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Representing Ballet, Strength, and Identity in Pretty Lethal (2026)

Nova Indriani, M Afifulloh
Faculty of Social and Political Science, Universitas Bangka Belitung, Bangka, Indonesia
E-mail: vanova1319@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT
Research on ballet has concentrated on the bodies and identities of real dancers, while studies using Stuart Hall's theory of representation have not examined how a fiction film shifts the meaning of a cultural practice such as ballet..This study aims to analyse how the film Pretty Lethal (2026) represents the shift in the meaning of ballet from delicacy to strength and how that representation contributes to the construction of ballerina identity. The study uses a qualitative approach with textual analysis based on Stuart Hall's constructionist approach. Six data units consisting of dialogue and events were purposively selected from the film as representative examples, using four criteria: relevance to the study's themes, the presence of a verbal or visual sign, distinctiveness, and a traceable timestamp. Each unit was analysed through the same five stages, from sign, concept, cultural code and constructed meaning to representation, and the interpretations were checked against the scene context. The film does not remove the image of ballet's beauty but constructs it together with strength, pain, endurance, discipline, teamwork and survival. The ballerina is built as an identity formed through bodily experience, loss and the commitment to keep dancing. By tracing how ballet as a practice, rather than as the experience of real dancers, acquires new meaning inside a fiction film, this study offers a Hall-based reading that is relevant to representation, film, cultural and dance studies.

Corresponding Author:
Nova Indriani
Faculty of Social and Political Science, Universitas Bangka Belitung, Bangka, Indonesia
E-mail: vanova1319@gmail.com

1. Introduction

Films serve as spaces where ideas about women, the body, and capabilities are both shaped and debated. Dialogue, costumes, body movements, and plotlines construct a narrative that not only reflects reality but also helps determine how audiences understand that reality (Hall, 1997). Prysthon (2016) demonstrates that Stuart Hall's ideas regarding identity, difference, and stereotypes influence both how films are interpreted and how they are produced, particularly in works that highlight groups that have long been positioned as "the other." The female body serves as a crucial arena of meaning in this debate, as it can be trapped within narrow stereotypes yet also used to challenge those very stereotypes.

Ballet holds a unique position in this debate. On the surface, ballet is synonymous with grace, softness, and slender, seemingly weightless bodies; behind this image, however, its training demands strict bodily control, endurance against pain, and long hours of practice. A mixed-methods study of female ballet dancers in Brazil found that the dancers followed various strict diets and were satisfied with their bodies in everyday life, yet dissatisfied when evaluating themselves in the context of classical ballet (Santo André et al., 2022). Findings among adolescent dancers in the United States align with this: nearly 80% of respondents reported restricting their food intake in the past year, and the stronger a person's identity as a

ballet dancer, the smaller the ideal body size they desired (Ohashi et al., 2023). Both studies indicate that the delicate image of ballet goes hand in hand with real physical pressures.

To examine how such an image is formed, Stuart Hall's theory of representation offers a relevant framework. Hall views meaning as the result of production through language and signs, not as something inherent in objects or images (Hall, 1997). This framework has been used to analyse dancers' bodies and culture across various media. Baker and Navas (2022) employ Hall's concept of stereotypes to examine Josephine Baker and Mercedes Baptista, two Black female dancers who transformed the stereotypes attached to their bodies into a means of controlling their own self-image on stage. On the other hand, Prysthon (2016) explains "transcoding" a strategy of taking existing meanings and giving them new ones so that stereotypes can be used against themselves.

These studies follow paths that have yet to intersect. Research on ballet begins with the dancers' real-life experiences, so the pressure on the body is discussed in terms of body image and eating behaviors. Lindner (2011) analyzes female dancers in dance films through a feminist critique of the gaze and bodily experience, and finds that the physical strength briefly evident in rehearsal scenes tends to be toned down into spectacle during the final performance. Gibson (2023) demonstrates that popular fiction has long used ballet to portray women's hard work and agency, but the source material consists of the British girls' magazine Girl, published from 1952 to 1960. Meanwhile, research grounded in Hall's theory examines Baker and Baptista's stage work or Javanese culture in horror films, not ballet. Among the studies reviewed here, none have employed Hall's representational framework to examine how a contemporary fictional film shifts the meaning of ballet from gentleness toward strength and resilience, nor how that shift helps shape the ballerina's identity. The question thus shifts from what the dancer's body experiences to how the film constructs meaning around that body.

Pretty Lethal (2026) serves as an intriguing convergence point for these lines of inquiry, as the discipline and endurance in the face of pain which, in studies of the dancer's body, emerge as a burden are instead employed by this film as weapons for survival. The subject of this study is Pretty Lethal (2026), a film directed by Vicky Jewson and written by Kate Freund (Jewson, 2026). Five young ballerinas are portrayed by Maddie Ziegler as Bones, Lana Condor as Princess, Iris Apatow as Zoe, Avantika as Grace, and Millicent Simmonds as Chloe, while Uma Thurman plays Devora Kasimer. According to the official synopsis on Prime Video, the film tells the story of five young ballerinas from Los Angeles whose bus breaks down in a remote forest while en route to an international dance competition in Budapest. They take shelter at a roadside inn owned by Devora Kasimer, a former prima ballerina, and later find themselves facing a gang of criminals, forcing them to rely on the discipline and physical endurance they've gained from ballet training to survive. With this plot, ballet is taken off the stage and into a situation that demands strength and survival skills. The terms "dancer" and "ballerina" are also associated with warriors, pain, discipline, strength, teamwork, and survival. The line "Inside every ballerina's heart, is the blood of a warrior" early in the film explicitly links the identity of a ballerina to that of a warrior. Such a connection between a sign and a concept is not natural but is constructed through codes and practices of signification (Hall, 1997).

