

Lift the Multiple Veils on Genders Roles in Blue Velvet

Shuxuan Zhou

¹Tunghai University, No.1727, Sec.4, Taiwan Boulevard, Xitun District, Taichung 40704, Taiwan
R.O.C.

*Corresponding email: s08221601@thu.edu.tw

Abstract: This essay aims to illustrate how gender performativity exhibits gender roles in David Lynch's movie *Blue Velvet*. This essay brings about the collapse of the stereotyped traditional binary opposition of gender roles. Gender roles rely on the performance of people. However, people's performances are restricted by society, which has various possibilities. Based on *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution* (1988) by Judith Butler, this paper analyzes four protagonists' various gender performances in *Blue Velvet*. By going deeper into the psychoanalysis of protagonists and analyzing their behavior choices, this essay argues that Lynch intends to inform his viewers that there is no fixed gender role even in one single person. Through exhibiting the diversity of gender roles, various social environments are presented. David Lynch believes that once people's gender roles become peaceful, the social environment can also exhibit a peaceful and mild image. This finding contributes to the subversion of gender roles in *Blue Velvet*.

Keywords: *Blue Velvet*; David Lynch; Judith Butler; Gender performances; Gender roles.

1. Introduction

In the field of gender roles, David Lynch's film *Blue Velvet* addressed the ambiguity of people's inner selves and genders through a variety of performances. *Blue Velvet* mainly contains two males: Jeffery and Frank, and two females: Dorothy and Sandy. Although biologically their sex was divided into two parts: male and female, different historical situations can make different "genders". In turn, different performances were presented. By illustrating their irrational performances, Lynch demonstrated the erratic gender trouble in a postmodern way. In the field of gender performativity, Judith Butler (1956) is one of the representatives of gender theorists. Butler's best-known *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution* (1988), in which challenged conventional notions of gender and developed the theory of how gender performances become the key to gender itself.

Scholars have created different concepts of sex and gender. Most of the studies were focused on two aspects: First, illustrating sexual orientation reflected in Judith Butler's work [1]. Second, exploring dimensions of gender identity disorders [2]. However, "Can one person show diverse gender roles?" has rarely been discussed. This research constitutes a relatively new area that has emerged from gender roles. Gender roles are influenced by the circumstances people stay in, which can not be determined by sex simply. Thus, this essay will draw on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity to argue the diversity of gender roles in *Blue Velvet*.

In order to analyze Judith Butler's "*Performative Acts and Gender Constitution*", this essay includes two relevant sections. The first section is about the subversion of the gender roles of Jeffery

Beaumont (Kyle MacLachlan) and Frank Booth (Dennis Hopper). By illustrating the scenes they stay in, their acts channel their inner gender roles. Furthermore, by analyzing the gender relations between Frank and Jeffery, this section will describe the uncertainty that gender roles show in two men. The second section is focused on the different treatments that Dorothy (Isabella Rossellini) and Sandy (Laura Dern) receive, as both women. Dorothy has two gender roles: an active male gender role (tough), and a passive female gender role (an object of sexual desire under the “Male gaze” [3]). However Sandy contains the potential mother gender role and a loving girlfriend gender role that Jeffery turns to. This section will show why different performances can receive different gender treatments.

2. Subversion of Gender Roles of Jeffery and Frank:

In Butler’s theory, continuous social performances shape gender reality. Thus, through the continuous outside stimuli that Jeffery and Frank have received respectively, their subversion of gender roles has been shaped differently. By making the sense of unreal beauty immediately collapse, and the mystery and grotesqueness take their place in the eyes. Lynch breaks away from the slightly monolithic, overly rosy scenery of Hollywood films, which are no longer just the mainstream of talented scholars and lovely ladies or individualistic heroism.

