

## **‘The best way I knew– through fashion’: On Personal Style Bloggers and Self-Expression.**

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### **Abstract**

The connection between personal style and self-expression has emerged as a foundational concept in early studies of personal style blogging, as consistent with the field of fashion theory in general. Yet the kinds of expression facilitated by blogs and the implications of this for style bloggers themselves has yet to be examined. The selves performed on the spaces of blogs are not only articulated through dress, but also through its documentation; selves that flow outwards in an ongoing narrative towards a readership as well as inwards as bloggers creatively think through who they feel themselves to be and how they wish to be seen. The dressed and blogged self, then, becomes a self in dialogue, a self taking shape through performance on the exploratory space of a personal style blog.

Starting from a Butlerian conception of performativity, this discussion will explore the possibilities of self-expression on style blogs, focusing in particular on the complex relationship between style bloggers, their blogged selves (or ‘blogging personae’) and their readers. The online performance of selfhood of British blogger Rosalind Jana will be constitute the central case study, demonstrating as it does the creative, intimate and alternative performances of self made possible by blogging. Jana is a blogger who employed styling and photographic angles to conceal and then reveal her severe scoliosis to her readers, later writing in a reflective blogpost that she revealed her condition in ‘the best way I knew– through fashion.’ The role that clothing played as a means through which Jana could both share her scoliosis and ensuing emergency surgery– and engage with it herself– and the response that this blogged revelation evoked from her readers demonstrates the possibilities of style blogging to represent and explore selfhood in ways precluded by offline life.

**Key Words:** Style blogging, identity, self-expression, dress, Judith Butler, performativity, Rosalind Jana.

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### **Introduction**

Personal style blogs are sites of the performance of self for their bloggers, who enact their identity through the display and discussion of their personal style for a reading public. Yet the creative and discursive possibilities inherent in this sub-genre of the fashion blogosphere have not yet been adequately explored in the growing field of literature on style blogs, despite the alternative perspectives they provide on the communicative qualities of dress. This will constitute the focus of this article, as I argue that dress is performative, a means of self-knowing and of self-creation. I will demonstrate both how this process is evident on the style blogosphere and how style blogs as a medium facilitate different kinds of ‘speaking’ through dress. Furthermore, I will engage with the oft-argued assertion that dress is self-expressive, reconceptualising what this can look like in practice, namely on the style blogosphere. This phenomenon will be discussed through a case study of one blogger in particular, Rosalind Jana. Not all bloggers are as articulate as Rosalind, nor do many share the extremity of her experience, yet she is indicative of the manner in which selfhood, dress and self-reflexivity are enmeshed and performed on the style blogosphere.

Personal style blogs are a sub-genre of fashion weblogs, an online platform for the regular publication (‘posting’) of written and visual texts, most often created and maintained by an individual working outside of the fashion media (‘bloggers’). Personal blogs are characterized by bloggers’ use of an informal and conversational tone and their individualized, ‘first-person perspective’ content. The defining feature of this sub-genre is ‘outfit posting’, in which bloggers style, photograph and upload images of their own dressed selves in a range of poses.<sup>1</sup> These may comprise of an outfit worn that day or one donned specifically for display on the blog.

As the sole publisher of their blogs, bloggers enjoy the liberty of writing particular aspects of their selves into visibility and concealing others, an editorial choice customarily framed by their blog’s focus on the nexus between fashion and their own lived experience. This allows for discussions of the personal, the embodied—or the ‘private’—an aspect of fashion rarely discussed in the mainstream fashion media. As Rocamora and Bartlett argue, fashion blogs represent a space for ‘commonplace’ conversations: ‘[they have] introduced a new type of information into fashion discourse, one nourished by the ordinary experiences and personal viewpoints of their authors.’<sup>2</sup>

Style blogging, then, is space for the public thinking through of the subjective significance of fashion and style. As content is situated within the realm of the personal, it also allows for a public thinking through of self, an exploration of aspects of experience that might not find articulation in other spheres of bloggers’ lives. Particularly notable is the way that these two themes converge: this ‘thinking through’ on a style blog is framed by the lens of a blogger’s personal style. Here, style blogs operate as a reflexive space: not just a platform for the performance of a styled self but also of a self in the process of being understood *through* style.