The shift in ballet's connotations from softness toward strength and symbols of survival is worth analysing from three perspectives simultaneously. From a linguistic standpoint, the meaning of ballet is shaped through word choices and dialogue when "ballerina" is juxtaposed with "warrior" and "strength," language functions as a system of representation that transfers the meaning of a term from one domain to another (Hall, 1997). Culturally, ballet carries strong codes of femininity, such as grace and an ideal body that appears light and weightless (Lindner, 2011); thus, this shift can be interpreted as an effort to

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imbue an established image with new meaning, in line with the concept of transcoding (Prysthon, 2016). For film studies, this shift is present not only in words but also in the way movement, costumes, and space are arranged, transforming the ballet stage into an arena of survival. Building on this gap, this study analyses Pretty Lethal (2026) through Stuart Hall's theory of representation to address the following two questions: How does Pretty Lethal (2026) represent ballet through a shift in meaning from "delicacy" to "strength"? And how does the representation of ballet contribute to the construction of the ballerina's identity in the film?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Stuart Hall Theory Of Representation

Stuart Hall's constructionist approach begins from the premise that meaning is not a natural property of objects, words, or images but is produced in representation. A sign stands for a concept, and that relation becomes readable because a cultural code makes it intelligible within a particular context (Hall, 1997). Because the code decides the connection, the same sign can carry a different concept when the context around it changes. In ordinary usage "ballet" is connected with delicacy, elegance, and slim bodies, while *Pretty Lethal* (2026) places the same word in a narrative of violence and survival and connects it with strength, endurance, discipline, and teamwork. If read through Hall, the question is not whether the film shows ballet correctly, but which codes allow the sign "ballet" to join new concepts without discarding the old ones. In this study, dialogue and character actions are treated as signs, while concepts such as delicacy, strength, endurance, discipline, survival, and identity are categories found from the film data, not indicators taken from Hall.

2.2 Analysis Framework: Hall's Constructionist Approach

Hall's constructionist approach does not supply a checklist of indicators but a way of following how meaning is produced. Based on Hall (1997), this study operationalises the approach as a five-stage flow, namely Sign → Concept → Cultural Code → Constructed Meaning → Representation, and this order is the researcher's operationalisation of Hall's concepts, not a standard procedure formulated by Hall. For each data unit the same five questions are asked in the same order: what sign appears, what concept is connected to it, what cultural code or narrative context makes that connection understandable, what meaning is formed, and what representation is produced. The flow suits a problem that is a movement of meaning. Applied to *Pretty Lethal*, it follows the same word, for example "dance", from the context in which it is lost to the context in which it is reclaimed, so that the shift from delicacy to strength is described step by step. The five stages therefore connect the conceptual discussion above to the six data units.

2.3 Ballet, the Body, and Aesthetic Demands

The literature on the dancing body forms one argument in several methods. Santo André et al. (2022), Doria and Numer (2022), and Leonkiewicz and Wawrzyniak (2022) all begin from the assumption that the ballerina's body is judged not by a general standard of health but by an aesthetic ideal that belongs to ballet and dance. Santo André et al. (2022) locate that ideal in the dancers' own judgement, reporting that 14 classical ballet dancers aged 18–30 feel satisfied with their bodies in everyday life but not when they judge them in the context of classical ballet. Doria and Numer (2022) locate it in the discourse around competitive dance dancers in Canada, which strengthens the idea of the ideal dancer's body. Leonkiewicz and Wawrzyniak (2022) locate it in behaviour and risk, assessing body perception, eating behaviour, and the risk of anorexic readiness in 60 ballet and artistic

gymnastics students aged 10–12 compared with 60 primary school girls. Read together, the three studies move from self-judgement to social discourse to psychological risk, and agree that delicacy is not only an image but a norm working on real bodies.

The later studies in this group move the explanation from the individual to the institution. Batista et al. (2025) show that the dancer's body is understood as a "business card" that determines job opportunities, while del Río Carral et al. (2024) show that health and beauty discourses in the ballet environment work as a body pedagogy that demands dancers meet their institution's expectations. The two agree that aesthetic demands are social rather than personal, but they differ in mechanism, because one works through the labour market and the other through an institutional pedagogy. Taken as a whole, the body literature establishes the norm that the present study needs, a demand placed on the dancer's body from outside. What the group does not examine is how that norm is represented, contested, and given a new meaning in a film text, since all of its studies work with real dancers. That question leads to the literature on identity.

2.4 Ballet and Dancer Identity

Research on ballet identity starts from the same premise but changes the question from how the body is judged to how the dancer understands herself through ballet. Ohashi et al. (2023) measured *ballet identity*, that is, the extent to which a person identifies herself as a ballet dancer, among 188 adolescent ballet dancers, and they find that the desire for a smaller body size is related to a stronger ballet identity. The finding links this strand to the body literature, since the aesthetic demand and the sense of self work together. The difference between the two strands is their unit of analysis: the body studies describe a norm that acts on dancers, while the identity study treats identity itself as the object to be measured. Both, however, work with real dancers who report on themselves, so neither can say how a fiction film builds the identity it places in its characters. This study takes that construction as its object, reading identity from dialogue and character action rather than from a psychological measure.