2.1. By Presenting Jeffery’s Initiative and Passive Performance, His Gender Roles are Divided into two Figures: The Boyish Gender Role and the Patriarchal Male Gender Role

Jeffery Beaumont (Kyle MacLachlan), as the male protagonist with a decent look, who had been seeking clues to a terrible case that was not even relevant to him, has two completely different gender roles. He seems to be simple, firm, and righteous. However, has been seeking some unstable gender roles inside. Jeffery needs a way to communicate with his subconscious gender. In terms, gender embodies a special institution, as Butler claims: “Gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self [4].” Thus, Jeffery’s stylization of his bodily interactions with Frank, Dorothy, and Sandy, shows his exploration of himself.



Figure 1: (00:42:05) [5].

Firstly, Jeffery’s boyish gender role includes three figures: Hot-blooded youth, obedient child, and helpless boy. When Jeffery explained his plan to have Sandy accompany him as they broke into Dorothy’s house, Sandy thinks it looks like a daydream, but it's so weird and dangerous. As opposed to this, Jeffery declares that they are going to try it first, and nobody will suspect them because they won't think there are two people in the world who are that crazy. The most insane people can act the most normal, and the most dangerous places are also the safest places. It is certainly ignorant and fearless to overturn the dichotomy and treat danger as an ordinary thing as a hot-blooded youth. When

Frank visits Dorothy, Dorothy drove Jeffery back to the closet to hide from Frank. When facing unknown dangers, Jeffery complied with her like an obedient child, as figure 1 shows [5] (00:42:05).

Like he unloaded to Sandy after all: “I’m seeing something that was always hidden. I’m involved in a mystery, I’m in the middle of a mystery and it’s all secret. [5] (01:05:26)” This unload happens after he peeped through Dorothy’s closet chinks, as figure 2 shows [5] (00:35:15). Jeffery saw Frank abusing Dorothy during sex. Jeffery is alluding to an underworld that involves extortion, corruption, psychopathy, sado-masochism, and kidnapping. He is also referring to Frank, a brutal, crazy, and horrifyingly cruel killer. Nevertheless, it wasn’t only a narration of Jeffery’s discovery of his situation, but also a feeling towards the position of Jeffery himself. When Jeffery was hidden in a closet, it seems like he was hidden from a brutal family, from something he couldn’t even believe himself—his helpless boy gender. After he was done watching and got out of the shelter closet, he is confronting his helpless boyish gender role. Lynch is using double interpretations to form Jeffery’s inside mind and outside scenarios at the same time. Lynch’s scene settings and intentions are not singular, just like his protagonist’s gender roles.



Figure 2: (00:35:15) [5].

Secondly, Jeffery’s patriarchal male gender role depicts violence and arbitrary. Under Dorothy's constant requests, Jeffery's reaction ranges from physically refusing to be violent towards Dorothy, to not hitting her voluntarily at first, and finally to not being able to resist absorbing the feeling of sexual abuse in his dreams. The transformation is from a male who held fast to the idea of not harming women and not abusing women in any circumstance to a male who abuses women during sex. Sigmund Freud called this defense mechanism “reverse formation” [6], that is, when people do not accept certain impulses and desires, they will stand against them, to avoid internal conflict and external threats. For Jeffery, the desire for sexual abuse may also be hidden deep inside him, which contradicts his moral boundaries.

2.2. By Presenting Frank’s Bodily Interactions with Dorothy and Jeffery, his Gender Roles are Divided into two Figures: the Empathy Gender Role and the Patriarchal Male Gender Role.

Frank Booth (Dennis Hopper), a most extreme sexual psychopath. Frank has an empathy gender role when he is performing sympathetic action. Frank burst into tears while Dorothy the singer sang the song Blue Velvet, he treasured her in this scene, and he showed mildness and strong empathy. Also Frank, however, threatened and roughed up Jeffery when he discovered that Jeffery was also interested in Dorothy. He used force and patriarchy to control Dorothy at the beginning of the film, even chopping off her husband's ear. These performances of him are very much irrational and unstable. By illustrating these irrational acts, Lynch presents Frank’s erratic gender trouble in a postmodern way.

