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Female Agency Through Bodily Autonomy: Resistance to Patriarchal Institutional Control in *Level 16*

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Abstract

This study examines how female agency is manifested through bodily autonomy in Level 16 (2018) and how it enables resistance to patriarchal institutional control. Although previous studies have examined patriarchal oppression, institutional discipline, and female resistance in dystopian narratives, less attention has been given to bodily autonomy as a manifestation of female agency within institutional constraints. This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to analyze five purposively selected scenes, focusing on dialogue, character interactions, and visual representations. The analysis was guided by Ahearn's (2001) theory of agency, supported by Foucault's (1977) concept of disciplinary power and Mead's (1934) concept of the self. The findings identify five manifestations of bodily autonomy: refusing institutional medication, rejecting medical intervention, reversing institutional control, rejecting institutional ownership of the female body, and reclaiming bodily autonomy through self-scarring. In the context of the film, these findings illustrate how Vivien's actions challenge institutional authority and the commodification of women's bodies. This study contributes to feminist film studies by interpreting bodily autonomy as a process through which female agency is exercised under patriarchal institutional constraints in Level 16 (2018).

1. Introduction

Gender inequality remains a persistent social issue, rooted not only in individual prejudice but also in social structures that privilege men and limit women's opportunities, participation, and authority. Within this context, patriarchy functions as a social system that institutionalizes male dominance through social norms, cultural values, and everyday practices that position women in subordinate roles (Tong, 2009; Walby, 1990). Contemporary feminist scholarship further demonstrates that patriarchal power is maintained through institutions that regulate women's bodies, identities, and behaviors by reinforcing socially constructed expectations of femininity (Almeida, 2025; Morgenroth et al., 2025). Therefore, understanding gender inequality requires examining not only unequal social relations but also the institutional practices through which women's bodies and choices are controlled.

One mechanism through which patriarchal power operates is the regulation of women's bodies. The female body can become a site of surveillance, discipline, and commodification, where institutional authority determines how women should behave and appear (Almeida, 2025; Güleşce, 2023) Foucault's (1977) concept of disciplinary power explains how institutions maintain obedience through surveillance, normalization, and self-discipline rather than relying exclusively on direct physical force. Bartky (1990) extends this perspective by explaining how patriarchal standards of femininity shape women's bodily practices. Studies of dystopian narratives similarly show how surveillance and bodily regulation reinforce patriarchal authority (Ismael & Saleh, 2023; Shubha & Rebecca, 2024). These perspectives establish institutional control as an important context for examining women's capacity to make decisions about their own bodies.

Bodily autonomy refers here to women's capacity to exercise authority over their bodies while negotiating the social and institutional forces that seek to regulate them. From a feminist perspective, autonomy is not exercised in isolation but is shaped by unequal power relations that influence women's choices and identities (Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000). Reclaiming bodily autonomy can therefore involve resisting institutional discipline, rejecting objectification, and challenging the commodification of the female body (Fikri & Rosida, 2022; Nie & Kaur, 2025; Muhammad, 2025). Juliartha et al. (2026) likewise discuss the reclamation of ownership over the female body as resistance to patriarchal domination. Bodily autonomy is thus understood in this study not simply as the outcome of resistance, but as a process through which women negotiate institutional power and assert authority over their bodies.

This understanding of bodily autonomy is closely related to female agency. Ahearn (2001) defines agency in relation to the socioculturally mediated capacity to act, recognizing that action takes place within existing social relations rather than outside them. Accordingly, female agency can be expressed through decisions and actions that challenge institutional constraints, even when complete freedom remains unavailable. In this study, Ahearn's theory provides the primary perspective for interpreting Vivien's actions as expressions of agency. Foucault's (1977) concept of disciplinary power is used to examine how institutional practices regulate and control the girls' bodies, while Mead's (1934) concept of the self supports the interpretation of how Vivien's understanding of herself and the meaning of her body changes through social interaction.

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Together, these perspectives connect institutional control, the development of self-awareness, and actions through which bodily autonomy is asserted.