2.5 Representation, Stereotype, and Agency in Dance

The relationship between ballet, the body, and representation is seen more clearly in the study by Baker and Navas (2022) on Josephine Baker and Mercedes Baptista. That study uses Stuart Hall's concept of stereotype, namely the process in which a person is reduced to a few simplified and exaggerated characteristics so that she is quickly recognised, and that process also creates a separation between *Self* and *Other* (Baker & Navas, 2022). Baker was indeed constructed through the stereotype of the sensual and exotic Black woman, but she used that stereotype to gain control over her body and her stage persona, so that she became an agent, not merely an object of representation (Baker & Navas, 2022). The case of Baptista shows another side, in classical ballet she never became a principal in the repertoire because her skin colour was considered unsuitable for the profile imagined by choreographers and directors at the time, even though she had mastered ballet technique (Baker & Navas, 2022). Both cases show that the dancer's body and movement are not neutral, because their meaning is formed by systems of representation and cultural stereotypes, and that this meaning can be negotiated by the dancers themselves.

The strands reviewed so far are not background material but terms for reading the six units. The literature on the body and aesthetic demands informs the first, second, and fifth data units, in which the beauty of ballet is presented as the result of pain, the image of "delicate, fragile little things" is confronted, and the broken toenails of a dancer are carried as the price of being a ballerina. The literature on ballet identity informs the fourth unit, in which Devora loses the Sugar Plum Fairy debut and says "I would never dance again", and it returns

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in the fifth and sixth units, where identity is asserted in pain and then reclaimed through the words "Let's dance". The literature on representation, stereotype, and agency informs the third and sixth units, because the counted movement used to survive and fight as a team, and the reclaiming of dance at the end, depend on reading the dancers as agents inside a system of representation. None of these strands supplies an account of how a film text produces meaning, which is the task of the last strand.

That pair of cases also connects to a wider discussion of the dancing body as a site where power can be taken back. Molopyane (2020) reads the female body on the dance floor as a body that does not only submit to the gaze but can also use dance to reclaim power from it, and her argument places the dancer between the image that is imposed on her and the movement that she performs herself. The argument is useful here because the ballerinas of *Pretty Lethal* move in a similar direction, from being looked at to acting, although the power they reclaim is bodily and collective rather than symbolic, and it is reclaimed inside a fiction film rather than on a stage.

2.6 Hall's Theory in Film Studies

Hall's thinking enters film studies less as a theory of the medium than as a theory of how meaning and difference are produced, and Prysthon (2016) makes that explicit. Although Hall is not a film theorist in the strict sense, his concepts of difference, identity, representation, and stereotype have shaped the way films are read, so that film is understood as a cultural text that produces meaning rather than merely presenting reality. In that reading, stereotype is a practice that reduces, essentialises, naturalises, and fixes difference, while *transcoding* takes meaning that already exists and uses it again for a new meaning (Hall, 1997, as cited in Prysthon, 2016). The last concept matters most here as an analogous lens rather than a direct application. The shift of ballet's image from softness towards strength can be read as a process of re-signification, not as an equation with racial stereotype, and that is the sense in which *transcoding* is borrowed in the analysis.

Studies that apply Hall to film have also been carried out in the Indonesian context. Ayuanda et al. (2024) analyse the representation of Javanese culture in the film *Primbon* and report seven representations of Javanese culture, including tahlilan, primbon, the Javanese language, weton, ruwatan, and Bujang Ganong. The study shares with the present one the use of film as the data source and of Hall's approach to read meaning through signs, and it shows that the constructionist approach can be applied to a film text in detail. Its object, however, is the display of a regional culture, so the question it answers is which elements of that culture appear and how they are represented. The present study keeps the method but changes the object.

The field built on this approach is now established and reaches beyond the Indonesian case. Recent work applies Hall to features across genres and national cinemas: female leadership in *Old Guard 2* (Herliyanti & Andina, 2025), women as agents of power in *The Shadow Strays* (Hidayah, 2026), gender representation and feminist discourse in *Barbie* and *Wonder Woman* (Pratama & Pitaloka, 2025), African cultural identity in *Black Panther* (Sere et al., 2020), and the contrast between American and Pakistani culture in *The Big Sick* (Nikita et al., 2019). Read as a group, these studies show that Hall's approach is used routinely to ask which identity, culture, or power position a film represents and how it is valued. The group shares an attention to the content of representation. What it leaves unexamined is the body as the medium of representation, since none of these studies takes a bodily practice such as dance as its object, and none follows a practice whose meaning is shifted inside the film.

Three works above are closer to the present study, and the difference from each needs stating. Baker and Navas (2022) read two real dancers through biography and stage

performance, and their question is how those dancers negotiate the stereotype attached to their bodies, while the present study reads a fiction film and asks how its dialogue and actions move the meaning of ballet from delicacy to strength. Ayuanda et al. (2024) share the method, since they also read a film through Hall's signs, but their object is the representation of Javanese culture and their question is which elements of that culture appear, while this study takes a practice rather than a culture as its object and follows a change in that practice's meaning across six scenes. Prysthon (2016) offers a theoretical account of Hall's relevance to film studies and explains *transcoding* as a strategy, applied here to a specific film and practice, with *transcoding* used as an analogous lens for re-signification rather than as a reading of racial stereotype. In short, the shift of a practice's meaning inside a fiction film is the object here.