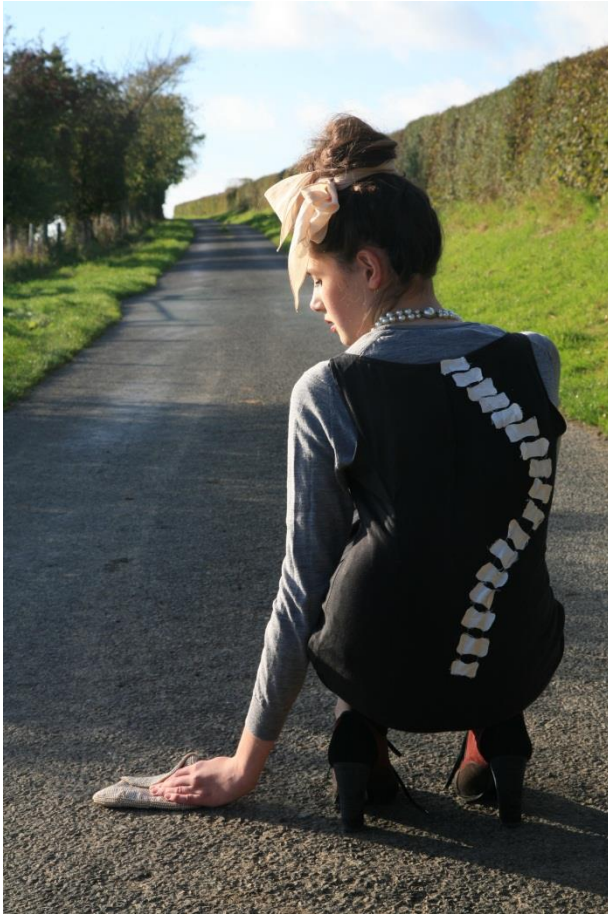
### **Rosalind and her ‘scoliodress’**

On October 17<sup>th</sup> 2010, fifteen-year-old Rosalind Jana posted on *Clothes, Cameras and Coffee*, the style blog she has kept since June 2009. Rosalind posts an average of two or three times a week, yet she described clicking the ‘publish post’ button in this particular instance as ‘nerve-wracking’.<sup>3</sup> Even a cursory glance at the blogpost, ‘Twisted Embrace’, reveals why she may have felt this way. At the centre of the post’s first image is Rosalind herself; although in this instance, she wears not one of her

vintage frocks but a short black dress from a charity shop that she has modified, and she is crouched down, a ball of girl facing away from the lens, so that at the centre of the shot is her back. And her back is precisely where the eye alights.

Her spine is mapped out by a row of silk patches in the shape of vertebrae that are stitched in a sinuous line down the dress. Yet instead of flowing straight and strong down the centre of her back, this spine curves out towards her right side in a gentle parabola. Yet it is not until you scroll down another two images that you see the significance of Rosalind's alteration to her dress. In the third photograph of the post, she stands tall in the sunlight, perpendicular to the even line of the horizon. We can now see that the central section of her back juts out on her right side, traced by the curve of her stitched spine, as if that portion of her body has been firmly pushed out of alignment to mimic a question mark.

Each image in this outfit post is carefully framed so that the warped curve of Rosalind's spine is always the focal point, surrounded by the organic lines of her environs. The series of six images has a cumulative effect of normalising the unusual shape of her back until I notice, on a closer look, that although the central seam of the dress starts between her shoulder-blades, instead of running straight down as such a seam would customarily do, it twists diagonally down her back, ending in a placket over the far side of her left thigh. I became aware at that moment of how the muscle and bone of her back were pulling in two directions, her body demanding more room than the straight tunic was able to give.



**Image 1:** An image from 'Twisted Embrace: In homage to the late Alexander McQueen.' © 2013.

Image courtesy of Rosalind Jana



**Image 2:** Another image from ‘Twisted Embrace: In homage to the late Alexander McQueen.’© 2013. Image courtesy of Rosalind Jana

In the accompanying prose, Rosalind explains what has occurred. At the end of 2009, she discovered that she had scoliosis, a condition in which the spine twists out of alignment due to uneven growth spurts as one side grows faster than the other. What was not a particularly serious condition to begin with worsened as Rosalind kept growing. As her ribs and shoulder blades became further distorted, she began experiencing intense aches and discomfort, and by the time her spine had twisted 80 degrees to the right, she ran the risk of suffering internal damage to her organs if she did not undergo emergency surgical correction. It was this eventuality that led her to write a post about her back and to create what she called the ‘scoliodress’.<sup>4</sup>

