

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This chapter introduces the core idea of this research. It details the phenomenon and context behind the study in the research background, highlights the main problems to be addressed, outlines the specific research objectives, and explains both the theoretical and practical significances of the analysis.

1.1 Research Background

Contemporary action films increasingly move beyond the simple binary of hero versus villain, instead foregrounding protagonists who must navigate moral dilemmas, identity conflict, and ethical ambiguity. Heroes such as John Wick, driven by grief and revenge after the death of his dog, are no longer portrayed as straightforward saviors but as morally compromised figures shaped by a corrupt system and trapped in a cycle of violence. Violence in these narratives functions less as spectacle and more as a means of exploring justice, retribution, and the psychological cost of taking the law into one's own hands, positioning heroic ethics as a defining feature of the genre rather than a peripheral concern.

This phenomenon reflects what can be understood as heroic ethics: the moral principles and virtues, such as courage, loyalty, sacrifice, and the willingness to endure suffering for the greater cause, that shape how a hero's actions are judged as right or wrong within a narrative (Hursthouse & Pettigrove, 2018). Rather than being defined solely by physical strength or victory over an antagonist, the contemporary action hero is increasingly measured by the ethical weight of their choices: whether revenge can be justified, whether violence committed for a personal cause can still be considered heroic, and how a character reconciles their own moral code with a world that offers no easy answers. It is precisely this ethical negotiation that distinguishes recent action cinema from earlier, more formulaic hero narratives.

One significant development within this trend is the growing presence of women as protagonists in action films. Figures such as Beatrix Kiddo in *Kill Bill*

(2003-2004), Lorraine Broughton in *Atomic Blonde* (2017), Diana Prince in *Wonder Women* (2017) demonstrate that female leads are no longer confined to roles of victim or loves interest; instead, they occupy the same morally ambiguous terrain long associated with male anti-heroes, driven by revenge, loyalty, duty, or survival rather than romantic subplots. This shift reflects a broader cultural negotiation of gender and heroism, as female characters increasingly embody the same ethical complexity that defines their male counterparts, while also carrying the added burden of proving that a woman's capacity for violence and moral compromise can be portrayed with the same narrative depth.

Within this development, *Ballerina* (2025), a spin-off set within the John Wick universe, stands out as a particularly compelling object of study. The film follows Eve Macarro, a hitwoman trained by the Ruska Roma organization, who embarks on a journey of revenge after losing her family to past acts of violence. As the first entry in the John Wick franchise to center entirely on a female assassin, *Ballerina* extends the universe's established preoccupation with moral ambiguity, institutional corruption, and the cost of vengeance into a perspective that has, until now, remained largely unexplored within that world.

Eve is compelling to analyze not only because she is a professional assassin, but because the narrative traces her psychological and moral development as she negotiates the pull between vengeance and the human values she still holds onto. As a female protagonist operating within a genre historically dominated by men, Eve offers a distinctive lens through which heroism, morality, and violence can be examined together. Because the film was only released in 2025, it also provides recent and largely unexamined material through which the intersection of gender, heroism, and ethics in action cinema can be studied using up-to-date evidence rather than dated case studies.

Despite the richness of this phenomenon, existing studies on heroism in action films remain predominantly male-centered and tend to emphasize physical heroic action rather than its ethical dimension. Studies applying Campbell's and Vogler's Hero's Journey largely focus on mapping a character's narrative stages without engaging with the moral or ethical dimension of the hero's transformation.

Meanwhile, research on female action heroes tends to focus on questions of gender representation and empowerment, examining how female characters challenge or reproduce gender stereotypes (Bampatzimopoulos, n.d.; Fouskas, 2020), without connecting this representation to the structure of the Hero's Journey or to the ethical dimension of heroism itself.

This gap indicates that no existing study has yet integrated the Hero's Journey framework with the concept of heroic ethics to examine a female protagonist in a contemporary action film. Therefore, this study addresses that gap by examining how the heroine in *Ballerina* follows the stages of the Hero's Journey while simultaneously embodying the ethical dimension of heroism, revealing how her journey and her morality mutually construct one another throughout the film. This film is therefore relevant for examination using the concepts of heroic ethics and the Hero's Journey to understand how heroic values are forged through the heroine's experiences, suffering, and moral decisions.

