Style Star – Admiring Audrey Hepburn in the 1950’s

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Audrey Hepburn’s Hollywood debut in the 1953 film *Roman Holiday* made the 24 year old gamine actress an instant star, and she became one of the most popular western film stars of the 1950’s and the 1960’s (Walker 85-86). Particularly, it was her clothes and looks that garnered great attention and admiration, and it is precisely her style that is the focus of this paper. Why did Hepburn’s style become so popular, why did she have such resonance especially for young white women in the 1950’s? I’m dealing here with possible, shared readings of Hepburn available, and also employed, at the time. My examples, though from Finnish sources, serve here to illustrate a wider “Audrey style” phenomenon in Western countries. I shall examine a look-alike competition organised by Finnish film magazine *Uutisaitta* in 1955, and present excerpts from the diary of a young Finnish girl in the 1950’s, Satu Koskimies, published in *50-luvun tytöt. Katarina Haavio ja Satu Koskimies. Päiväkirjat 1951-1956* (Katarina Haavio and Satu Koskimies - Girls of the 50’s. Diaries from 1951-1956).

According to Jackie Stacey, the relationship between a female spectator and a star ideal is characterised by “contradictions of similarity and difference, recognition and separateness” (Stacey 126-127). The mechanisms of stardom are similarly dualistic. A star is like the rest of us, but somehow special and out of reach (McDonald 7, 12; Welsch 16-17). Identification, then, is seen here as a diverse and fluid cultural process, where the differences and similarities between star and spectator are constantly negotiated. Female stars are consumable images of ideal femininity and beauty. Particularly with female spectators, identification with these stars is closely linked to the consumption of other commodities (Stacey 3-5; McDonald 5-7; Dyer 2000a, 121-124; Morley 274). So what was at stake in liking Audrey and being like Audrey?

It is important to note my own admiration of Hepburn and her style, but also the historical nature of a star image. The Hepburn I confront today in magazines and films is not the same encountered by spectators 50 years ago; my reading of her is historically predetermined. Indeed, as I have discovered firsthand while working on this paper, it is not possible to see a figure like Hepburn without all the meanings associated with her over time. Hepburn has become an icon, and her way of dressing – cutting edge and striking 50 years ago – is today a standard of classic style.

Liking Audrey, Like Audrey

In the 1950’s the fashion industry was experiencing great changes. Paris haute couture designers had regained their place as leaders of fashion from the Hollywood dressmakers of the 1930’s and 1940’s. At the same time the expanding ready to wear market made it possible for a wider audience to imitate couture styles. Christian Dior was the ruling couturier with his nostalgic belle époque designs, launched in his 1947 New Look collection. In 1952 young designer Hubert de Givenchy caused great stir with his simplistic debut collection (Wilson 1985, 63, 86-89; Wilson 1993, 38-40: Mulvey & Richards 107; Seeling 172, 236-239, 245; Thesander 170; Holman Edelman 60). A year later this enfant terrible of Paris haute couture met Audrey Hepburn. *Sabrina Fair*, released in 1954, was their first on screen collaboration, though Givenchy’s work went uncredited. From there on Givenchy clothed Hepburn both off screen and in nearly all her films, whether it was appropriate for her character or not
From the start, Hepburn’s image was constructed around her alternativeness and uniqueness, manifesting itself in her style and, importantly, in the copying of that style by women. With her irregular features, large eyes and mouth, extremely thin body and no curves to speak of, she was not a self evident beauty for her time. Indeed, Billy Wilder, the director of Sabrina Fair marked: “This girl, single-handedly, may make bosoms a thing of the past.” (Clarke Keogh 82)