This post marked the first time Rosalind had ever made mention of her scoliosis on her blog, and despite the fact that she had regularly uploaded photographs of herself posing in her clothes, there had never appeared to be anything out of the ordinary about her back. In the post itself, she wrote that she had actively tried to “conceal the more obvious mis-shapes with careful clothing, wide belts, my long hair and good camera angles”.<sup>5</sup> In a subsequent interview, she elaborated on this, saying that for many months she was ‘in denial’ about what was happening to her body,

to some extent, if I had talked about it on my blog then it would have felt much more real to me and at that point I didn’t want it to be real [...] in some ways [it] was me actually being able to be the Roz who still had a really straight back and just enjoyed fashion and was really enjoying blogging and meeting new people and interacting with them.<sup>6</sup>

Taking shape on her blog prior to this post, then, was an alternative Rosalind, as attested by her own words written in a personal essay for *Vogue UK* two years later: ‘I draped and layered myself into an illusion of straightness’.<sup>7</sup>

Emerging here is a complex performance of self, facilitated both by the presentational possibilities of a blog and the embodied practice of dressing. In dressing into an illusion of straightness, Rosalind employed her clothing and photographs to overwrite her embodied self with a particular dressed self, the kind so often portrayed in mainstream fashion imagery: that of the healthy, slender individual engaging in the world from the threshold of her style. Yet what the scoliodress spoke into being in the space of her blog was an alternative Rosalind, one more closely aligned (as she saw it) with ‘the real’ by which she meant her offline self.<sup>8</sup>

I hesitate to employ the term ‘real’ to distinguish between what occurs offline and online: that the online is somehow less real for its occurrence on a digital realm. Rosalind’s prior dressed self on her blog, while illusory in that it concealed her scoliosis from her readers, was also ‘real’ – it was Rosalind herself dressing and photographing herself in particular poses and editing her photos to conceal the shape of her back. This was the Rosalind who her readers were encountering on her blog. It was real in another way as this illusory blogged self enabled Rosalind to distance herself from dealing with her worsening condition. In her article for *Vogue UK*, she wrote that:

I was determined to hide it, not only from my friends, peers and increasingly my model agency, but also from myself. I tried to shape it into something separate from me, hidden out of sight [...] more than wanting it better, I wanted it swept out of existence, as though it had never happened. I was irritated at any mention of my back, feeling simultaneously responsible for— and completely removed from— my condition.<sup>9</sup>

### **Style blogs as performative, reflexive spaces**

Evident here is the way that style blogs are a tool in the process of self-knowing and the exploration of possible selves. In fact, these two aspects of style blogging—the explorations of self and of personal style—are often intertwined, due to the manner in which the self is primarily performed through style on these blogs, a process shaped and facilitated by clothing. Style blogs, then, are a locus at which concepts of dress and self, identity and performativity converge. There is an overlap between style blogs and clothing here: both implicated in subjectivity, both operating with simultaneity towards the eyes of those that surround as well as inwards as the subject engages with the doing—the wearing, the blogging—and is constituted as a subject in that moment.

However, interestingly, often this complex, ambiguous reflexive process is reduced to definite statements of fact: style bloggers might claim that their style is a 'self-expression', as if they have a stable, interior, prior self that is not only identifiable but easily rendered material through their clothing.<sup>10</sup> This is an argument about the dress that has long been argued in academic work on fashion by writers from various disciplines from sociology to subcultural theory, who have sought to explain the significance of clothing in human society; that is, that clothing speaks a wearer's social identity (as wealthy, aspiring, fashionable, punk, and so on), the clothing itself imbued with social codes that are overlaid onto the wearer as indicative of their identity and that are readable by those who encounter them.<sup>11</sup> The communicative quality of clothing here is unidirectional, monologic, emanating out from a dressed self towards society.

When read this way, fashion and dress can be seen to distinguish groups of people from one another and provide a language by which clothing can be talked about as doing something: not just operating as a material covering, but also as a symbolic and communicative overlay. Yet, as Joanne Entwistle observed, there is also a homogenizing quality about this perspective: the intentions and individual selfhood of the person underneath the clothes obscured by the fixed meanings apparently encoded in their garments. The prevailing dynamic is of an individual framed in relation to what is external from them: their peers, the expectation of their society, and the fashion system of sartorial products that carry signification that people, by donning them, might embody. This is evident in Fred Davis' assertion that dress is 'a kind of visual metaphor for identity.'<sup>12</sup>