These strands together define the task of the article. The literature shows that the ballerina's body is judged by an aesthetic norm, that ballet can become part of a dancer's identity, that dancers can act as agents inside representation, and that Hall's approach has been widely used to read film, but it has not shown how a film text shifts the meaning of a cultural practice through its own signs. The next section sets out the method used to answer it: a qualitative textual analysis of *Pretty Lethal* (2026), six purposively selected data units, and the five-stage flow described earlier, which is applied to each unit.

3. Research Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with the method of textual analysis. The choice of a qualitative approach fits the character of the research data, which consists of dialogue and events in the film. Creswell (2009) explains that qualitative research relies on text and image data and uses analysis steps that are interpretive. Textual analysis is used because the object of this study is a film, namely a text whose meaning is produced through dialogue, image, and narrative, so the work of the analysis is to read how that meaning is built rather than to measure how an audience receives it (McKee, 2003). The film is therefore treated as a cultural text that can be read, because its dialogue, costume, body movement, and storyline compose images that do not merely follow reality but take part in deciding how ballet and the ballerina are understood. The analysis is carried out with Hall's constructionist approach framework.

The primary data source of this study is the film Pretty Lethal (2026), directed by Vicky Jewson and written by Kate Freund (Jewson, 2026). The film runs for about 88 minutes and is available through Prime Video. The research data is focused on dialogue and scene contexts that are directly related to ballet, strength, pain, survival, and ballerina identity. The transcript used in the analysis process includes timestamps, so that every piece of data can be traced by the time it appears in the film. The version used in this study is the Prime Video release of 25 March 2026, and the timestamps refer to that version. Every unit that is analysed is also recorded in Table 1, which notes the timestamp, the sign in the form of dialogue or action, the concept connected to the sign, the cultural code or narrative context that makes the connection understandable, the constructed meaning, and the representation that is produced.

For this study, a relevant sign is a piece of dialogue, a bodily action, or a narrative event that carries a concept about ballet, the dancer's body, or ballerina identity, and that can be shown at a specific timestamp and read through a cultural code. The six data units are selected from the film with four criteria. The first criterion is relevance to the themes of the study, namely ballet, strength, pain, survival, and identity. The second is the presence of a verbal or visual sign that can be quoted or described directly. The third is distinctiveness, so that no two units repeat the same meaning, and the fourth is the availability of a traceable timestamp, so that every unit can be checked back against the film.

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The six units that meet those criteria are taken from different parts of the film, namely the opening narration at 00:00:39–00:01:20, where the ballerina is connected with "the blood of a warrior", the statement about "delicate, fragile little things" at 00:39:32–00:39:42, the use of ballet counts and movements to survive as a team at 00:59:26–01:01:09, Devora's account of her lost debut as the Sugar Plum Fairy at 01:07:23–01:08:45, the declaration "I'm a balle-fucking-rina!" at 01:10:57–01:11:11, and the closing "Let's dance" after the line "you took my leg" at 01:17:44–01:18:43. Read in that order, the six units follow the movement of the film's meaning of ballet from an image of beauty and delicacy towards strength, endurance, and identity.

The six units are therefore purposively selected representative examples, not the whole population of relevant scenes in the film. The film also contains other conversations among the ballerinas and scenes that build the setting of the inn, but those moments are not counted as data units because they repeat a meaning that is already represented, because they do not carry a clear verbal or visual sign, or because they are not directly connected to ballet and ballerina identity. The analysis is therefore not a census of every relevant scene and does not claim to count how often a meaning appears. It describes how meaning is constructed in the selected examples, and those examples are chosen because they allow the five-stage flow to be followed from the clearest and most distinct signs that the film offers.

Data collection is carried out through repeated viewing of the film. The film is watched several times, and each viewing is given a different task. One viewing is used to understand the whole narrative context, so that no line of dialogue is read outside the situation in which it appears. Another viewing is used to mark the moments where ballet, strength, pain, or identity becomes visible in dialogue or action. The dialogue in those moments is then transcribed with its timestamp, and every timestamp is checked again by re-watching the scene, so that the time in the transcript matches the time in the film. The visual and narrative context of each unit, such as what happens before and after the line, is also recorded, because a sign carries a different meaning in a different context.

The five stages of Sign, Concept, Cultural Code, Constructed Meaning, and Representation are applied to each unit with the same five questions asked in the same order. For every unit, the analysis asks what sign appears in the dialogue or action, what concept is connected to it, what cultural code or narrative context makes the connection understandable, what constructed meaning is formed, and what representation is produced. The same order is kept for all six units so that they can be compared on one standard. The five-stage flow is therefore the researcher's operationalisation of Hall's concepts, not a standard procedure formulated by Hall, because Hall (1997) explains how representation works rather than a fixed set of steps to be applied. The answers are recorded in the same order in Table 1, so that the movement from sign to representation can be read for each unit.

