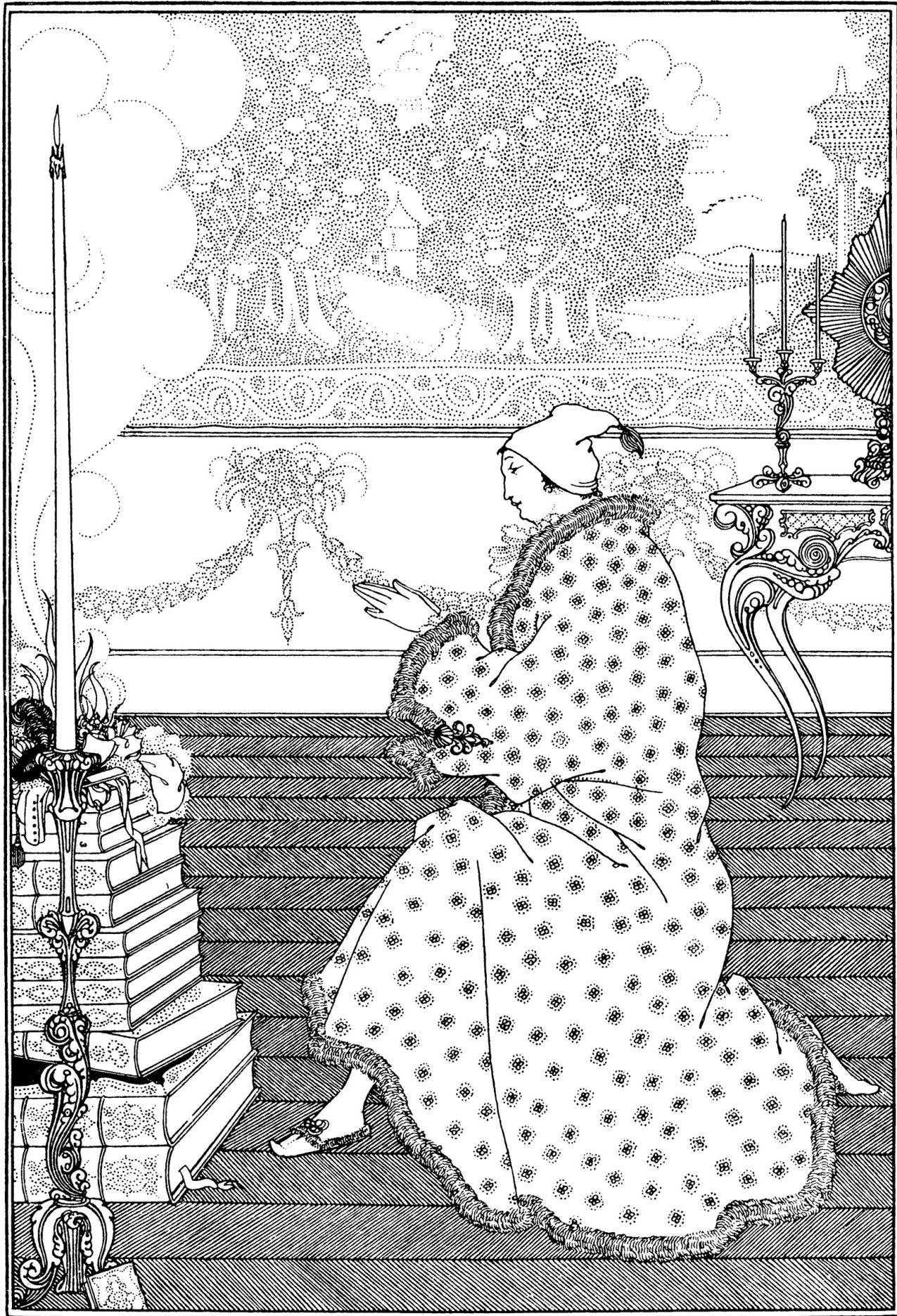
# THE DRINK TANK

384

A LITTLE ALTERNATE FILM HISTORY

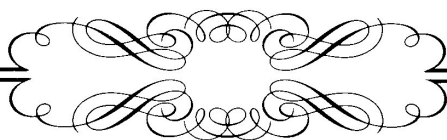






# Aubrey Beardsley's A Trip to the Moon

Chapter





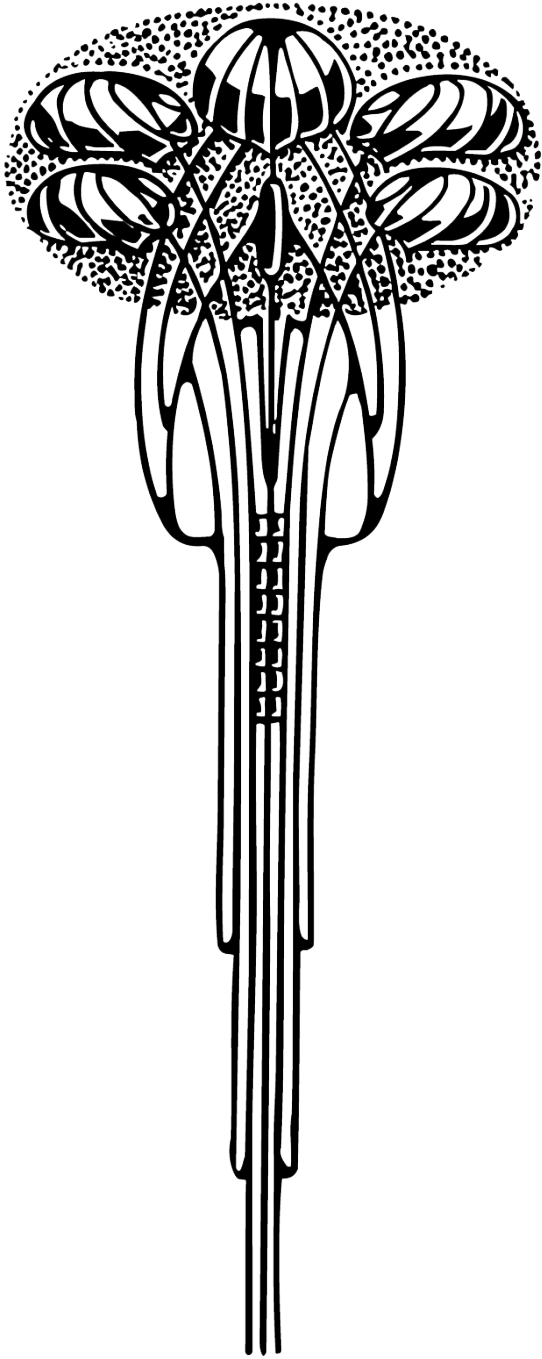


## FRANCE 1898

*“Cinematic theft is an ancient art.”*

No more than three days had passed before someone had swiped Edison's scheme for moving pictures. The Lumiere brothers had the same problem on the other side of the Atlantic. It's hardly shocking that one of the thieves of that technology would steal "his" great creation from another, but the audacity of the theft is so great, and thus-far un-reported!, that it makes this reporter sick.

The villain in this story is Georges Melies.  
The victim - Aubrey Beardsley.



Let us take you back to 1897 and The French Riviera. The incredibly prolific artist Beardsley, is suffering from consumption, now called tuberculosis. Slowly wasting away, he'd come to France to take advantage of the warm climate. The twenty-four year old had settled in at a hotel, enjoying himself the best he could while continuing to create an incredible amount of art. At times, fifty to a hundred pieces in an afternoon, which is only made more remarkable because he'd done so between coughing fits! As the story goes, one afternoon, a young magician named Georges Melies had taken his show on the road and brought his act to the Cosmopolitan Hotel in Menton. Setting up his act, Beardsley took in the show, sitting at a small table in the back of the theatre, mostly drawing his grotesque images while sipping cognac and violently coughing up bloody sputum. After the first act, Melies set up a screen and began to show his film.

At this, Beardsley stopped drawing and took in the marvel.

The films that most held his attention were *A Terrible Night*, in which Melies does battle with a giant bedbug, and *The Lady Vanishes*, which was Melies' first film featuring effects. When Melies projected *The Astronomer's Dream*, Beardsley was nearly apoplectic! He had never seen such a wonder, and he quickly began drawing again, in his inimitable style. Melies returned to do slight-of-hand tricks after the films, but Beardsley paid them no attention. Instead, he was furiously drawing, dozens of sketches created in less than an hour. He remained in the room where the show had been for more than an hour after the performance had ended. Still frantically drawing, the magician himself came to Beardsley's side.

"I'm aware of your work, Mr. Beardsley" Melies is said to have said.

Aubrey looked up from his work, though he kept drawing.

"That was the most magical thing I've ever seen!" Beardsley said.

"Was nothing but illusion, my dear fellow." The Magician returned.

At that point, or so the story goes, Beardsley pushed a stack of papers into the man's hands.