1.2 Statement of Problem

The film *Ballerina* presents a heroine within an action genre that is closely associated with violence and moral conflict. However, existing studies on heroism in action films remain predominantly male-centered and often emphasize physical heroic actions. As a result, the ethical dimension of heroism (heroic ethics) and the Hero's Journey of heroine, particularly as represented through cinematic elements such as mise-en-scene, have not been sufficiently examined. Therefore, the problem addressed in this study is the lack of critical analysis on how heroic ethics and the Hero's Journey are constructed through the heroine in *Ballerina*.

Based on the background above, the research problems are formulated as follows:

1. How are heroic ethics depicted through the heroine's action, dialogues, and character development ?
2. How does the heroine in *Ballerina* follow the stages of Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey ?

1.3 Research Purpose

Based on the research problems, the purposes of this study are:

1. To analyze how heroic ethics are represented through the heroine's behavior and narrative progression.
2. To examine the heroine's journey using Campbell's Hero's Journey framework.

1.4 Research Significant

This research offers significant contributions both theoretically and practically to the fields of literary and film studies. Theoretically, it provides an in-depth analysis of heroic ethics within a female-led action film, addressing a critical gap in existing studies that often prioritize male-centered hero narratives. By examining the heroine moral choices, violence, and sense of justice, this study expands the application of Campbell's Hero's Journey to contemporary revenge-action narratives, demonstrating how classical narrative structures can be reinterpreted to accommodate modern themes such as trauma, resistance, and moral ambiguity. This research also enriches discussions on ethical representation in action cinema by highlighting how heroism is constructed through complex moral dilemmas rather than idealized hero figures.

Practically, the findings of this study can serve as a comprehensive reference for future researchers interested in analyzing heroism, morality, ethical conflict, and narrative structure in film and literary adaptations. Moreover, this research may assist students, scholars, and general audiences in critically engaging with contemporary action films by fostering a deeper understanding of the ethical tensions, narrative patterns, and ideological messages embedded within modern cinematic storytelling.

1.5 Conceptual Framework

This research is grounded in an interdisciplinary conceptual framework that integrates narrative theory, heroic ethics, and film studies to answer the research questions of the study. The framework is designed to examine both the narrative

construction of the heroine and the ethical values represented through cinematic elements in the film.

To address the first research question, which focuses on the heroine's journey and transformation, this study applies Campbell's Hero's Journey as the primary narrative framework. Campbell's model explains the stages of a hero's transformation, beginning from the call to adventure, confrontation with conflicts, and eventual transformation. In this research, the Hero's Journey is used to analyze how the heroine character develops throughout the narrative, highlighting her resistance, struggles, and transformation into a heroic figure within the film. This framework allows the study to position the heroine not merely as a character in an action narrative but as a subject who actively shapes her own heroic path.

To answer the second research question, which examines the heroine's moral and ethical stance, this study employs Heroic Ethics Theory. This theory emphasizes the moral values, ethical dilemmas, and decision-making processes faced by a hero when confronting injustice, violence, or oppression. In the context of this research, heroic ethics is used to analyze how the heroine's moral choices—such as acts of resistance, violence, or justice—reflect ethical principles rather than simple revenge. This approach enables the study to explore the complexity of the heroine's morality and how her actions challenge conventional representations of heroism, particularly within female-led action narratives.

Furthermore, to examine how these ethical values are visually represented, this research incorporates film studies concepts proposed by Ed Sikov, particularly elements of *mise-en-scène*, cinematography, lighting, and framing. According to Sikov, cinematic elements play a crucial role in constructing meaning and conveying ideological messages within a film. In this study, these visual elements function as analytical tools to reveal how the heroine's ethical stance is emphasized and communicated to the audience. For example, spatial arrangements, lighting choices, and camera angles are analyzed to understand how power, resistance, and moral authority are visually constructed in selected scenes.

By integrating Hero's Journey theory, Heroic Ethics Theory, and film studies, this conceptual framework establishes a structured approach to analyzing

both narrative progression and moral representation. This framework demonstrates how the heroine's journey and ethical values are interconnected and how cinematic elements serve as a medium through which these aspects are represented. Therefore, the conceptual framework provides a coherent foundation for answering both research questions and guiding the scene-based analysis in this study.