Hepburn is typically a much copied feature in star-audience relations and the cropped hairstyle Hepburn sports in Roman Holiday (1953) soon inspired numerous imitations. In August 1954, a young Finnish girl, Satu Koskimies, wrote in her diary that she had finally gotten her hair cut short, apparently unbeknownst to her parents: “A fringe and an attempt of a windswept crop. Now I too have a fringe! I’m so happy! Mother seems to have submitted. I think I have won the fringe battle!!! Ha!” (Haavio and Koskimies 129) Though she does not directly state if she wanted the haircut because of Hepburn, I feel the connection can be made: Roman Holiday had premiered in Finland in January of 1954, and after this Koskimies repeatedly declares her great love and admiration for Hepburn, and notes on her outward similarity with the star (Haavio and Koskimies see, for instance, 93, 116, 169, 173). Hepburn’s clothes were also imitated. In mere weeks after the premier of Sabrina Fair in September 1954, copies of Givenchy’s youthful couture outfits chosen by Hepburn for the film, such as a little black dress with a wide neckline, appeared in shop windows and magazines. It is notable that Hepburn’s character was the only one in the film to wear Paris fashions, singling her out from the other female characters who were dressed in rather conservative New Look -styles by costume designer Edith Head. Givenchy’s designs highlighted Hepburn’s face and neck, her slender figure and dancer’s poise (Clarke Keogh 37; Moseley 39, 63, 99-101; Stacey 167-168; Bruzzi 17). The light, angular way she uses her body, together with her low heeled shoes and the absence of corsets, emphasize the freedom and mobility of Hepburn’s character.

In the 1957 film Funny Face, notably a film about the fashion industry, Hepburn was seen in a number of couture outfits and Givenchy was now named as the designer (Wilson 1985, 100,104; Mulvey & Richards 107; Thesander 158, 160). In Funny Face Hepburn’s character Jo, a spirited bookworm, also sports black narrow pants with a black turtleneck and ballet-like slippers. A version of this look had already been worn by Hepburn in Sabrina Fair and this student/dancer style caught on quickly with the young female audience. In April 1955, a few months after Sabrina Fair had premiered in Finland, Satu Koskimies wrote in her journal: “I think I’m getting those long Audrey trousers! Mother has almost promised, but…I still think I’ll get them! They are so marvellously narrow at the ankles, and then I’ll use them with my red shoes. Ahh!” (Haavio and Koskimies 216) As Elizabeth Wilson has suggested, this style was linked to young European intellectuals, who after World War II, signalled their disdain for conservatism by dressing in antibourgeois black. Hepburn’s image and roles, along with those of Leslie Caron, a star quite similar to her, played a central part in the popularisation of the Left Bank look, the creation of a sort of pseudo-existentialism in the 1950’s (Moseley 42-44; Wilson 1985, 186-187; Wilson 1993, 37-38; Seeling 249, Wilson and Taylor 163). I think this connects Hepburn to the era’s rising youth culture and, indeed, rebellion.

From her first appearance Hepburn’s style was closely watched by the public as well as the press. In connection with the Finnish release of Sabrina Fair in early 1955 Uutisaitta, the magazine of Finnish film production company Suomi-Filmi, announced a competition to find “Finland’s Audrey Hepburn” (Uutisaitta vol. 1.3). The magazine described Hepburn as having caused an overnight sensation with her talent and unconventional looks. Hepburn had created “a whole new kind of feminine ideal” (Uutisaitta vol. 1 p. 5), and that “already the “Audrey Hepburn -type” is an established concept all over the world. Thousands of women have adopted the star’s tasteful way of dress, restrained make up and lively hair cut” (Uutisaitta vol. 1 p. 5). Though competitions such as these were not uncommon, the response to this one was apparently unusually great, with hundreds of young women submitting. I think I have won the fringe battle!!! Ha!” (Haavio and Koskimies 129) Though she does not directly state if she wanted the haircut because of Hepburn, I feel the connection can be made: Roman Holiday had premiered in Finland in January of 1954, and after this Koskimies repeatedly declares her great love and admiration for Hepburn, and notes on her outward similarity with the star (Haavio and Koskimies see, for instance, 93, 116, 169, 173). The light, angular way she uses her body, together with her low heeled shoes and the absence of corsets, emphasize the freedom and mobility of Hepburn’s character.

