

## January 2011

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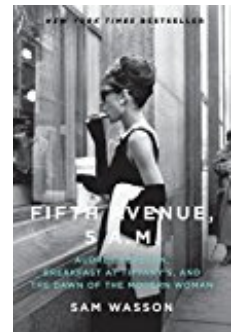
### The Bombshell

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#### Holly Golightly Needs a New Dress

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Sam Wasson's *Fifth Avenue, 5 A.M.: Audrey Hepburn, Breakfast at Tiffany's, and the Dawn of the Modern Woman* is a little black dress of a book: sleek, suggestive, and elegantly subversive. A delightful read full of gratifying anecdotes and provocative cameos of movie people and the glitterati -- Colette, Anita Loos, Gloria Vanderbilt and, of course, Truman Capote and his swans -- the book's greatest strength lies in Wasson's multi-stranded account of how a movie gets made. He divides the narrative into thematic ribbons -- costume, music, production, direction, the action both on set and off -- all colorfully woven around the book's maypole: Audrey Hepburn.



Wearing a sublime black number designed by Hubert de Givenchy in the opening scene of the iconic film, Hepburn as Holly Golightly cinematically introduces 1960s women to a new way of seeing and being seen. The black dress is, writes Wasson, “the choice of someone who needs not to attract. Someone self-sufficient. Someone more distant, less knowable, and ultimately, mysterious. Powerful.” Leaving the pastels of the Doris Day set behind, Audrey Hepburn embodies the color black and its “charged intimations of power, sexual knowing and reversals of traditional passivity.” She creates a new kind of bombshell -- a woman who radically refuses to be defined by male desire, who values her independence above all, and represents a multilayered woman who isn't punished for her sexual precocity.

Beyond the claim for Hepburn's black wardrobe as symbolic of female empowerment, Wasson lets Letty Cottin Pogrebin, a cofounder of *Ms. Magazine*, make his point. For Pogrebin, Holly's character was a “formative prefeminist role model,” who redefined gender for the '60s generation: “Here was this incredibly glamorous, quirky, slightly bizarre woman who wasn't convinced that she had to live with a man. She was a single girl living a life of her own, and she could have an active sex life that wasn't morally questionable. I had never seen that before.” It's a testament to the magic of cinema that Audrey Hepburn, famously brow beaten by her husband Mel Ferrer and renowned as the good girl of 1950s cinema, was able to achieve the status of progressive female icon.

Holly Golightly altered the public perception of acceptable behavior for women both on and off screen, and questioned the Lacanian idea that “woman is a symptom of man.” The film even slightly twists film theorist Laura Mulvey’s concept of the *Male Gaze* described in her seminal 1973 essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” Female movie characters in 1950s and ‘60s films, Mulvey wrote, were coded with “to-be-looked-at-ness”: the spectator was assumed to be a masculine subject; the woman on screen, the object of his desire, seen either voyeuristically as whore or fetishistically as madonna. Holly Golightly was a prostitute of sorts but so was Fred, the male lead and romantic interest; via their transgressive sexuality, they offered an unconventional way of looking and being looked at. *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* was perhaps our first major motion picture glimpse of a gaze that, though not necessarily Female, was certainly not rigidly Male. Yet, whatever Holly Golightly’s contribution to “the dawn of the modern woman,” fifty years later for women in Hollywood the sun still isn’t anywhere near high noon and the predominant gaze, along with everything else, is still very much Male.

As the Golden Globes and Oscars roll around once again, women in film remain grossly under-represented and misrepresented. Thanks to Geena Davis and her Institute on Gender in Media, gender disparity and gender stereotypes in Hollywood are being vigorously examined and reported. Analyzing over 100 films for children from 2004-2009, the institute found that 71% of the speaking characters were male and 29% female, a ratio that has not changed significantly in 20 years. Unsurprisingly, women are usually depicted as too thin, large breasted, with excessive hair, toppling in stilettos, etc. In non-speaking and crowd scenes only 17% of the characters were female.

As described in another of my *Bookslut* columns, the effects of this sort of neurosexism on the unconscious can seriously limit female ambition and performance, cause girls to accept sexism because they believe “that’s just the way things are,” and increase sexism in boys. At the Second Symposium on Gender in Media held in December 2010, it was suggested that even if half the background casting was required to be female (ignoring principal characters and story-types), an enormous shift in perception of gender and stereotyping would occur for all viewers.

The dearth of female directors making big-budget films prevails despite Kathryn Bigelow’s historic directorial win last year. Melissa Silverstein’s excellent blog *Women & Hollywood* features “The Bigelow Effect,” posts tracing the consequences of Bigelow’s Oscar for women directors in the industry. The story isn’t pretty. *The Hollywood Reporter’s* recent list of the 100 most powerful women in Hollywood listed only one director -- Bigelow at #53. And, contrary to common expectation, Bigelow’s win has not led to directorial opportunities even for herself. In the past year, she did a pilot for HBO which did not get picked up for series.

In December, Helen Mirren lambasted the film industry’s sexism in her acceptance speech for the Sherry Lansing Leadership Award. She bemoaned filmmakers who continue “to worship at the altar of the 18 to 25-year-old male and his penis.” Throughout her career, she said, she has watched “the survival of some very mediocre male actors and the professional demise of some very brilliant female ones.”

Wasson’s book, though less comprehensive, sits gracefully on the shelf next to the great

books of the past two decades on women and film such as Maria De Battista's *Fast Talking Dames*, Molly Haskell's *From Reverence to Rape*, Jeanine Basinger's *A Woman's View: How Hollywood Spoke to Women 1930-1960*, and Elizabeth Kendall's *The Runaway Bride* -- and nestles right up to the phenomenal little book about moviemaking called *Picture* by Lillian Ross.

With great charm, finesse, and potency, Holly Golightly did her part in advancing the depictions and prescriptions of women in the movies towards some sort of parity with their male counterparts. It is my New Year's wish that the spirit of Holly Golightly put on a new dress, one that attracts, challenges, and promotes all gazes.