Interpretive decisions are checked in three ways. First, every interpretation is read again against the timestamped quotation and the surrounding narrative context, so that a meaning the scene cannot support is revised or removed. Second, alternative readings are considered whenever the same sign could lead to more than one concept, and the reading that is kept is the one that the scene supports more fully, not the one that sounds the most interesting. Third, the findings are compared with the previous studies discussed in Section 2, so that a reading which contradicts what is already known about ballet, the body, and identity has to be re-examined before it is accepted. Because the researcher is the main instrument of interpretation in this analysis, the checking procedure is described openly so that the reader can follow the same path and judge the reading. Section 4 presents the result of this analysis in the order of the six units, from the opening narration to the closing "Let's dance".

4. Result and Discussion

Section 4 presents the six data units in the order in which they appear in the film, and the discussion moves from the meaning of ballet to the identity of the ballerina. The first two units, at 00:00:39–00:01:20 and 00:39:32–00:39:42, discuss the shift of ballet from delicacy towards strength, because both place ballet and the ballerina next to pain, discipline and endurance. The following units discuss ballet as part of identity. Unit 3 at 00:59:26–01:01:09 shows ballet training used as a survival strategy, while unit 4 at 01:07:23–01:08:45 and unit 6 at 01:17:44–01:18:43 are read as a pair, because both concern Devora and they mark the loss of dance and its return. Unit 5 at 01:10:57–01:11:11 is placed between them because it states the identity claim most directly. Every subsection follows the same five-stage flow, namely Sign, Concept, Cultural Code, Constructed Meaning and Representation, and every subsection separates what the film states explicitly from the reading drawn from it. The table summarises that flow for each unit, while the prose explains how the verbal signs and the immediate situation construct the representation.

Table 1

Analysis of the six Data Units through the Five-stage Framework of Hall's Constructionist Approach

No	Timestamp	Stage 1: Sign (dialogue/action)	Stage 2: Concept	Stage 3: Cultural code and narrative context	Stage 4: Constructed meaning	Stage 5: Representation
1	00:00:39–00:01:20	Narration: "Inside every ballerina's heart, is the blood of a warrior"; "They turn pain into beauty"; "chaos into precision"; "Sweat, blood, sacrifice."	Warrior, pain, precision, sacrifice (→strength, discipline)	The film's opening narration; the aesthetics of ballet are juxtaposed with the rigors of training that demand physical sacrifice.	The beauty of ballet is born of pain and discipline; the ballerina is seen as a warrior.	The ballerina as a warrior; beauty as the result of sacrifice.
2	00:39:32–00:39:42	Bones: "People assume we're these delicate, fragile little things, but we're not"; "We perform sick, hurt, and on bleeding feet … so don't tell me you're not strong."	Delicacy and fragility versus strength and endurance	The common notion of the fragile ballerina is rejected, and the character who feels insufficiently strong is reassured.	Fragility is not the ultimate meaning of ballerina; delicacy is confronted and expanded into strength	The ballerina as a body capable of enduring pain.

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No	Timestamp	Stage 1: Sign (dialogue/action)	Stage 2: Concept	Stage 3: Cultural code and narrative context	Stage 4: Constructed meaning	Stage 5: Representation
3	00:59:26–01:01:09	Bones : “If we want to survive, we have to do this as a team”; “The only way out is together”; “First positions. Six, seven, eight”; “Bourrée!”; “Duet?”; Princess: “Together!”	Survival, teamwork, coordination	The terminology and sequences of ballet practice or performance are transposed into a dangerous situation.	Ballet as a survival strategy and collective strength	Ballet as a practical skill beyond the stage
4	01:07:23–01:08:45	Devora: “I was eight”; a role as the Sugar Plum Fairy; “I would never dance again”	Identity, loss	Devora tells the story of her childhood and of the lost debut role, and she has been dancing since she was eight.	Losing the opportunity to dance means a severance of the connection to one's identity; ballet becomes part of that identity.	"Ballerina" as an identity tied to lived experience.
5	01:10:57–01:11:11	Bones : “My toenails break all the time”; “I peel them off, I put a smile on my face and I dance”; “because I’m a balle-fucking-rina!”	Pain, endurance, commitment, identity	The dancer's bodily experience; an emotional declaration within the scene.	The identity of a ballerina encompasses resilience against pain and a commitment to dance.	The ballerina as an identity that unites pain, endurance, and commitment.
6	01:17:44–01:18:43	Devora: “you, Lothar Markovic, you took my leg”; Bones: “Let’s dance”	Loss, courage, reclaiming identity	Devora’s confrontation with Lothar Markovic; in contrast to “I would never dance again”	Dancing again means reclaiming the identity of a ballerina.	The ballerina as an identity reclaimed through action.

4.1 Ballet as a Blend of Beauty, Pain, and Strength

The first data appears in the opening part of the film, around 00:00:39–00:01:20. The narration states, “*Inside every ballerina’s heart, is the blood of a warrior*”, then continues with “*They turn pain into beauty*”, “*chaos into precision*”, and “*Sweat, blood, sacrifice.*” This series of dialogue becomes an important early sign because the film directly pairs the concept

of ballerina with the concepts of *warrior*, *pain*, *precision*, *sweat*, *blood*, and *sacrifice*. If read through Hall's *constructionist approach*, the word "ballerina" does not only point to a dancer, because the film builds a new relationship between the sign ballerina and the concept *warrior*. Hall (1997) explains that signs are used to stand for concepts in a system of mental representation, while the relationship between sign and concept is understood through cultural codes (Hall, 1997). In the film, the experience of training and physical suffering works as the cultural code that connects the sign to the concept, so that the audience understands ballet not only as something beautiful, but also as a practice that demands strength (Hall, 1997).