These issues are represented in *Level 16* (2018), directed by Danishka Esterhazy. The film portrays Vestalis Academy as a highly regulated institution in which young women are subjected to strict rules, surveillance, medication, and expectations of ideal femininity. Beneath its appearance of discipline and protection, the institution exploits the girls' bodies for the benefit of wealthy sponsors. As the narrative unfolds, Vivien increasingly questions the academy's authority and acts against its control over her body. The film therefore provides a relevant context for examining how bodily autonomy can become a manifestation of female agency under patriarchal institutional constraints.

Previous studies have examined related aspects of patriarchal control and female resistance from different perspectives. Fikri and Rosida (2022) analyze how women's bodies are constructed as sexual commodities, reproductive instruments, and objects of pleasure in dystopian literature. Ismael and Saleh (2023) focus on the discursive strategies through which surveillance, discipline, and ideological control sustain patriarchal power in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Similarly, Matek (2026) examines beautification in *The Substance* through biopolitical discipline, showing how socially constructed ideals of femininity can become internalized in bodily practices. Carrasco-Carrasco (2025) examines how vulnerable women in contemporary speculative television resist patriarchal power structures despite the disciplinary control and exploitation of their bodies. Although these studies explain different mechanisms of bodily regulation and female resistance, they do not primarily examine bodily autonomy as a process through which female agency is enacted.

Other studies emphasize women's resistance to patriarchal structures. Sanjaya and Fitriana (2026) examine female characters' resistance through challenges to traditional gender roles, economic dependence, and unequal relations in *There's Still Tomorrow*. Bhanbhro et al. (2025) discuss how female characters in *Before She Sleeps* challenge institutional oppression and reclaim autonomy within a patriarchal dystopian society. These studies demonstrate that women's agency can emerge through resistance to social and institutional constraints. However, their respective emphases on familial and social resistance or broader feminist resistance leave room for a more focused examination of how bodily autonomy operates as a specific manifestation of agency within an institution that disciplines and commodifies women's bodies.

Taken together, previous studies have examined bodily commodification, institutional surveillance, biopolitical discipline, and female resistance in dystopian narratives. However, these studies approach these issues from different perspectives, leaving room to examine how bodily autonomy connects institutional control with female agency. This study addresses this gap by analyzing *Level 16* (2018) through an integrated framework of Ahearn's theory of agency, Foucault's concept of disciplinary power, and Mead's concept of the self. Its contribution lies in explaining how bodily autonomy develops as a manifestation of female agency within the institutional constraints represented in the film.

Accordingly, this study aims to examine how female agency is manifested through bodily autonomy in *Level 16* (2018) and how bodily autonomy enables Vivien to resist patriarchal institutional control. The analysis focuses on five selected scenes that portray different responses to institutional regulation: refusing institutional medication, rejecting

medical intervention, reversing institutional control, rejecting institutional ownership of the female body, and reclaiming bodily autonomy through self-scarring. These scenes provide the basis for examining both the forms of bodily action through which agency is expressed and the ways those actions challenge institutional control. The study addresses the following research questions:

1. How is female agency manifested through bodily autonomy in *Level 16* (2018)?
2. How does bodily autonomy enable Vivien to resist patriarchal institutional control in *Level 16* (2018)?

2. Method

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to examine how bodily autonomy functions as a manifestation of female agency in *Level 16* (2018). This approach was appropriate because the study interpreted meanings represented through dialogue, character actions, interactions, and visual scenes rather than producing numerical findings. The analysis was guided primarily by Ahearn's (2001) theory of agency and supported by Foucault's (1977) concept of disciplinary power and Mead's (1934) concept of the self. The primary data consisted of dialogues, character interactions, and visual scenes from *Level 16* (2018), directed by Danishka Esterhazy. The selected data focused on representations of bodily autonomy, institutional control, and Vivien's actions. Secondary data were drawn from scholarly books and journal articles relevant to the theoretical framework and research topic.