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The competition is an interesting example of the way Hepburn’s image as a fresh and alternative beauty was constructed in interaction with the audience and circulated in publications. It also highlights the close connection between film stars and consuming. Consumption, however, is complex – in the words of Stacey it is “a site
of negotiated meanings, of resistance and of appropriation as well as subjection and exploitation” (Stacey 187). Copying, then, should not be understood as mere imitation but a physical as well as an emotional process, where the spectator combines her own appearance with some features of the star, and produces “a new feminine identity” (Stacey 170). The star moves into the marginal and the spectator becomes the central character (Stacey 9). But the relationship is not unproblematic, as can be read from Satu Koskimies’ diary entry on November 11th 1955:

“She [Audrey] is wonderful. She is individual. I would so want to be individual, but am not. I imitate Audrey. It’s terribly stupid. [...] I would like to be individual and should find my own style. [In English:] ‘But what is my own sort?’ That’s just what’s so hard to know. [...] Now I shall decide this: I shall no longer copy Audrey, just love her with all my heart. [in English:] ‘I LOVE her!’” (Haavio and Koskimies 377)

In female star-audience relations, and perhaps especially with Hepburn, there is a constant negotiation about one's identity in everyday life and what one wants to be.

Hepburn’s style was assigned various positive meanings such as modern, intelligent, spirited and sophisticated. By building a relationship with her through the imitation of her style, spectators took on these meanings. Hepburn’s style seemed to come natural to her, signifying her look as achievable. Furthermore, the simplicity of Givenchy’s designs meant that they could be mass produced seemingly easily, as well as made at home at a relatively low cost. But ideal femininity is never fully achievable in patriarchal culture, and needs to be constantly worked at. And, despite increasing prosperity in the West in the 1950’s, many women did not have the financial means to copy star styles. Women’s attachment to stars, then, is also marked with feelings of failure and frustration (Stacey 8, 167-168, 206-214; Moseley 19, 53-54, 117; McDonald 7, 12; Wilson 1993, 36).

To be sure, Hepburn was part of a Hollywood tradition linking female stars with fashion, but it should be noted that Hepburn and Givenchy were the first successful actress - fashion designer pairing in a long while. Hepburn’s popularity arguably played a large part in Givenchy’s rise to fame, while his designs contributed to Hepburn’s aura of rarity and elegance (Drake 6; Clarke Keogh 90-93; Wilson 1993, 38).

Hepburn’s fashion stardom was quickly put to good use on the screen. Her films were mainly set in contemporary time and in cosmopolitan cities such as Paris and New York, enabling the filmmakers to utilize her celebrated look. Funny Face is a true Audrey Hepburn vehicle in this sense (McDonald 13; Dyer 2000a, 122-123; Dyer 2000b, 126; Welsh 303-304). In the film’s fashion shoot sequence in Paris, Hepburn is caught on camera leaping, turning, running down stairs. Fred Astaire’s photographer character Dick Avery was based on real-life photographer Richard Avedon, who was pioneering a more energetic style of fashion photography and acted as an advisor on Funny Face (Walker 132; Jacobs 161). In Hepburn’s films fashion was one of the main attractions. The clothes were not just costumes but almost characters in themselves. Givenchy’s designs carried alternative, independent meanings from the world of Paris fashions (Bruzzi 3, 14-17). Through this emphasis on looks, Hepburn’s films invite and leave room for a competent feminine gaze to analyse appreciate them – however patriarchally determined that gaze is. There is a shared understanding between Hepburn and her spectators of the work involved in producing a style. This shared cultural competency, knowingness about the very practical side of the construction femininity, brings about a sense of intimacy with Hepburn for her female spectators (Moseley 39-41, 46-48, 60, 86-88; Stacey 188-190).