Two features of the narration construct this representation. First, the sentence "Inside every ballerina's heart, is the blood of a warrior" places the warrior inside the heart, so the fighter is presented as an inner property of the ballerina rather than as an outside role that she takes on. Second, the narration repeats the same transformation formula in "They turn pain into beauty" and in "chaos into precision", so ballet is defined by what it converts instead of by what it displays, and the material it converts is pain and chaos. The list "Sweat, blood, sacrifice" then closes the sequence without a verb, like an inventory of costs, and the three words rise in weight from sweat, which belongs to ordinary training, to blood and sacrifice, which belong to war. The film states explicitly that the ballerina carries the blood of a warrior. The inference drawn here is that "warrior" is chosen over dancer or athlete because it is the term that makes the pain a condition of the value and not an accident of the work.

The dialogue "They turn pain into beauty" shows a process of meaning transformation, because *pain* is no longer only a sign of suffering, but is placed as part of the process of producing beauty, while "chaos into precision" shows that ballet turns a body condition that is hard to control into orderly movement. This representation expands the *conceptual map* of ballet: if ballet is generally associated with elegance, the film adds the concepts of *strength* and *endurance*, so that the words *warrior*, *pain*, *blood*, and *sacrifice* help shift the sign of ballet towards a stronger meaning (Hall, 1997). The representation that is formed is the ballerina as a fighter, with beauty as the result of sacrifice; *delicacy* is not thrown away, but is positioned as the result of bodily work that carries a burden.

4.2 Rejection of the Fragile Ballerina Image

The change in the meaning of ballet appears explicitly at 00:39:32–00:39:42. When Zoe says that she feels she is not strong enough, Bones answers, "*People assume we're these delicate, fragile little things, but we're not*", then strengthens it with "*We perform sick, hurt, and on bleeding feet … so don't tell me you're not strong.*" There are two opposing groups of signs: the first group is "delicate" and "fragile", while the second group is "strong", "sick", "hurt", and "bleeding feet". The film deliberately places both groups of signs in one context in order to change the meaning of the ballerina: the ballerina is not removed from the meaning of *delicacy*, but that meaning is fought and expanded through physical experience that shows *endurance*.

The arrangement of the two groups of signs carries the argument. The stereotype is placed in the mouths of other people, since Bones says that people "assume" the ballerinas are delicate, and it is answered with a description of what the ballerinas do, so the film separates the image from the bodies that carry it and makes the image a belief held by outsiders. The verb "perform" is used twice in different senses, first for the performance of ballet and then for performing while sick, hurt and on bleeding feet, and the second use makes the injury part of the working condition instead of an interruption of it. The list "sick, hurt, and on bleeding feet" also becomes more concrete as it moves, because it ends on a visible injury, and the preposition "on" describes a body that stands on its wound while it works. The closing sentence "so don't tell me you're not strong" is an imperative, so strength is presented as evidence that settles a doubt rather than as an opinion about the self.

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The word "fragile" does not become the final meaning for the ballerina, because the film presents other signs, namely being sick, bleeding feet, still smiling, and continuing to dance, and these signs form a new relationship with the concept of strength. That relationship is not a simple reversal, since the film does not remove the ballerina from delicacy. What the film relocates is the cause of the delicacy. The soft appearance is no longer presented as the sign of a body that must be protected, but as the surface of a body that has been trained, so the same word carries a different cultural code. The scene supports that reading, because it takes place after the ballerinas are held captive in the basement of the inn and their passports and phones are burned, so that ballet training becomes the only provision left for them to survive. In that situation the ballerina is not delicate because nothing has touched her, but because the training has made the appearance outlast the damage.

Does the film challenge, expand, or reproduce the conventional image of ballet? In this study the defensible answer is that the film expands and re-signifies that image, and that it also reproduces part of it in the same movement. The delicate image is not abandoned, since the film keeps beauty as the product of pain in "They turn pain into beauty", so the graceful surface stays in place while its cause is changed. What the film gives that surface is a new explanation, because delicacy is re-read as the visible result of discipline and endurance, and the body that carries it is a body that has been trained. The reproduction is visible in the requirement that pain stays hidden, and the same requirement returns later at 01:10:57–01:11:11, when Bones says "I put a smile on my face and I dance". Read through the *transcoding* described by Prysthon (2016), this is a re-signification and not a replacement, since the old meaning is taken again and given new meaning instead of being deleted, and that is why the conventional image survives while its content changes.

The visual design of the film carries the same movement. The ballerinas wear the same white leotards and feathered tutus from the stage into the fight, and the pointe shoes that belong to the performance become the shoes in which they move and defend themselves, so the costume of delicacy is never taken off. What changes is its condition, because the white outfits grow gradually bloodier as the story advances, and by the final scenes the tutu is stained rather than clean. That change of colour is readable as a visual counterpart of the shift traced in the dialogue, since the sign is kept and only its condition is altered, and the image of the ballerina is shown as an image that survives the damage instead of an image that is protected from it.