Yet how this 'identity' is actually enacted in the lives and embodied practice of being dressed is rarely discussed. While this research is valuable in articulating the negotiation of personal taste and social expectation that individuals engage in within their society, it does not adequately address all of the ways in which dress is communicative. Not only do these approaches not speak to the experience of being dressed itself—between clothing and skin—they also characterise dress as an external symbol of an already formed identity, not part of the process of its on-going formation; they concentrate on the execution rather than the creative discovery inherent in dressing. However, as Susan Kaiser suggests (after Ossi Naukkarinen), how people dress daily and make sense of their appearances is more elastic and integrative than traditional philosophy can address, that 'for some individuals style becomes a critical and creative strategy for negotiating new truths and subjectivities [...] a vehicle not only for being, but also for becoming.'<sup>13</sup>

Style blogs are a site at which this process of creative discovery both occurs and is discussed. With their writable and visual capacities, they are a space upon which styled identities are shaped and where bloggers are able to reflexively engage with the affective qualities of dress. This affectivity occurs between a wearer's corporeal self and their clothing, a vital aspect of dressing and a fundamentally embodied one that is surprisingly under-theorised in studies on fashion and identity.

### **Dressing identity into being**

To push this idea further, then: the expressive and identificatory qualities of dress do not just emanate out towards society: they also emanate inwards to the person wearing the clothes, reflexively communicating to them about their identity and being in the world. Perhaps this is discussed on the style blogosphere because it is a space that requires bloggers to articulate and perform themselves towards their readers, leading to a consideration of personal experience. Fashion here is not just the representation of a prior knowledge of one's identity, then, but also the process of that identity coming to be known, both for readers and for bloggers themselves.

'Identity' as I here employ the concept is founded on Judith Butler's work on performativity, in which she argues that our gendered identity is an aspect of ourselves that constantly comes to be through the 'repetition of stylised acts', taking shape in the iterative moment of being performed.<sup>14</sup> This is a process that is informed by societal expectation of gender normativity but also mutable, negotiated by individuals as they transgress or reinterpret gender through their own performative behaviour. As she argues, one's gender— and more broadly, one's identity— is thus not prior, innate or fixed, but a phenomenon that is constituted by a sustained repetition of behavioural acts. Likewise, our dressed identity, or our 'personal style', is ever becoming through the intimate and everyday process of donning certain clothing, and as a corollary, in performing that dressed self for a reading public through outfit posts. Identity is therefore a *process*, which problematises the connotations of unidirectional communication implied by the statement that 'dress is a self-expression.'

Yet more intriguing is to consider the ways in which our dress can be a part of the process of self-knowing, an articulation of what would otherwise be inarticulable. This is a complex, embodied interrelation between an individual's self and the clothes that they wear, a performative process evident throughout the style blogosphere. An example of this is a post published by British blogger Susie Bubble in 2007, in which she described that her style was a means of speaking back to her own perceived ugliness,

[i]n some ways, I think [my love of fashion] might have helped me escape into a world where I could fool myself into thinking that as long as I clothed myself in beauty [...] what my face looked like might not matter so much [...]

I'm deeply passionate and act on whimsy and desire with my style yet probably the one thing holding me back is my ability to be 100% comfortable in my own skin. To illustrate, whilst I have no shame about photographing my outfits in all their various mishapen (*sic*) stages and developments, the camera stays firmly over my face. It's an open invite to view my love of fashion and how I express that in my style but I'm also saying "Look at the outfit.... not the face..."<sup>15</sup>

For Susie, like Rosalind, clothing was a means of creating an illusory self to conceal her discomfort with her embodied self. Here we see Susie in dialogue with her clothes, as she dresses with passion and whimsy and yet is 'held back' by her inability to feel comfortable in her own skin. Her eclectic style then helps her feel more beautiful while also standing in contrast to what she sees as not beautiful— her face. Clothing here acts as the intermediary between Susie as she feels herself to be and Susie as she wants to be, the tension between these two states played out at the surface of her skin.

Furthermore, as with Rosalind, Susie's blog acts as the space for the articulation— and the thinking through— of this dynamic. These kinds of intimate discussions of personal experience, particularly in regard to clothing and feelings about themselves, is made possible by the unwritten spaces of blogs, which offer bloggers, the majority of whom are girls and young women, a means of speaking publicly about their lived experience. To return to a consideration of Rosalind, making the scoliodress enabled her to think through her scoliosis and reconcile her towards her operation. She later wrote that when she was told that she would have to undergo surgery, 'aside from all the obvious questions— such as, 'How much pain will I be in?'— I wondered how I would introduce the issue on my blog, as it was now unavoidable. In the end, I did it in the best way I knew— through fashion.'<sup>16</sup>