Frank’s patriarchal male gender role contains dirty words, assault, and apathy. There is a scene

when Frank visited Dorothy, it happened after Dorothy found out Jeffery hid in her closet and drove Jeffery back to the closet to hide from Frank. Dorothy greeted Frank: “Hello, baby. [5] (00:42:34)” However Frank answered in a rude tone: “Shut up, it’s dad, you shit head, where is my bourbon? [5] (00:42:38)” His figure presents a macho look, bossing his wife around the house, an unreasonable husband. After Frank abused Dorothy, he seemed to regain his usual state, and said to Dorothy in a cruel tone: “You are still alive. [5] (00:47:18)” Then he opened the door and left, leaving Dorothy lying on the floor alone. According to psychoanalyst Maria Ponsi, people who act on their inner impulses are also indifferent and unconcerned about the consequences of their impulsive behavior for themselves and others. When they act, they act before they think, or they do not think at all. For Frank, his action replaces his thinking, behavior, and language expression, and fully expresses his patriarchal male gender role. Enactment is also a concept derived from psychoanalysis and refers to the “realization” or “acting out” of unconscious fantasies. In contrast to the simple act of seeing, enactment is more often found in the interaction between two people in a relationship. According to classical psychoanalytic theory, Frank’s patriarchal enactments are manifested as a series of his intense, unconscious emotions, feelings, and behaviors that are essential “a conspiracy of empathy and counter-empathy” [7].

2.3. Different Circumstances’ Behavioral Relationships Place Frank and Jeffery in Different Gender Roles.

Firstly, Jeffery is the genderless child, Frank is the patriarchal father. Jeffery’s acts are milder, mostly scattered in tracing, peeping, and hiding, which are more innocent and childish than Frank’s furious rage. Thus, when Frank is having sex with Dorothy: “Don’t you fucking look at me” [5] (00:45:35), Frank commands Dorothy after instructing her to open her legs. He watches her while lounging on the sofa [5] (00:43:14). Frank is more like an image of a patriarchal, parental figure, which is the father. This statement makes Dorothy the mother. In the scene when Frank got out of the car and crucifies Jeffery, Frank made Jeffery rub his muscles -- It is like a stern father giving his son a lecture. Dorothy (mother) tries to dissuade Frank in the car, where an absurdist singer dances. It is just like a scene reminiscent of domestic violence in a child’s room.

Secondly, Jeffery is the male-gendered son, as well as Frank. Jeffery’s obedient child and helpless boyish gender role have been described upfront. As for Frank, when Jeffery is inhabiting the shadow of a closet, Frank is trying to get back to a mother’s womb. After taking a sip of wine, Frank puts on his mask and inhales. While inhaling, he goes into another state, a state that appears to be a baby figure, mumbling: “Mommy [5] (00:44:20)” and shakily repeating it, to which D replies: “Mommy loves you.” As figure 3 shows [5] (00:44:35). “Baby wants to fuck” [5] (00:44:38), says Frank. Expressing his primal sexual desire, Frank puts himself back to his babyhood, as a male-gendered son. On the other hand, Frank has been shifted on and on to: “Don’t you fucking look at me!” This has been constantly repeated over and over again [5] (00:45:35-00:46:50). Frank doesn’t want his immature desires—the needs of a child’s sexual love for his mother—to be discovered. He kneels down while gazing at Dorothy’s intimate area and pretends to be inside her womb. Although he does not want to be discovered, Frank is unable to take his eyes away because he is too powerful to be restrained. The paradoxical emotion Frank is attempting to escape is likewise represented by his actions. “Baby wants blue velvet”, Frank asked, and Dorothy puts a piece of blue velvet into Frank’s mouth [5] (00:45:10). Frank begins wooing [5] (00:45:17), which sounds like a baby indeed. The wooing and the panting have mixed together, as Frank’s unstable gender roles.



Figure 3: (00:44:35) [5].

3. Dorothy and Sandy Receive Different Treatments Due to the Different Social Scenarios, thus Different Actions they Perform Make Various Gender Roles.