4.3 Ballet as a Strategy for Survival

The representation of ballet as strength becomes clearer at 00:59:26–01:01:09. In a dangerous situation, Bones says, "*If we want to survive, we have to do this as a team*", continues with "*The only way out is together*", then gives the instructions "*First positions. Six, seven, eight*", "*Bourrée!*", "*Duet?*", and is followed by Princess, who shouts "*Together!*" This scene changes the function of ballet from a performance activity into a *survival* strategy: terms that are usually used in training or performance, namely *first position*, counts, *bourrée*, and *duet*, are moved into a dangerous situation, so that ballet movement no longer only produces a beautiful performance, but is used as body coordination and teamwork to save themselves.

The scene begins with a condition, because Bones says, "If we want to survive, we have to do this as a team", and the rest of the scene is the execution of that sentence. The commands are the vocabulary of the studio, but they are no longer addressed to a rehearsal. "First positions. Six, seven, eight" gives the group a starting position and a count, so the danger is met with the temporal structure of dance, in which a movement begins only when the voice has counted it. "Bourrée!" follows as a single word in the imperative form, and

"Duet?" converts a form for two dancers into a proposal that the group answers with "Together!" The word "together" is stated twice, first by Bones as "The only way out is together" and then shouted by Princess, so the meaning is not announced once and accepted, but repeated by a second voice and confirmed by the group. The cultural code is the training sequence itself, moved into a situation where it has practical value, and the representation that is formed is ballet as a bodily ability that no longer depends on the stage.

The space in which the scene takes place supports the reading as well. The unit happens in the basement of the inn, a confined space in which the bodies cannot be arranged as a stage picture, so the group has to move as one body instead of as five solo performers, and the counts are what hold that body together. The camera moves with the group rather than settling on one dancer, so the coordination is visible as a spatial fact and not only as a statement in the dialogue. In the five-stage flow this belongs to the cultural code, because the room removes the theatre that normally frames ballet and leaves the training itself as the only frame that remains.

4.4 Ballet as Part of Identity

The representation of ballet does not stop at physical strength, because ballet also becomes part of the way the characters understand themselves. The clearest account appears at 01:07:23–01:08:45, when Devora tells the story of her childhood. She says, "I was eight," then explains that her debut role was supposed to be the Sugar Plum Fairy, but that chance was lost because her leg was taken by Markovic after her father could not pay a debt, so she states, "I would never dance again." Three details in that account do the work. The age places the beginning of the identity before any choice, the name of the role gives the lost future a precise form, and "never" with "would" closes that future instead of describing an interval. The film states explicitly that the leg was taken, that the role was lost, and that she would never dance again. The inference drawn here is that the injury is permanent and that a professional career therefore became impossible, because the film presents the debut as withdrawn and not as postponed.

What is lost in this account is therefore not only technique. Technique is the condition that allows the body to execute the sign, while identity is the relation between the sign and the concept of the self, and the two losses are not the same. Devora loses the first completely, because the material analysed contains no recovery from the injury, and she loses the second only in part, since the film introduces her as a former ballet dancer and she narrates her own life through the role she never performed. The words ballerina and dance keep describing her after the activity has stopped, so the identity is not cancelled by the injury, but it is left without a practice in which it can be enacted. The inference drawn here is that the damage falls on the relation and not on the concept, because the concept still organises the way she tells her own story. That is the distance the last scene has to work on, and the film names it later through the same verb, dance.

Devora also has a visible counterpart of that loss, because the inn is furnished with antique furniture, ballerina relics, and oversized nutcracker figures under saturated red and yellow light, and the leg that was taken from her is kept in the basement, preserved in a jar. The objects turn the ballerina into décor and into a relic, and the part of the body that carried the career is kept while the career itself is gone, so what the film shows is not a memory of dancing but the separation between the body and the name. That is why the identity in this unit is still present and still unable to be practised, and why the last scene has to return to the verb dance rather than to the technique.

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4.5 "I'm a Balle-Fucking-Rina!" as an Assertion of Identity

At 01:10:57–01:11:11, Bones says, "My toenails break all the time," then explains, "I peel them off, I put a smile on my face and I dance," before asserting, "because I'm a balle-fucking-rina!" The account has three moves. "All the time" gives the damage a frequency, so the injury is routine and not an accident, and "I peel them off" is told as a small practical action, without complaint and without asking for sympathy. "I put a smile on my face and I dance" joins the face and the body in one sentence and puts the smile before the dancing, so the covering of the pain belongs to the performance itself. The last line supplies the reason, because "because" makes the identity the cause of the endurance and not its result, and the word ballerina is broken by the profanity, so the name is claimed by a mouth that speaks roughly. The film states explicitly the injury and the practice. The inference drawn here is that the speech converts a list of damage into a title.

This assertion also carries a tension that runs through the film. On one side, the scene celebrates endurance, because the sentence is spoken as a declaration rather than as a complaint, and it turns a private injury into a shared identity. On the other side, the same sentence normalises pain as a condition of being a ballerina, because the identity is given as the reason for the damage and the damage is measured in time, as "all the time", instead of being presented as something to be repaired. Celebration and normalisation are produced by the same words, and the film does not separate them. Within the six data units analysed, no character asks whether the pain should belong to the identity, so the celebratory tone tends to make pain look like a requirement of the identity rather than an injury to be questioned. The tension is therefore not resolved by the film, and it is not resolved by this analysis. It is better stated as a finding, namely that the film gives the ballerina a strong identity and in the same gesture sets bodily damage as its price.

