

ZOOM

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What's the big idea?

Lots of people have ideas they think will change the world, but innovators sometimes see their brilliant inventions go awry — or get ripped off by a giant corporation.

The latter happened to Bob Kearns, whose story is told in “Flash of Genius,” opening Friday. Kearns (played by Greg Kinnear) is the guy who created the intermittent windshield wiper in the '60s — and took the big automakers to court when they stole the idea. Here are six more Hollywood celebrations of inventors who were brilliant or bonkers — and sometimes both.

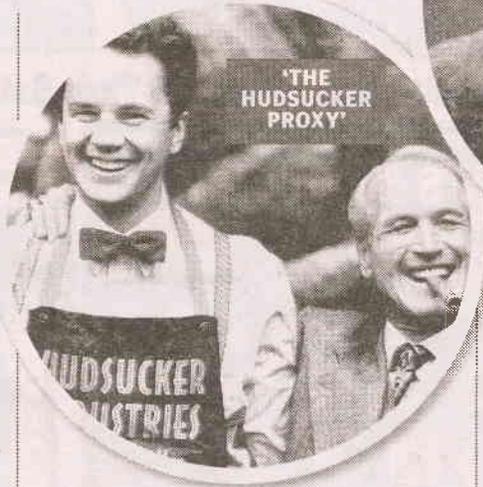
TUCKER: THE MAN AND HIS DREAM (1988)

Flash of genius: Preston Tucker (Jeff Bridges) has decided post-WWII America is ready for a better car — and he'll build it.

Breakthrough or bomb: Detroit doesn't like upstarts, and so it squashed Tucker's dream. This Francis Ford Coppola film is one of his underappreciated gems, with flash and style to spare — just like the '48 Tucker sedan.

THE ASTRONAUT FARMER (2006)

Flash of genius: Just because you had to retire from NASA to save the family farm is no reason to give up your dream of space travel. At least that's the thinking of Billy Bob Thornton's character, a former astronaut named ... Farmer.



Breakthrough or bomb: Farmer's wife, played by Virginia Madsen, has got his back, while the FBI is suspicious. Without spoiling the ending, let's say that just trying to get into space on your own is a nutty triumph.

FAT MAN AND LITTLE BOY (1989)

Flash of genius: Our best and brightest scientific minds (overseen by Paul Newman's Gen. Groves) race against the clock to build an atomic bomb before the Nazis do.

Breakthrough or bomb: They then see it used to wipe out a pair of Japanese cities. Maybe



some things weren't meant to be invented, but that was a luxury they just didn't have.

THE HUDSUCKER PROXY (1994)

Flash of genius: The head of a company (Newman, again) hires a “moron” (Tim Robbins) to drive the firm into the ground so he and his cronies can take it over for pennies on the dollar. Unfortunately, said moron comes up with a brilliant idea for a new toy.

Breakthrough or bomb: Robbins thinks a Hula-Hoop-type toy will work. And darned if it doesn't. Nobody's hated accidental success this much since “The Producers.”

FRANKENSTEIN (1931)

Flash of genius: Everyone dreams about defeating death. But Dr. Frankenstein took it a step further by harnessing the power of lightning to reanimate a “creature” stitched together from various bodies.



Breakthrough or bomb: Two words: “It's alive!” A definite success, though someone should have thought about what to do with the Monster after it came to life.

BACK TO THE FUTURE (1985)

Flash of genius: Time travel is one of Hollywood's favorite sci-fi devices, but it was never more entertaining than when Christopher Lloyd's Doc Brown introduced the flux capacitor.

Breakthrough or bomb: Michael J. Fox's Marty McFly soon realized the hilarious — and sometimes creepy — aspects of jumping back into the past and meeting your nerdy dad and randy mom when they were in high school. It took two more movies (and probably a lifetime of therapy for McFly) to straighten it all out. But it sure was fun.

Michael Giltz