Dorothy (Isabella Rossellini), the stereotypical masochist and a poor, crazy woman. Dorothy has two gender roles. Dorothy's passive female gender role has taken a big part in her performances. Sandy (Laura Dern) The feminine gendered role of Sandy (Laura Dern) reflects the cohesive character of the "American sweetheart." Sandy is a sweet and kind young woman with a lovely figure who grew up in a happy home. As a result of this setting, Sandy has developed her gender role of a caring, loving mother and girlfriend.

3.1. Dorothy's Active Male Gender Role is Aggressive and her Passive Female Gender Role is Helpless.

Firstly, Dorothy's active male gender role is aggressive. "No way, I want to see you get to undress!" then asking sex from Jeffery at knifepoint, like a fierce rapist, as figure 4 shows [5] (00:39:35). Making demand has nothing to do with gender, however considering an estimated 91% of victims of rape & sexual assault are female and 9% male. Nearly 99% of perpetrators are male [8]. The rape Dorothy asks for is beyond the female's traditional figure of being meek and forgiving.



Figure 4: (00:39:35) [5].

Secondly, Dorothy's passive female gender role. The formality of Dorothy's passive female gender role has been compelled by society. Dorothy has been displayed as an object of sexual desire. "Woman as Image, Man as Bearer of the look" [3]. There is a scene when Jeffrey lurks into Dorothy's home to spy on her and caught her undressing. From the traditional psychoanalysis, this section is a typical male projection: the voyeur is male (active, watch), and the voyeur is female (passive, be watched). Jeffrey's eyes are also delivered to the viewer's eyes, and whether the audience is male or female, they are forced to obtain the pleasure of voyeurism of women from the male role. Under a "Male gaze" [3] that is a male voyeuristic pleasure. The coining of the term "Male gaze" is a particularly

influential and compelling theory. The idea is that straight directors “fetishize and idealize women in film through fragmentation, costuming, or any other means possible” [9]. Dorothy as a woman has been in a state of oppression in the movie.

Dorothy’s physical and verbal expressions are characteristic of female passivity. After she has threatened Jeffery at knifepoint, she then asks Jeffery to stand up, and after he stands up Dorothy kneels down. To this position, it is an appearance of high status for men, and low status for women. Dorothy’s masochistic tendency has surfaced at this point. Dorothy then asks Jeffery to come closer: “What do you want?” as figure 5 shows [5] (00:40:43). Jeffery answers: “I don’t know.” Dorothy pulls down Jeffery’s bottom, then asks softly: “Don’t move, don’t look at me. [5] (00:45:59)” Jeffery just touches her shoulder and she suddenly turns to a vicious face: “Don’t touch me, or I’ll kill you! [5] (00:41:17)” After a while, she asks in the same soft tone as before: “Do you like that I say that? [5] (00:41:21)” Obviously, Frank’s fierce behavior has influenced her deeply. However, she has no hostility towards Jeffery. At this point, she just turns into a mimic figure that yields to Frank’s patriarchal male gender role. In order to accomplish certain goals, people may mask their emotions and respond to external stimuli with a particular role. For instance, Dorothy pretends to smile to make Frank pleased while harboring masochistic inclinations. “Instrumental emotion reactions” is another name for these intentional, fake emotional responses [10]. Constructed from prior experiences, instrumental emotional responses might be conscious or unconscious just like the unstable gender roles Dorothy shows.



Figure 5: (00:40:43) [5].

Dorothy’s helpless performance is a characteristic of female passivity. After Frank abuses Dorothy, Jeffery comes out of the closet and helps Dorothy to get up from the floor. Dorothy is very helpless and asks the question again, however grudgingly: “What do you want.” Jeffery says: “Nothing. [5] (00:48:19)” Dorothy claims: “I’m scared. [5] (00:48:45)” Looking at each other, Dorothy asks Jeffery: “Do you like me? [5](00:49:09)” Jeffery says yes. By asking Jeffery a serious question and getting the same positive answer, Dorothy has emerged into the habit that Frank has used to treat her. She asks Jeffery: “Do you like holding me?” and “See my breasts? You can feel it. [5] (00:49:42)” She says her nipples are hard and asks Jeffery to touch them [5](00:49:54). Like a mother who coaxes her child, but lewd. She is confused, however trying to please him anyway. Dorothy closes her eyes and asks: “Do you like the way I feel? [5] (00:50:05)” Jeffery says yes. Dorothy then asks: “Feel me. Hit me. [5] (00:50:19)” She puts forward a masochistic request. Jeffery firmly refuses, she cries and asks him to hit her. Having been treated rudely by Frank, she somehow has formed a habit of masochistic need. Like Butler claimed: “Gender is an act, broadly construed, which constructs the social fiction of its psychological interiority.” and “gender is only socially compelled and in no sense ontologically necessitated.” Having been socially compelled by Frank’s abuse, Dorothy has transformed from a healthy family’s wife to a crazy masochistic.