4.6 Ballet as an Identity Reclaimed

Between 01:17:44 and 01:18:43, Devora addressed the conflict by saying, "You, Lothar Markovic, you're the one who snatched my leg," and the scene concluded with Bones saying, "Let's dance," after they had managed to escape from the inn. This accusation is more precise than the previous account, as it names the man and links him to the verb, thereby attributing the loss to a specific person and no longer treating it as a debt that has fallen due. 'I'll sort this out' removes the immediate danger from Devora's hands, and the invitation that follows uses the same verb she used when concluding her story: 'I shall never dance again.' It is the contrast between these two sentences that carries the meaning, as the same sign is placed in opposing contexts. What returns is not her career, as no role, stage or debut is restored, and the film does not show whether Devora was dancing at that moment. The interpretation that the sentence refers to her is a conclusion drawn from the fact that it was uttered immediately after she mentioned the name of the man who took her leg. Based on this interpretation, the scene restores the connection between the sign and the self, rather than the profession, so that her identity is reclaimed whilst her performance is not.

At the end of the film, Bones says, "Let's dance," whilst speaking to his friends as they face their final situation together. As this line is spoken by Bones, not Devora, it does not directly indicate Devora's return to ballet or the restoration of her dancing ability. Rather, the word 'dance' can be interpreted within the context of the group's shared experience, in which ballet-related skills have become part of their response to danger. When read alongside Devora's earlier statement, "I will never dance again", this ending also creates the possibility of a thematic connection between dancing as a professional practice and dance-related skills as a means of confronting danger. This connection relates to the broader representation of ballet in the film, rather than serving as evidence that Devora has returned to dancing.

4.7 Theoretical Contribution and Comparison with Previous Studies

The findings agree with previous studies on the body in ballet, but they also show what a fiction film does with that body. Ohashi et al. (2023) found that a stronger ballet identity was related to the desire for a smaller body, while Batista et al. (2025) and del Río Carral et al. (2024) show that the dancer's body is judged through institutional expectations, so it is never a private object. *Pretty Lethal* keeps that judged body, since the ballerinas are still valued through what their bodies can do, but it shifts the content of the judgement from size and beauty towards endurance and readiness. The film also gives the institutional pressure a face, because the lost career is caused by one man and one debt instead of a diffuse system, and the inference drawn here is that this personalisation is how the film makes a structural relation tellable in a story.

Compared with Baker and Navas (2022), the agency in this film is collective and bodily rather than individual and staged, because the ballerinas gain control by using their training together, and the leadership is organised through the counting voice instead of one leader, which also differs from the female leadership studied by Herliyanti and Andina (2025). Hidayah (2026) reads women as agents of power, and this study adds that such power can be represented through a practice usually coded as delicate. The contribution of the article is not the claim that the film gives ballet a new meaning, but an account of how it does so within the five-stage flow and of the cost of that change. Delicacy is re-signified through endurance, identity survives the loss of technique, and the pain is left in place as the price of the name. The strategy also extends the use of *transcoding* as an analogous lens beyond stereotype to a cultural practice, which is the part of the argument Prysthon (2016) does not yet cover.

5. Conclusion

This study shows that Pretty Lethal (2026) constructs the meaning of ballet through various verbal signs and character actions. Based on Stuart Hall's constructionist approach, the meaning of ballet is not understood as something already fixed, but is produced through the flow of Sign, Concept, Cultural Code, Constructed Meaning, up to Representation. The findings of this study show that ballet in the film works through at least two interrelated things. First, ballet is represented through a shift from delicacy towards strength. The film does not remove the image of beauty and softness, but expands and fights it through the signs warrior, pain, sacrifice, bleeding feet, movement coordination, and teamwork, so that ballet is given the meaning of strength, endurance, discipline, and survival.

Second, ballet works as part of the construction of ballerina identity. The dialogue about losing the chance to dance, the statement "I'm a balle-fucking-rina!", and the closing "Let's dance" show that ballet does not only describe a physical activity, but becomes a sign that connects the characters with concepts about themselves. Ballerina identity is built through bodily experience, endurance of pain, commitment, and the desire to return to dancing. Theoretically, this study extends the notion of transcoding, which Prysthon (2016) discusses in relation to stereotype, to a cultural practice: ballet is re-signified inside a fiction film without discarding its older meaning, and the five-stage flow makes it possible to trace that shift unit by unit. Both findings need one qualification. The film does not replace the delicate image of ballet with a strong one, because the two meanings are produced by the same signs: delicacy is kept as the visible surface while its cause is moved into discipline and endurance, so the change is better described as a re-signification than as a rejection of the old image. The analysis also leaves a tension that the film does not resolve, because the scenes that celebrate endurance at the same time present pain as a condition of ballerina identity rather than as an injury that the narrative questions. The article states that tension as part of its result instead of settling it. However, this study has limitations. It is a single-film study based on six

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purposively selected data units, which are representative examples rather than all relevant scenes, so the findings describe how meaning is constructed in those units and cannot be generalised or used to count how often a meaning appears. The analysis is also interpretive and was carried out by one researcher, so the readings remain open to alternative interpretations despite the checks described in Section 3, and it does not cover audience reception. Further research can compare *Pretty Lethal* (2026) with other films that make dance their main theme, combine textual analysis with a study of audience reception, or examine how audiences read the ambivalence between celebration and normalisation that the analysis identifies.

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