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"I am a great admirer of the works of Mr. Verne, and many of the more romantic fantasies of Poe, Twain, and the art of Mr. Robida."

Beardsley said, pointing to various images on the pictures he'd handed to Melies.

"These are..." Melies said, obviously stunned.

"I envision a fantastic story told, of men who would journey from Earth to the Moon, by way of a propelled capsule!" Beardsley said, excitedly, shuffling the papers in the filmmaker's hands to bring forth the proper drawing.

"Fired from a cannon, no doubt?" Melies stated flatly.

"Well, no, that would leave those in the capsule crushed by the forces. Instead, perhaps one form of rocket propulsion system?"

The magician scratched his chin.

"No, no one would believe that."

The two spoke for several hours. Beardsley apparently told the filmmaker his story concept, about Royal Academy scientists who develop a form of space travel and take off for the moon, where they encounter strange beasties. Melies walked off with Beardsley's drawings at the demand of the artist himself. Melies, already a very busy performer and filmmaker, set them aside and did nothing with them. Beardsley, impatient a man as ever existed, sent letter daily to Melies imploring him to make the



movie based on the drawings and description he'd provided. After a few weeks of no reply, Beardsley made a move. He'd met a young man of Menton who had brought a camera from England to film the beautiful French Riviera. Beardsley saw him shooting from a veranda on the side of the hotel and joined him, befriending him over a meal. Beardsley asked if the cameraman could spare the camera, which turned out to be impossible, but he did understand the techniques of building a camera. He wrote a step-by-step description of the technique for Beardsley, who gave the plans to a local mathematical instruments maker who built a camera in less than a week. It cost a small fortune, but Beardsley declared it better than his imagination.

Like any wise experimenter, Beardsley spent the next few weeks producing simple films - shorts of people playing in the water, very short pieces shot while riding in motor cars, and perhaps most impressively, a series of films featuring puppets designed by the legendary graphic artist. These films were simple, but every one allowed Beardsley to attempt more complex tricks and effects. Within a month, just as 1898 was breaking, Beardsley had come to the point where he felt he could tackle his masterpiece - A Trip to the Moon!

The film was set in what appeared to be 18th Century France, though with the instruments of the late 19th century evident everywhere one looked. While walking through his garden one night, a member of the Royal Academy is looking at the moon through his telescope. He begins to have a vision that the moon is a woman looking down on him, inviting him to come and join her. The scientist is snapped out of his dream by a servant saying that he is being summoned to Paris for a meeting of the Royal Academy. The scientist excitedly jumps at the chance to present an idea and gathers papers, maps, and his telescope before hopping in an airship similar to the most wild of Mr. Robida's fantastical drawings.

Upon his arrival, members are asked for proposals, and the Scientist stands and says that he has had a vision. He outlines his vision and says that with enough funding he can put men on the moon. The Academy President laughs at him, leading all other in attendance, save for a woman acting as secretary, to join in. The Scientist storms out of the meeting, but the Secretary runs after him and says that she believes he can do it, and offers to help him. He asks for her qualifications, and she says that she has recorded all the minutes for years and has as advanced knowledge as any of the members. He informs her that he does not have the money to produce a rocket himself. She takes him with her to the Vault where the funds held by the Academy are stored, and it is maintained by a clerk. She flirts with the young man and convinces him that he should allow The Scientist to withdraw some 30,000 francs.

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The Scientist and The Secretary begin the work to create the rocket system on The Scientist's estate. It is a giant rocket, many stories tall, and shining, with hundreds of gargoyles and other figures decorating it. Meanwhile, the Academy discovers the theft, and send a posse to recover the sum. The Scientist has completed the rocket, and he begins the sequence that will take him and the Secretary to the Moon. The other members of the academy, led by The President, arrive just as the rocket is lifting off, and one manages to hook his umbrella to one of the gargoyles and is lifted along with the rocket into space.

After a long journey, the rocket arrives on the moon. As The Scientist and Secretary emerge, they encounter The President, who berates them for stealing the rocket, until they are set upon by a tribe of Moonmen. The attackers are defeated by The Secretary wielding her parasol. With each hit, the Moonmen wetly pop like a water balloon. They are eventually over-come and brought to the Queen of the Moonmen, who sentences them to death. The President claims to be the King of Earth, and that he will take the punishment for his subjects so long as they be allowed to return home. The Queen agrees, and The President is beheaded as The Scientist and Secretary climb into the rocket and return to Earth, where they are greeted as heroes after splashing down into the waters.