Dorothy has pinned her hope on a male (Jeffery) she has just met a few days before, just because Jeffery is submissive to her. This causes her feminine passivity to be magnified in reverse. The second

time Jeffery comes to her, Dorothy asks: “You think I’m crazy, don’t you? I want you to stay. Don’t hate me. [5] (01:10:14)” It is an action from a female who lacks love. Jeffery said he doesn't hate her at all. Dorothy says: “I’m not crazy. I know the difference between right and wrong. [5] (01:10:23)” She is not crazy before enduring from Frank, she is once a common wife and mother indeed, and she does remember being normal. She says to Jeffery: “You are my special friend. [5] (01:10:29)” “It helps me, I need you. [5] (01:10:40)” This sense of need for him will help Dorothy to get through her life. The help that she needs is to have trust in her mind so that she can endure the mental torture Frank sends. In this scene, Dorothy and Jeffery are like a couple who has just gotten together, as Jeffery says: “I will call you. [5] (01:10:44)” Dorothy asks: “Soon? [5] (01:10:49)” At this point, their intimate manners are caught by Frank. Frank shouts directly to Dorothy: “Hey! Who is this fuck? [5] (01:11:04)” She quickly explains that Jeffery is her friend who lives in the neighborhood and they are just chatting. She has made up an excuse to let Jeffery stay out of trouble. Dorothy tries to interject that Jeffery is a nice guy, and Frank scolds her to shut up. When Frank is showing his fatherly figure, Dorothy is the female without a voice. At the end of the movie, Dorothy reunited with her son and they played happily on the lawn, just like a normal mother did. David Lynch presents that once people’s gender roles become peaceful, the social environment also exhibits a peaceful and mild image. This also highlights the turmoil of Dorothy’s gender roles in a turbulent and dark situation.

3.2. Sandy Contains the Potential Mother Gender Role that Tolerances Jeffery and a Loving Girlfriend Gender Role that Understands Jeffery.

Sandy (Laura Dern)’s female-gendered role fits the “American sweetie” unified figure, which gives Jeffery a sense of security. By being a nice and warmhearted girl, she is the only one who truly understands Jeffery. She needs to be protected by men, as a potential girlfriend. The reason why Jeffery talks to Sandy each time he finds something isn’t just for Sandy the daughter of a policeman, but Sandy’s nice, loving female gender role as a girlfriend. In her outfit, compared to Dorothy’s dark and sexy style, Sandy always wears pink and light colors. From her well-spoken conversations, she is full of hope and making a positive impact on Jeffery.

However, Sandy is also a potential mother that Jeffery turns to. She provides him love, trust, and tolerance. After Jeffery talks with the detective, he seems ready to let go of the whole case. Sandy emerges from the darkness in a pink dress and points out to Jeffery where Dorothy’s apartment is located. She seems to have given Jeffery the motivation to move forward and explore again. With this tone of her patient, encouraging performances, Sandy is shaped into a loving mother gender role. When a person is a baby, we consider a mother to be a “good mother” if she responds to the child's needs, for example, by nursing when the baby is hungry. When she fails to respond to our needs, we think of her as a “bad mother” [11]. Sandy’s “good mother” image responds to Jeffery’s needs repeatedly and promptly, so that this good experience is repeated over and over again, and gradually Jeffery’s mind comes to possess a “good mother” image, that is the “good inner object”.