Rachel Moseley’s study on Hepburn and her British fans, based on several interviews, suggests that many young women in the 1950’s felt Hepburn to be one of them, for them and for herself, not for men. Many of them saw the bodies and behaviour of stars such as Marilyn Monroe, Sophia Loren and Brigitte Bardot to be physically and socially impossible for them (Moseley 59, 76, 109-113, 124-125). Nor was Hepburn prim and perky in the mode of Doris Day. Of her contemporaries in the pantheon of stars, the elegant Grace Kelly was perhaps most like her, but I would argue Hepburn lacked Kelly’s cool sensuality and Kelly Hepburn’s elfin-like sensitivity. Hepburn was not seen as seductive, but sexual in a way that was attainable, comfortable and appropriate. She had class, style and innocence without stupidity. Unlike those of many other stars, her clothes did not cling and accentuate her breasts or hips – her femininity seemed uncluttered and understated (Moseley 59, 76, 109-113, 124-125). The waiflike Hepburn had a certain untamed wildness about her. Despite her sophistication, she was something of a tomboy. Her pixie hair cut and near androgynous figure made Hepburn almost asexual, though not unerotic. The ease of her style was compared against the more constraining, excessively feminine styles seen on many other stars. ‘The Hepburn look’, argues Moseley, offered young women a way to be boyish and active while still being, and understood by others to be, feminine (Moseley 59, 103-104, 113, 126). Copying involves an intense emotional investment, the looking and finding of oneself, or the desired self, in the ideal star (Stacey 208). By taking on her style, Hepburn’s fans constructed themselves as different. But, Moseley’s study suggest, it was a difference they felt to be within themselves rather than in their idol. Though they knew they could never be Hepburn, they felt they
could reach the kind of white femininity she embodied. Hepburn represented a way of being both different and acceptable (Moseley 78-79, 124; Haavio and Koskimies 93, 162).

“Of the World and in the World”

In *Sabrina Fair* Hepburn’s character describes to her father what she has learned in her two years in Paris, writing: “I have learned how to live, how to be of the world and in the world.” (*Sabrina Fair* 1954) This sense of finding one’s place is, in my view, central to Hepburn’s image. Transformation is an important theme in many of her films. The Cinderella-motif locates her persona into what is a traditionally feminine culture sphere. She is not a teen star, nor a child-woman, but a young woman in a transitional phase. Hepburn’s characters are on the verge of adulthood, and for them the process of growing up and shaping an identity for oneself is closely interwoven with clothes and the creation of a style. In the case of Princess Anne in *Roman Holiday* and Sabrina Fairchild in *Sabrina Fair*, for example, the acquisition of a look gives them a sense of self, a way to act and negotiate in the world. This, I think, is also what Hepburn’s admirers were doing in imitating their idol (Moseley 36-37, 61-62, 66-67, 74, 76, 92-93, 146-149).

Though the Cinderella-motif can be seen as a patriarchal device – the shaping of the woman to the man’s liking – Hepburn’s films modify the theme in a very particular way. For instance, in *Sabrina Fair* Hepburn’s character has built a strong self-esteem even before she sees what effect her new look has on her ‘Prince’, David Larrabee played by William Holden. She does not find her worth in his admiration. The realisation of one’s potential, of the future and its possibilities, is central to these Cinderella-stories (Stacey 208, 223; Moseley 134-137; *Sabrina Fair* 1954). Hepburn’s characters are curious, but not very serious about fashion. They enjoy the beauty and artistry, but deny that their worth is in this decoration.

With Givenchy, Hepburn created and perfected a look where the emphasis was on self-knowledge, on wearing what suits you (Fox 112; Wilson 127). In their transformations Hepburn’s characters become new kind of sophisticated young women. The association with cutting edge couture is important here. Other aspects of Hepburn’s style, such as her pixie haircut and flat shoes also marked her as independent and energetic. It could be argued that having one’s hair cut like hers, for example, for young women meant a breaking away from earlier generations and the more overtly feminine ideal of the time (Moseley 99-101; Haavio and Koskimies 129). Indeed, in *Roman Holiday* Hepburn herself acts as a model for this, when, as Princess Anne, she has her long hair cut short, despite the protests of the hairdresser (*Roman Holiday* 1953).

An important modification of the Cinderella-theme in Hepburn’s films is that her characters look to other women for support and admiration for their transformation, not to men. Moseley argues that it is not the dances with princes, but the “resonant moments of recognition and validation” (Moseley 137) between Hepburn and other female characters that are at the emotional core of her films (Moseley 137-138). It is also significant to note that though men are involved in their transformations, Hepburn’s Cinderellas do not in the end seem to marry their princes. The urbanity and emphasis on style in Hepburn’s films clashes with her characters’ attempts at domesticity. This is the case in *Sabrina Fair* and even more in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, released in 1961. There is an element of sacrifice in her films. What’s more, even though Hepburn’s devotion to her family was written about, these aspects of motherly femininity in her image were apparently overlooked by many of her fans (Moseley 55). As Richard Dyer has noted, Hepburn the star is about the public aspects of life (Dyer 2000c, 132).