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Beardsley hired actors from the local theaters to play the various roles, though he paid a franc to three dozen school children to play his Moonmen. The entire project took less than two weeks. Sets were built in the local theatre, which was doing a play about Marie Antoinette at the time. Costumes were similarly borrowed from the theatre, though no one is sure how Beardsley acquired such state-of-the-art scientific instruments, including a Millionaire mechanical calculator and a number of other astronomical forms and devices. The production, by all accounts, was opulent, and expensive. Apparently, Beardsley had to produce dozens of extra drawings to sell to pay for it.

As soon as he had put together the film, which required a multi-role scripted narration to have it make sense to the average viewer, he had it screened in the Cosmopolitan Hotel. Only 40 people attended, but all were astounded, particularly at the scene of the rocket lifting off. Beardsley's health was deteriorating quickly, and he could not achieve the one goal he had stated to so many of those who assisted him on the film - to debut in Paris.





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*The cannon concept that Melies had initially envisioned was also a part of the festivities.*

As soon as it became obvious that he would not live long, Beardsley sent the film along with a note detailing the screening requirements, as well as the script for the actors, to Melies. The note implored the magician to show it at the Theatre Robert Houdin alongside his own works. Melies watched the film privately, going so far as to hire actors from out of town to read the parts in Beardsley's script. He did so to avoid any locals knowing that he had seen the film.

Within a month of Melies viewing the film, Beardsley had died. Melies, who was in a fury of filmmaking at the time, sat on Beardsley's film, though he watched it several times for his own entertainment. He was heard to comment to his wife, a great admirer of the film, that it was "overly-complicated, too lavish, and impossible from an audience to make heads-or-tails of." As 1901 rolled around, Melies began to think about the film in a different light, especially as his in-camera tricks had caught up to those that Beardsley had managed to achieve. According to speculation from historians of Beardsley's works, Melies began to work with the script, and many of the original drawings that Beardsley had provided to create his own story of travel to the moon. He



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made some fundamental changes, including making it more a story of a collective intent to travel to the moon. The cannon concept that Melies had initially envisioned was also a part of the festivities. While it would be inaccurate to say that Melies simply copied the film, there are some remarkably similar moments, including the image of the Moon with a rocket in its eye and the exploding Moonmen (called Selenites in Melies' film). Melies' film had a different feel, not so much a story of two characters, but a story of Humanity conquering the moon. The Magician's effects were also cleaner, as several of Beardsley's appeared to be hastily done.

*A Trip to the Moon*, Melies' version, is often considered to be the start of modern science fiction film. The images Melies captured have remained influential for more than one hundred years, and cultural references continue through to today, though several attempts have been made to reveal Melies' thievery. The first, during World War I, was made by a former friend of Beardsley who had attended Beardsley's screening at The Cosmopolitan. When he finally saw Melies' *A Trip to the Moon*, he accused the Magician of fraud in a small local paper. News that his cover was blown led hi to destroy the print he still had in his possession, though he claimed he had done so due to losing his faith in humanity with the outbreak of World War I. During the 1930s, another young art enthusiast had come across art pieces that seemed vaguely familiar from having seen *A Trip to the Moon*. Some detective work led him to discover several pieces of evidence pointing to Melies coming into contact with Beardsley's film. He confronted the old





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*“...it would be inaccurate to say that Melies simply copied the film, there are some remarkably similar moments...”*

magician at that point, but renewed interest in Melies' work, along with a promise that he could serve as his 'Official Biographer' secured his silence.

No concrete evidence remains of Beardsley's legendary *A Trip to the Moon*. Several illustrations seem to hint at the existence of the film, and a few pieces of diary entries also hint at the idea that perhaps Beardsley's greatest, most prescient, work has been lost to history; or more accurately, to the greed of Old Man Melies!



# King Vidor's Se7en (1927)

Kids today don't know their film history. Such was obvious long ago, but made more obvious by the reaction to the 1995 release Se7en from David Fincher. Every film student who went to see the film in the multiplex walked out raving about the originality of the film, right down to the credits, but somehow failed to read the text stating "adapted from King Vidor's Se7en (1927)"

King Vi-





## SEVEN (1927)

To start with, Fincher's not made a very big deal of it. It was a terrible failure when first released in 1927. The complex story-telling and dark themes were hardly what the country wanted from the cast. Within a dark and grim Los Angeles, Detective William Somerset (Charlie Chaplin) has been assigned a new partner, Harold Mills (Harold Lloyd). The pair are teamed together, with Somerset coming up on retirement and Mills still shining new and optimistic. They are contacted to investigate a murder in a seedy part of town. They discover a dead man (played by an uncredited Fatty Arbuckle) who had been force fed to the point of his stomach bursting. This is the start of a series of murders that the detectives follow. Each of them inspired by one of the seven deadly sins. They find a dead banker (Lon Cheney, Sr.) who has been bled to death as a marker of Greed, and a man who has been held captive in a bed (Ben Turpin) to represent Sloth. The murders continue, and Mill's young wife, played by Mildred Davis,



strikes up a friendship with Somerset, who she informs that she is pregnant, but hasn't told her husband. The bond between the two is very touching, especially as Chaplin's wheelhouse is schmaltz.