Data were collected through documentation and repeated viewing of the film. Relevant dialogues and scenes were identified and documented, and official subtitles were consulted to support dialogue accuracy. Screenshots of the selected scenes were also collected as supporting evidence. Five scenes were selected purposively based on their relevance to the research questions. A scene was selected when it represented an action or decision concerning the female body, demonstrated a relationship between that action and institutional control, and provided evidence for interpreting bodily autonomy as a manifestation of agency. The five selected scenes concern refusing institutional medication, rejecting medical intervention, reversing institutional control, rejecting institutional ownership of the female body, and reclaiming bodily autonomy through self-scarring.

The data were analyzed manually through coding, categorization, and interpretation. First, the selected scenes were reviewed to identify relevant dialogue, bodily actions, character interactions, and visual details. Initial codes described the actions represented and the forms of institutional control involved. Related codes were then grouped into five categories based on the type of bodily action, the form of institutional control involved, and their relevance to the research questions. Each category was subsequently interpreted using the theoretical framework to explain how the observed action represented female agency through bodily autonomy.

Ahearn's (2001) theory of agency was used to interpret how Vivien acted within institutional constraints. Foucault's (1977) concept of disciplinary power supported the analysis of how the institution regulated and controlled the girls' bodies, while Mead's (1934) concept of the self informed the interpretation of changes in Vivien's self-awareness and in the meanings attached to the female body. Dialogue was analyzed

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alongside relevant visual evidence, including character actions, bodily expressions, interactions, and the institutional setting. To support the credibility of the interpretation, the film was viewed repeatedly, and the selected scenes were documented using dialogue records and screenshots. Dialogue accuracy was checked against the film's official subtitles, and the timestamps were rechecked against the corresponding scenes. The analytical matrix organized each selected scene by timestamp, bodily action, institutional control, theoretical focus, and interpretation. This structure helped maintain a consistent connection between the film evidence, the theoretical framework, and the research questions.

3. Results

The analysis identified five scenes in *Level 16* (2018) that illustrate different ways in which Vivien responds to institutional control over the female body. Although the scenes are presented chronologically, they do not necessarily establish a universal or strictly linear progression of female agency. Rather, they show how Vivien's responses change as she becomes increasingly aware of the institution's control over her body.

Table 1. Manifestations of Bodily Autonomy in *Level 16* (2018)

	Act of Bodily ɔnomy	**The Stage (Time Stamp)**	**Context of Bodily Autonomy**
1.	Refusing institutional medication	(00:18:23)	Vivien secretly refuses the institutional vitamin after Sophia warns her, marking the first moment she questions institutional authority over her body.
2.	Rejecting medical intervention	(00:49:09)	Vivien openly refuses Dr. Miro's injection, asserting her right to reject unwanted bodily intervention despite institutional pressure.
3.	Reversing institutional control	(01:13:17)	Vivien takes the syringe from the institution's representative and injects Miss Brixil, turning the institution's medical instrument against its own authority.
4.	Rejecting the institutional ownership of the female body	(01:28:37)	Vivien realizes that the institution commodifies female bodies after discovering Miss Brixil's surgical scars, leading her to reject patriarchal ownership of women's bodies.
5.	Reclaiming bodily autonomy through self-scarring	(01:34:53)	Vivien deliberately scars her own face after discovering how the institution exploits the girls' physical appearance for its own interests, marking her attempt to reclaim control over her body.

Table 1 summarizes five manifestations of bodily autonomy identified in the selected scenes. The sequence moves from covert refusal and explicit rejection of intervention to the interruption of institutional control, recognition of bodily commodification, and an ambivalent act intended to prevent further exploitation. Although the chronological arrangement suggests a development in Vivien's responses, it does not establish a universal or necessarily linear progression of female agency. The findings indicate that bodily autonomy is represented through different forms of decision-making and resistance, while the third and fifth scenes particularly require attention to the distinction between challenging institutional control and exercising autonomy without qualification. The following discussion interprets these findings in relation to the theoretical framework and previous studies.