This good relationship gives Jeffery a “sufficiency of living” [12]. When no one can give Jeffery companionship, comfort, or affirmation. Sandy does. The presence of a “good inner object and a good relationship” give Jeffery the positive response he needs. For example, when Jeffery asks her desperately like a hopeless child: “Why are there people like Frank? Why is there so much trouble in this world? [5] (00:55:52)” Sandy makes her speech about her dream of the robin, as figure 6 shows: There is no robin, so their world has turned gloomy. The darkness lingers for a very long period, and the robins stood for love. Thousands of robins are suddenly freed; with them, they have brought the blinding light of love. As if only love could fix anything. There will be problems up until the robins arrive [5] (00:57:17). Jeffery responds to Sandy by grinning. The sound of the approaching dawn serves as the soundtrack.



Figure 6: (00:57:17) [5].

4. Conclusion

In summary, this paper argued that even one person can have multiple gender roles. According to the existing scenes of *Blue Velvet*, each character's performance shows at least two gender roles in different contexts. Jeffery and Frank's subversion of gender roles is related to their individual life experiences. Dorothy and Sandy are treated differently because of their varied social performances. These four protagonists result in similar or different gender roles uniquely.

People's gender roles are susceptible to their behavior choices. It follows that gender is not a fact, it is an act that relies on the circumstances people encounter. It has multiple exhibitions and it exists when it is performed under certain scenarios. The gendered body performs its function in a limited corporeal space, enacting interpretations within the limits of pre-existing directions. By going deeper, the exploration of the four protagonists' psychoanalysis strengthens the case for identifying various gender roles in each person.

This argument helps me to conclude that people identify with each other due to the idea of what their behavior means to be in certain scenarios, which change from scene to scene. David Lynch presents that once people's gender roles become peaceful, the social environment also exhibits a peaceful and mild image. This also highlights the turmoil of characters' gender roles in a turbulent and dark situation. This essay intended to contribute to the subject of gender roles by applying how gender reality is refashioned in Judith Butler's essay, even in works that are traditionally seen as rebellious. Gender roles are explored in David Lynch's movie *Blue Velvet* as a symptom of the intricacies and persistence of dominant cultural myths.

References:

- [1] Slobodan Golubović (2021) 'Gender and Name: Towards Thinking of the Possible in the Work of Judith Butler and Sylvain Lazarus', *Genero*, (25), pp. 87–105. doi:10.5937/genero2125087G.
- [2] Anton V. Dyachenko et al. (2021) 'Gender Identity Disorders: Current Medical and Social Paradigm and the ICD-11 Innovations', *Consortium Psychiatricum*, 2(2), pp. 54–64. doi:10.17816/CP68.
- [3] Laura, Mulvey. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" 1975.
- [4] Judith Butler. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (Dec. 1988), pp. 519-531. The Johns Hopkins University Press <http://www.istor.org/stable/3207893>
- [5] David Lynch. *Blue Velvet*. (1986)
- [6] Sigmund Freud. "Three Essays on Sexuality."
- [7] Ponsi, Maria. (2012). The evolution of psychoanalytic thought: Acting out and enactment. *Rivista di psicoanalisi*. 58. 653-670.
- [8] U.S. Dept. of Justice, *Violence Against Women Report*, 2002. <https://stoprape.humboldt.edu/statistics#1>
- [9] Cameron, Smith. "Voyeurism and embracing The Male Gaze – *Blue Velvet* (1986)"

<https://theoverlookedfilmblog.wordpress.com/2020/07/13/voyeurism-and-embracing-the-male-gaze-blue-velvet-1986/>.

- [10] Elliott, R. (2010). *Learning emotion-focused therapy: the process-experiential approach to change*. Washington: American Psychological Association.
- [11] Klein, M. (1935). A contribution to the psychogenesis of manic-depressive states. *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 16, 145–174.
- [12] Donald W. Winnicott (1958). "The capacity to be alone." DOI:10.1093/med:psych/9780190271374.003.0060.