We are finally introduced to our killer, John Doe (played by Buster Keaton), who informs that there are two last victims. The detective take them and the final scene plays out nearly shot-for-shot the same as the Fincher version, though when it is revealed that Wills' wife's head is in the box, Lloyd accidentally drops it, and as he tries to pick it up, ends up kicking it around while Somerset and Doe try to help him, until the three of them run into each other head first, knocking them all cold as the iris closes.

The film is far from a masterpiece if the reviews of the day are to be believed. While the cinematography and editing were highly praised, the performances were widely panned.

"Where is the merriment we know Chaplin, Lloyd, and Keaton for? This sullen wreck of a film is made nearly joyless until the final moments." said the Hollywood Reporter.

Sadly, the only known remaining copy of *Se7en* was destroyed in a vault fire in 1958, though the script (which Fincher discovered while in film school) was widely-known. In 1979, a series of production stills were discovered in the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Science Archives, and in 2008, the final reel of the film was found in an abandoned apartment building in the UN Buffer Zone on Cyprus. This was shown at the 2009 San Francisco Silent Film Festival, where it was declared the comedy hit of the festival

## SE7EN (1927)







# Hot Tub Time Machine (1987)

## 3 Chapter

Of all the films I never expected John Hughes to make, a science fiction piece about a group of popular kids from high school who go off to a ski resort and end up blasted into the future where they're a bunch of schlubs was not one of them.

*If there's any point that must be made with Hot Tub Time Machine, it's the lengths Hughes goes to make his characters human.*

Straight off his triumph with *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, John Hughes has given us another set of young people having a good time in strange circumstances.

Adam, played by John Cusack, is the leader of an unlikely band of bad boys slacker-types. There's Lou, embodied by the young Robert Downey, Jr., the stoner who can't keep himself out of trouble. Nick, the musician whose band is preparing for their debut at the ski resort, comes in the form of Damon Wayans. It's a strong trio, and the antics we're treated to around the ski lodge are hilarious, especially the continued challenges that Lou faces as he's stoned/drunk/tripping on some sort of paint-thinner, and during this deep debauchery, our boys end up entering a hot tub, spilling a very special bottle of vodka on the controls, and waking up in 2010.

Adam, Lou, and Nick, now played by Kevin Kline, Jeff Goldblum and Sidney Pointier, find themselves in the midst of the resort, now a part of a failed ski town, as middle-aged versions of themselves. Lou's near-suicidal, Adam's stuck in a dead-end job and failed marriage, Nick's dealing with the worst job in the universe and the death of his music career. Even worse is the fact that they're constantly tied to their problems by the fact that they carry space-age communicators that are part-telephone, part-computer. Assisted by Adam's young nephew, played by Sean Astin, they go about trying to get themselves back home, but when that proves more difficult than anticipated, to turn around the fortunes of the resort they loved so well.

Hughes' comedic eye and timing are perfect. The way the ski resort has become derelict is perfect, and there's no doubt the the giant transmissions towers and electronic billboards will be with us by 2010. The actors inhabiting the town, played by the likes of Burgess Merideth, Madeline Khan, and young Crispin Glover, give the resort a brilliant sort of science fictional flavor. Every character seems bitter in ways that are completely understandable in the view of a changed world. Khan is particularly amusing in both the present, as a lusty inn-keeper trolling for young lovers (of either sex), and in the future as a crone who is no less lusty with the passage of time. The running gag of Glover's lost arm is the kind of bit you'd expect from Mel Brooks, but it's perfectly timed in the script and cinematography.

## ANIMAL TITLE

The young women, though, will be widely remembered in this one; Molly Ringwald as Adam's 'Great White Buffalo' being the greatest stand-out. Fine performances from Ally Sheedy and Laura Dern as the young women old Lou and Nick 'encounter' are just as good. The scenes between Goldblum and Dern are especially funny, as Goldblum's awkward pauses and bizarre withdrawal-play reacts perfectly against Dern's doe-eyed precociousness.