4. Discussion

The findings illustrate how female agency in *Level 16* (2018) is expressed through Vivien's responses to patriarchal institutional control over her body. Rather than appearing only through direct confrontation, her agency emerges through different bodily decisions and acts of resistance. These actions reveal how bodily autonomy becomes a means of challenging institutional discipline and the commodification of women's bodies, although Vivien's ability to exercise control remains constrained by the institution. The following sections discuss these findings in relation to the theoretical framework and previous studies.

Bodily Autonomy through Refusal of Institutional Medication

Vivien's refusal to consume the institutional medication represents the earliest manifestation of bodily autonomy in the film. Although her resistance remains covert, this seemingly ordinary bodily decision demonstrates that agency can emerge through everyday acts of questioning and self-determination rather than direct confrontation. By deciding whether to consume the vitamins, Vivien begins to exercise control over her own body while remaining within the institution's authority.

Data 1. Refusing Institutional Medication as Initial Resistance



Figure 1. Vivien Secretly Refuses Institutional Medication (00:18:23)

Dialogue:
Sophia: "I never would. But I need you to keep a secret, too."
Vivien: "I don't want any trouble."
Sophia: "No. Listen. I'm going to tell you something, and I need you to promise me that I can really, truly trust you."
Vivien: "Obedience, cleanliness..."
Sophia: "I need you to listen to me."

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Vivien: "I follow the rules! And soon I will be chosen. So..."
Sophia: "Don't take the vitamins. At meal break. Do not take the vitamins. You'll have to pretend that you're..."
(The conversation is interrupted when another student calls Vivien to help change the sheets, preventing Sophia from explaining further. Vivien then leaves with the other student.)

The scene begins when Sophia attempts to share an important secret with Vivien. At first, Vivien firmly rejects the conversation by insisting, "I follow the rules! And soon I will be chosen," reflecting her commitment to the institution's rules and values. Sophia then warns her, "Don't take the vitamins," but before explaining further, their conversation is interrupted by another student. Although the warning offers no evidence, it introduces uncertainty into a routine Vivien has always accepted without question. During the next meal, she secretly spits out the vitamin instead of swallowing it, quietly refusing one of the institution's ordinary disciplinary practices. While the act appears insignificant, it marks an early moment in which Vivien acts on her own judgment rather than simply following institutional expectations, representing an initial manifestation of female agency through bodily autonomy.

What makes this decision significant is that Vivien acts without fully understanding the institution's hidden agenda. Rather than waiting for certainty, she chooses to act on her suspicion despite years of internalized obedience. Her hesitation reflects the difficulty of violating rules that have governed her behaviour throughout her life. Nevertheless, this intentional bodily decision demonstrates agency as the capacity to act within existing sociocultural constraints rather than outside them (Ahearn, 2001). Vivien does not escape Vestalis Academy or openly reject its authority; instead, she begins to negotiate that authority by deciding what may or may not enter her own body.

This decision also reflects a change in how Vivien understands the vitamins. What previously represented discipline, health, and virtue becomes associated with suspicion and institutional control after Sophia's warning. As meanings are reconstructed through social interaction (Mead, 1934), Vivien begins to question a practice she had previously accepted as care. This change in interpretation is reflected in her subsequent bodily action, connecting her emerging awareness with her initial act of resistance.

The vitamins can therefore be interpreted as more than daily medication. Their routine distribution presents bodily regulation as healthcare, potentially normalizing obedience through an apparently beneficial practice. Rather than relying solely on physical force, the institution embeds control within an ordinary routine, illustrating how disciplinary power can operate through practices presented as care (Foucault, 1977). Vivien's refusal interrupts this routine and challenges its previously unquestioned authority over her body.

This portrayal relates to Fikri and Rosida's (2022) discussion of patriarchal domination through the regulation and commodification of women's bodies and to Ismael and Saleh's (2023) analysis of surveillance and disciplinary practices as mechanisms of bodily control. The scene adds a specific emphasis on the role of a small bodily decision in initiating resistance before direct confrontation occurs. Within the film's narrative, Vivien's refusal illustrates how bodily autonomy can emerge through a limited act of choice while institutional authority continues to constrain her actions.