The dress literally rendered Rosalind's scoliosis visible, metaphorically turning her embodied self inside out to display her difference. Entwistle's assertion that clothing can become like a second skin is pushed further by this example, in which the distinction between clothing and embodied self blurs as the dress operates as exoskeleton, rewriting Rosalind's embodied self into fabric while being the means by which she is able to identify and articulate her situation for her readership.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, for Rosalind, this particular moment of dressing— and appearing dressed for her readers— was, in her words, 'cathartic', as she— again, in her own words— 'express[ed] it in a way that felt real for [her.]'<sup>18</sup>

Clothing, then, was the interface at which Rosalind could engage with her scoliosis, holding it at a distance before aligning it with her self-perception in a way that she was comfortable with. Here we see dress not just a means of aesthetically performing an identity, but as the means through which that identity is experienced. Dress, then, is implicit in the process of *becoming*, a complex, embodied interrelation between an individual's embodied self, the clothes that they wear and their articulation of narratives of self.

## Conclusion

The interplay between blogger and style demonstrates that there is a more complex dynamic at work on style blogs and in dressing than simply 'self-expression'. Rather, blogs make available a space for different discussions about fashion and style, ones that are firmly emplaced within the personal experience of a blogger and, as such, often reflect the process by which bloggers engage with themselves through fashion and style. As I have argued, this process is performative, an ongoing dialogue between fabric and sentient self as bloggers explore ways of being in the world in ways that feel necessary and true to them through the threshold of their dress.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Agnès Rocamora and Djurdja Bartlett, "Fashion Blogs: New Spaces in Fashion Discourse", in *Sociétés* 104(2) (2009): 105-114 and Rosie Findlay, "At One Remove From Reality: Style Bloggers and Outfit Posts", in *The Australasian Journal of Popular Culture* 1(2) (2011): 195-206.

<sup>2</sup> Agnès Rocamora and Djurdja Bartlett, "Fashion Blogs: New Spaces in Fashion Discourse", in *Sociétés* 104(2) 2009: 108.

<sup>3</sup> Rosalind Jana, in interview with the author, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Rosalind Jana, "Twisted Embrace- In homage to the late Alexander McQueen", on *Clothes, Cameras and Coffee*, last modified on 17 October 2010, viewed 1 July 2013, < <http://clothescamerasandcoffee.blogspot.com.au/2010/10/twisted-embrace-in-homage-to-late.html>>.

<sup>5</sup> Jana, "Twisted Embrace", 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Jana, interview with author, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Rosalind Jana, "Twist of Fate", *Vogue* UK (March 2013), 222.

<sup>8</sup> Jana, interview with author, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Jana, "Twist of Fate", 222.

<sup>10</sup> For examples of this, see Susie Bubble, "Frequently Asked Questions", *Style Bubble*, accessed 25 September 2013, [http://www.stylebubble.co.uk/style\\_bubble/faq.html](http://www.stylebubble.co.uk/style_bubble/faq.html); Amy Peachy, "Fashion: My form of self expression", *Peachy Life, Fashion Inspirations*, last modified 3 January 2013, accessed 25 September 2013, <http://peachylifefashion.wordpress.com/2013/01/03/fashion-my-form-of-self-expression/>; Eva Domijan, "Something Is Rotten

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<sup>11</sup> See Joanne Entwistle and Elizabeth Wilson’s introduction to *Body Dressing* (2001) for an excellent overview of the different theoretical approaches in this vein– namely, by Veblen, Simmel, Barthes and subcultural theorists such as Hebdige and Hall.

<sup>12</sup> Fred Davis, *Fashion, Culture, and Identity*, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 25.

<sup>13</sup> Susan Kaiser, “Minding Appearances: Style, Truth and Subjectivity”, *Body Dressing* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2001), 83.

<sup>14</sup> See Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory”, *Theatre Journal* 40 (4) (1988), 519-531.

<sup>15</sup> Susie Bubble, “Look At Me, Don’t Look At Me”, *Style Bubble*, last modified on 14 August 2007, viewed 1 July 2013, <[http://www.stylebubble.co.uk/style\\_bubble/2007/08/look-at-me-dont.html](http://www.stylebubble.co.uk/style_bubble/2007/08/look-at-me-dont.html)>.

<sup>16</sup> Rosalind Jana, “Blogging Against Adversity”, *Independent Fashion Bloggers*, last modified April 27 2011, accessed 1 July 2013, < <http://heartifb.com/2011/04/27/blogging-against-adversity/>>.

<sup>17</sup> See Joanne Entwistle, “Fashion and the Fleishy Body: Dress as Embodied Practice”, *Fashion Theory* 4(3) (2000), 334.

<sup>18</sup> Jana, interview with author, 2011.

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