If there's any point that must be made with *Hot Tub Time Machine*, it's the lengths Hughes goes to make his characters human. He gives heart preference over slapstick, which makes even shallow roles such as Harry Dean Stanton's glorified cameo as the hot tub repair man into something special. Watching these characters, who on paper seem to be nothing more than base chacteratures, evolve into real people is a revelation that few other directors would be able to manage.

*Hot Tub Time Machine* is a wonderful film, Hughes' best so far, but also one of the best science fiction films of the last decade.





# I, Fatty

## 4 Chapter

When a man is dragged through the mud, there is no way he can come up clean. Sadly, such was the case with Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle following his acquittal for the murder of Virginia Rappe. He'd been innocent all along, but the trial's sensationalism has painted him as a monster. The lies the press created, fueled by the



lies told by witnesses such as Maude Delmont, had forever tarnished Fatty's reputation, and following the 1922 conclusion of the trial, his career was finished. Friends like Buster Keaton kept him working behind the scenes, but he was nowhere near the million dollars a year he was making before the trial. A 1929 phone call nearly changed everything, and perhaps it would have saved his life.

Fatty was working as a director and script doctor, often working only one week every couple of months. He spent much of the time between drinking heavily, but always on the hustle, just in case something came up. An odd assignment came his way, the chance to shoot some footage for a newsreel of a wrestling match between Jim Londos and Dick Shikat. Fatty, a fan of grappling, drove across the country, sleeping in his car and writing scripts for shorts that he would later funnel to friends in Hollywood. Arriving in Philadelphia on August 21st, he had two days to kill. He spent the first drinking in some of the lower class, South Philly watering holes, and the second touring museums and bookshops. At one small bookshop, he came across a copy of Joseph Moncure March's epic poem *The Wild Party*, and he devoured it that evening. He shot the match the next day, and while on photographers row at ringside, he struck up a conversation with a young Frenchman name Pierre deLongpre. He had been sent by Pathé to shoot the match, along with a travelogue-style documentary about the Eastern Coast of the United States. Pierre typically shot documentaries, though he had been the director of a series of successful adventure films. After the match, Fatty and Pierre headed to a local watering hole, where the two talked about movies, and Arbuckle brought up *The Wild Party*.

"Someone ought be shooting this as a movie," he told Pierre.

That, along with letting Pierre take the poem with him, was all it took to set the wheels in motion.

A month later, Fatty was back in California working on educational short subjects for a local school district under the name Will B. Good. He had just returned from a twelve hour shooting day and was about to fall asleep when his phone rang. It was Charles Pathé, the head of the massive French studio. He said that Pierre had told him about *The Wild Party* and let him read it. He knew it would be a sensation, and was pushing for Pathé to hire Fatty to adapt it.

But Pathé had a better idea.



The Studio Head asked if Arbuckle was willing to make a party picture inspired by *The Wild Party*, but based on Fatty's own experience.

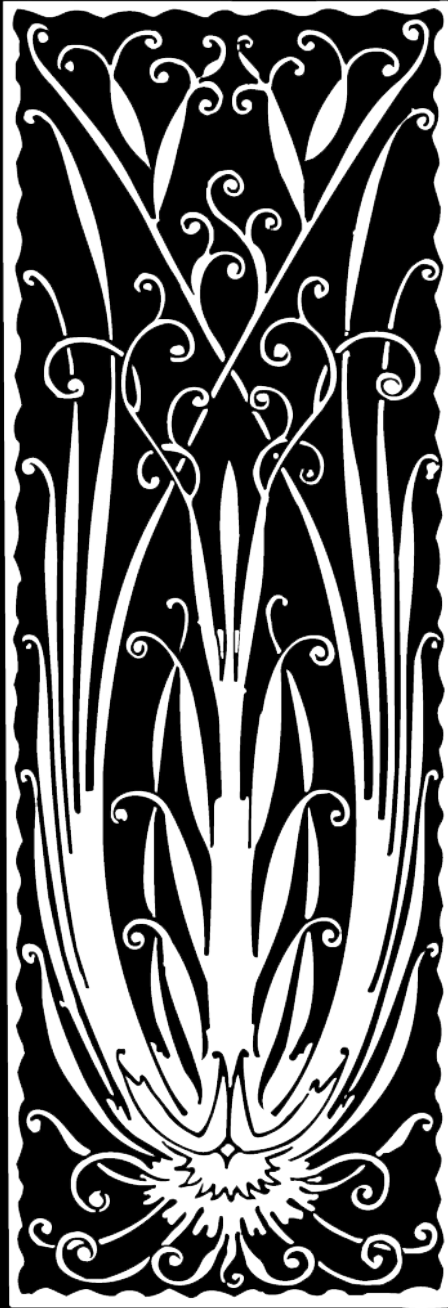
Arbuckle would write, direct, and star in the picture, which would be shot in France with a massive budget. They'd use the biggest stars in Europe alongside Arbuckle, notably Florelle, who they'd already signed to a three picture contract. Pathé had offices in America, and would run the pre-production out of Fort May, New Jersey, but do the actual filming in Paris in summer 1929. The key for Pathé to make such a large investment was Fatty telling his story, as honestly as possible, and then shooting it.