Bodily Autonomy through Rejecting Medical Intervention

Vivien's rejection of Dr. Miro's medical intervention represents a further manifestation of bodily autonomy. Unlike her earlier act of secretly refusing the institution's daily medication, this scene portrays a more explicit assertion of female agency as Vivien openly rejects an intervention imposed on her body. Her verbal refusal indicates that bodily autonomy is expressed not only through covert resistance but also through the attempt to refuse unwanted bodily intervention.

Data 2. Rejecting Medical Intervention



Figure 2. Vivien Refuses Dr. Miro's Injection (00:49:09)

Dialogue:
Dr. Miro: "If you have any problems in Rose Hall, you can report that to Miss Brixil."
Vivien: "Miss Brixil won't help us. She works with the guards."
Dr. Miro: "Vivien, have you been taking your vitamins?"
Vivien: "Yes, of course."
Dr. Miro: "Because you seem upset. Are you angry?"
Vivien: "Anger is a vice."
Dr. Miro: "The vices of the unclean lead to what?"
Vivien: "Hysteria."
Dr. Miro: "Which is a very serious risk for young women. I'm going to give you a concentrated vitamin injection."
Vivien: "I don't need that."
Dr. Miro: "When a girl behaves the way you are behaving, I am required to call the guards. Do you understand? To send you down for punishment. Is that what you want?... I'm not going to do that because I think you deserve a second chance. Do you deserve a second chance?"
Vivien: "Yes."
Dr. Miro: "What is a girl's first virtue?"
Vivien: "Obedience."

The scene begins when Dr. Miro attempts to reassure Vivien that Miss Brixil can be trusted whenever problems arise in Rose Hall. Rather than accepting this reassurance, Vivien responds, "Miss Brixil won't help us. She works with the guards," suggesting that she no longer trusts the institution's authority figures to act in the girls' best interests. Recognizing Vivien's unusual behaviour, Dr. Miro questions whether she has been taking her vitamins before deciding to administer a concentrated vitamin injection. Vivien immediately refuses, stating, "I don't need that." Unlike her earlier act of secretly refusing the institution's daily medication, this scene presents a more explicit refusal of medical intervention. Her response suggests that she no longer accepts the proposed intervention simply because it is authorized by the institution.

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Vivien's initial refusal marks a change in how she resists institutional authority. Previously, she challenged the institution in secret by disposing of the vitamins without being noticed. Here, she explicitly states, "I don't need that," but her resistance is followed by verbal compliance when Dr. Miro threatens her with punishment. Vivien answers "Yes" when asked whether she deserves a second chance and identifies "Obedience" as a girl's first virtue. These responses suggest that, although Vivien begins to assert control over her body, her ability to sustain that refusal remains constrained by the institution's authority. Her agency is therefore expressed through an initial refusal but limited by the threat of punishment (Ahearn, 2001).

This refusal is also connected to Vivien's changing understanding of the institution. Earlier in the film, medical procedures were presented as forms of protection, discipline, and moral improvement. As Vivien becomes aware of the academy's exploitation, however, these procedures become associated with manipulation and bodily control. This change in meaning can be interpreted through Mead's (1934) concept of the self, as Vivien begins to reconsider the significance of institutional practices in light of her changing understanding of the academy.

The proposed injection also illustrates how institutional authority can present discipline as healthcare. Dr. Miro frames the injection as a response to Vivien's emotional state, while his threat of punishment reveals the coercive conditions surrounding the intervention. This scene can therefore be interpreted through Foucault's (1977) concept of disciplinary power: medical authority functions not only to provide treatment but also to reinforce obedience. Although Vivien initially refuses the injection, her subsequent verbal compliance demonstrates how disciplinary power limits her ability to sustain that refusal. The scene thus reveals the tension between her emerging bodily autonomy and the institution's continued control over her actions.

This finding relates to Ismael and Saleh's (2023) discussion of surveillance and bodily regulation within patriarchal institutions and complements Matek's (2026) analysis of medical practices as disciplinary technologies. The scene adds a specific emphasis on the tension between bodily refusal and coerced compliance. Whereas Vivien's earlier resistance involved secretly avoiding medication, she now openly expresses her refusal but subsequently responds to the institution's demands under the threat of punishment. This contrast suggests that bodily autonomy in *Level 16* (2018) is not represented as a complete or uninterrupted achievement; rather, Vivien's attempt to assert control over her body remains limited by institutional power.