Hepburn escaped definition. Her nationality and age were elusive. In their minimalism, Givenchy’s designs for her anticipated the fashions of the 1960’s. As the result of their transformation, Hepburn’s characters in many ways became sort of displaced persons, caught in between. The classiness of Hepburn’s style, with its mix of casual and couture, was not bound to high class social status. Indeed, combined with her Continental accent and undefined nationality, Hepburn’s style disrupted class bound stereotypes of femininity, particularly in post war Britain (Moseley 138-142, 157-158; Wilson 1993, 37, 40; Wilson and Taylor 162). I believe that in the changing western society of the 1950’s and early 1960’s, the flexibility of Hepburn’s style was one of her main attractions to young women. Even though the emphasis on looks in Hepburn’s stardom is symptomatic of a time when outward appearance was of the utmost importance, especially with women, in that culture her specific look was experienced by many as an alternative. The problems faced by her characters in their transformations resonated: the construction of a socially acceptable femininity without betrayal of self, moving up in society, negotiating the domestic and public, work and marriage (Moseley 146-155, 166). Hepburn’s films, fans and ‘doing the Hepburn look’ speak about the difficulties of women being worldly.
KENESTÄ "SUOMEN HEPBURN"
Appendix 2
Nyt valitsemme "suomen Audrey Hepburnin"!

Kuten ennakoita voinn arvijoida, muodostui suurkilpailustamme ennenaikualan menestyks. Niin vaihtava mielenkiintoa kuin mitä Audrey Hepburn-kilpailuja kohtaan yleisin tabolta on osottettu, lienee harvoin tullut jonkun kilpailun osaksi maassamme. Toimituksen puheilme on ollut monen mieltä englannin yhdyskouluissa, kännykkä on kännykkä virtaamaan tiedustelumassassa milloin mitäkin kilpailun johdosta ja kirjetteleväja saapui niin runsaat, että meillä parihaa tahdottaan ole ennättäneet vasta kaikille. Määräpaivän mennessä kertyneistä ilmoittautumisista voinn haluta vahvasti ymmärrä, mitä olisi erittäin onnistunut 117 sellaisia osanottajia, joiden katsotiloin täyttävän kilpailusäännöiden vaatimat edellytykset. Pitkämatkaisen kirje oli postitettu niin kaukaan kuin Inari asti, ja olipa toivoksetta ilmoittautumisia saapunut Rootataskun saakka. "Raati" sai aikaa liitetyn aamu merkille, että huomattava osa saapuneista kilpailuun ilmoittautumisista osoitti lähettäjien omaavan hyvää maksaa ja tervetta itseksi. Olen voinut olla määrin kuin jo 50 miljoonaa maassamme järjestelyssä samantaipaisissa kilpailuissa on ollut asiantunulta. Kilpailijat ovat yllättävän korkeasta tasosta ja tasavälyydestä joh-
Appendix 4
"Näin se"... se alkoi silloin, että IT-voitot kohtalaisesti meidän vastaavaksi. "Oli uusi" eikä pitäisi tehdä mikään tänään, minkäkin perheestä tuli. Nämä vapaana aikana, kun kaikki oli naiset sekä kodinvanhemmat ja nuoret..."
Appendix 6
Notes

1 There are several biographies of Hepburn, see for instance Walker 1994.
2 All translations from this book are mine.
3 For information on the Finnish release of Roman Holiday, see http://www.elonet.fi/title/tt66200/esitys.
4 For information on the Finnish release of Sabrina Fair, see http://www.elonet.fi/title/tt25124/esitys.
5 See appendices 1 and 2. All translations are mine.
6 See appendices 3, 1 and 2.
7 See appendices 1 and 2, appendix 4, and appendixes 5 and 6.
8 Sabrina Fair (1954)

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