Fatty was torn.

He couldn't get regular work in the States due to his reputation, and especially Will Hays, the Hollywood morality czar. He also knew that if he did this picture in France, it could renew interest in him around the world, and thus bring his career fully back to the limelight. The travel to France could have been an issue, as his notoriety might not go unnoticed, but Fatty figured the county that gave us the Marquis deSade would not likely keep him out.

Working long nights writing, Fatty produced a near-400 page script titled *The Wild Party*. Pathé had not acquired the rights from March, leading Fatty to re-title the film *The Hotel Room*. Fatty's first draft was sent in to Pathé, which returned it with





*"It was the most beautiful script I'd ever read,"*

extensive notes, the boldest of which being 'CUT IT IN HALF!' Fatty had gotten a gig directing so the next re-write took him months, but the newly shortened script was better received, and Pathé had set up a shooting schedule beginning July 14th, 1929.

And then the world changed.

The release of *The Jazz Singer* almost instantly redefined the world of film, and Pathé was no exception. Charles Pathé instantly contacted Arbuckle, saying he needed to re-write the work as a talkie. At first Arbuckle resisted, but relented when Pathé increased the budget significantly. They would also be shooting everything twice - once in English and once in French, which meant that Fatty had to learn French, which took him several months. As 1930 rolled around, Arbuckle had learned French well enough to produce a script a française (which even Pathé was impressed with) and a new English script which took advantage of the new medium. There was dialogue, whip-smart and fast paced, and there was music, and there was a lot of dancing. It was the kind of talkie that had yet to make it to screen - one that used the medium of sound wisely to tell a strong story.

Delays with the script and shooting schedule allowed 1930 to slip into 1931, and Fatty was working more steadily, though typically for far less money than he had been. His drinking had become more of a problem as well. He wrote another draft, and was absorbing as much about the sound film process as he could. When he wasn't shooting, he was at the theatre watching the talkies that played out there. By late 1931, Pathé had shelved the project until the end of 1932, which led Fatty into another depression, and deeper into his cups.

It was the end of 1932, and Pathé had finally placed *The Hotel Room* (which Arbuckle had privately taken to calling *I, Fatty*) on the docket, even going so far as to send Arbuckle tickets for a steamer across the Atlantic. He would leave Los Angeles via train on July 30th, arriving in New York on August 14th, then across to France on the 17th. Fatty wrote a final version of the script in February, 1933. This version featured more dialogue, and a soundtrack that included seven original songs Fatty had written himself. Arbuckle held an intimate party one evening, inviting his friends in the industry, as well as a troop of theatre actors. This party, much more sedate than the famous St. Francis soiree, was headlined by a reading of *The Hotel Room*.

"It was the most beautiful script I'd ever read," said Buster Keaton, remembering

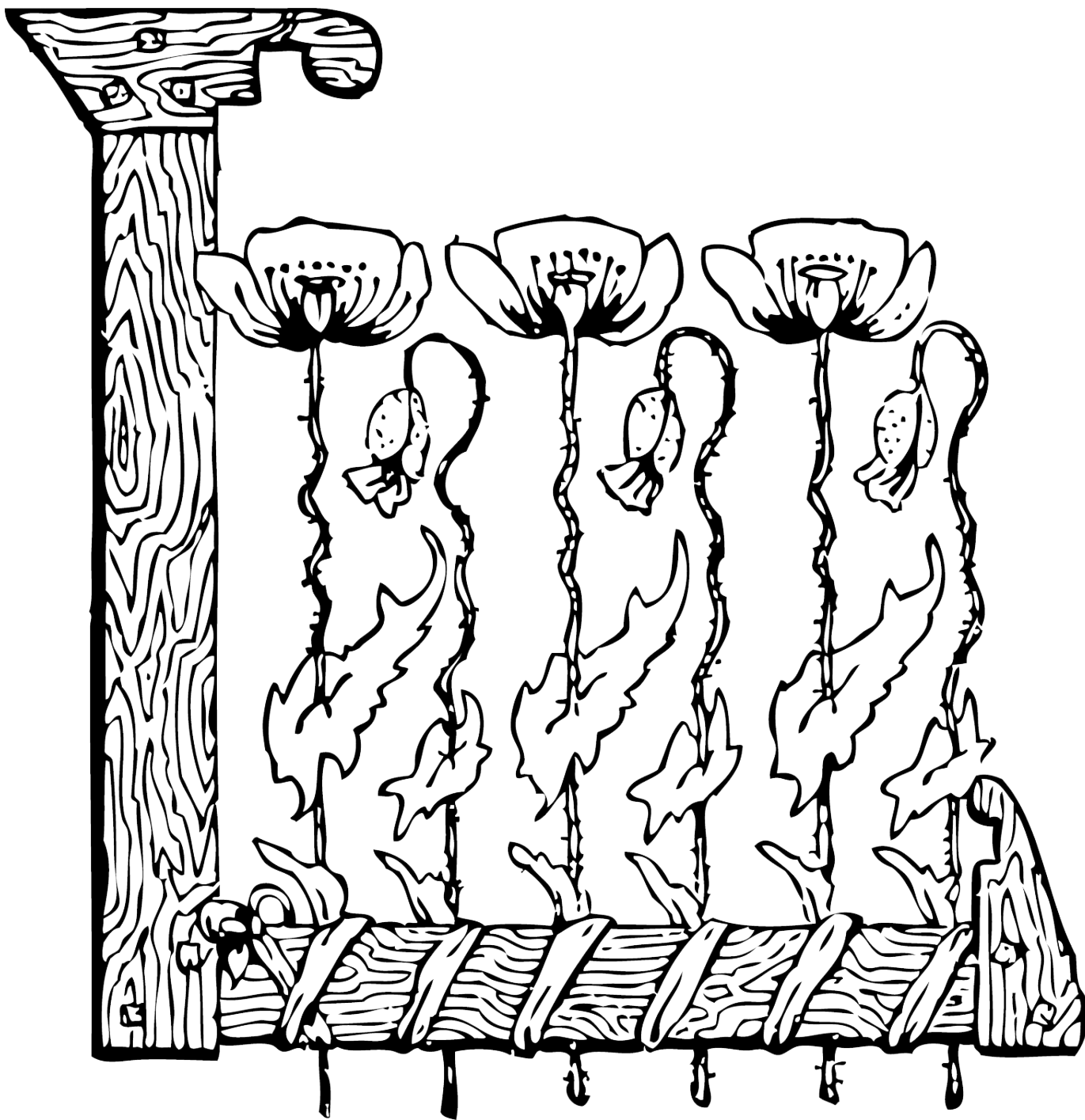
## I, FATTY

it for an oral history three decades later, "full of rich characters and sweet music. Fatty was firing' on all cylinders!"

The response from others was equally enthusiastic, and Fatty was chuffed as well. The day of July 18th, he'd signed a new deal with Warner Brothers to direct a major motion picture once he returned from France, but instead of spending the night celebrating, he spent it packing for his trip.

His steamer trunk was by the door in the morning when he was found dead.

The English version of the script no longer exists, but the French version is still to be found in the Pathé Archives. In it, Fatty mingles thinly-veiled characters from March's poem with real-life Hollywood participants. Arbuckle had written himself as the Burrs character, and as such told the story of his interaction with Virginia Rappe. The actor led Rappe into the adjoining bedroom, and they made out until Rappe broke down and confessed to Fatty that she needed money to have an abortion and he was the only one who could help her. She was then overcome from drink and became violently ill, striking Fatty several times and screaming, at which point the comedian left saying "she makes too much noise" as a way of playing cool having been severely shaken by the experience.



## I, FATTY

*The Drink Tank 384*

***Edited by***

***Vanessa***

***James***

***Chris***

***August 2014***

***Love ya!***

Pathé gave up on the idea of making the film. Cost overruns, not to mention the death of Arbuckle, had made the production untenable. The script was shopped around half-heartedly, then shelved forever. It wouldn't have been known save for researchers investigating *The Wild Party* in the 1970s when Merchant Ivory turned their attentions towards it. There was briefly talk of suing them for infringement, but it never came to be.

Much like the film that may have exonerated Fatty Arbuckle in the eyes of the world.