Bodily Autonomy through Reversing Institutional Control

Vivien's decision to seize the syringe and inject Miss Brixil represents a further development in her resistance to patriarchal institutional control. Unlike her previous acts of secretly refusing medication and verbally rejecting medical intervention, this scene portrays a more direct confrontation with institutional authority. Vivien interrupts the attempted injection and takes control of the instrument being used against her. However, the distinction between physical resistance and bodily autonomy is important: the relevance of this action to bodily autonomy lies in Vivien's attempt to prevent an unwanted intervention and regain control over what happens to her body.

Data 3. Reversing Institutional Control



Figure 3. Vivien Reverses Institutional Control (01:13:17)

Dialogue:
Miss Brixil: "Hello. You might as well come in...Sit down. It won't hurt to sit down. You can barely stand."
Vivien: "Because you drugged me."
Miss Brixil: "He said you were different."
Vivien: "Where's Sophia?"
Miss Brixil: "You two are friends... She's downstairs. She's fine... I don't want to hurt you. Any of you. I'm going to leave this place tonight or tomorrow. First, I need to give
you this vitamin... then I will take you downstairs to see your friend."
Vivien: "Or not."
(As Miss Brixil attempts to inject her, Vivien strikes Miss Brixil, seizes the syringe, and injects her instead.)

The scene begins when Vivien secretly investigates the institution in search of Sophia but is discovered by Miss Brixil. Miss Brixil orders Vivien to sit down and prepares another vitamin injection despite Vivien's accusation that she has been drugged. Although Vivien is primarily concerned about Sophia's safety, Miss Brixil insists on administering the injection before allowing her to see her friend. Instead of submitting, Vivien responds, "Or not," before striking Miss Brixil, seizing the syringe, and injecting her instead. The film thus depicts a physical confrontation in which Vivien interrupts a procedure intended to regulate her body and disrupts the authority behind it.

The significance of this moment lies in Vivien's refusal to submit to an intervention imposed by the institution. Whereas her earlier resistance involved avoiding medication or verbally rejecting an injection, she now physically interrupts the procedure. This action can be interpreted through Ahearn's (2001) theory of agency as an attempt to act within existing social constraints. Vivien remains inside Vestalis Academy, where institutional authority continues to restrict her choices, yet she acts to prevent the procedure from being carried out on her. Nevertheless, injecting Miss Brixil is not, in itself, an expression of bodily autonomy. Rather, the physical confrontation is the means through which Vivien attempts to resist institutional control over her own body.

The syringe also changes its significance within the scene. Throughout the film, it functions as an instrument of medical authority used to regulate the girls' bodies. When Vivien seizes it, she interrupts its established function as a means of institutional control. This change can be interpreted through Mead's (1934) concept of the self, which helps explain how meanings are reconstructed through social interaction. The syringe no longer functions solely as an instrument of institutional authority; its appropriation exposes how the institution's control can be challenged within the immediate situation.

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Miss Brixil's insistence on administering the injection despite Vivien's resistance further reveals the disciplinary function of the procedure. Although presented as healthcare, the intervention occurs within a system that demands obedience and regulates the girls' bodies. This interpretation draws on Foucault's (1977) concept of disciplinary power, through which institutional control can be maintained by presenting regulation as care. Vivien's interruption challenges the institution's assumption that it has the authority to determine what happens to her body.

This finding relates to Matek's (2026) discussion of medical practices as technologies of patriarchal discipline and Bhanbhro et al.'s (2025) analysis of female agency as resistance to institutional oppression. The scene adds a specific distinction between resisting an imposed bodily intervention and physically confronting the authority enforcing it. In *Level 16* (2018), these actions occur together, but they are not conceptually identical: physical resistance describes Vivien's confrontation with Miss Brixil, whereas bodily autonomy concerns her attempt to regain control over the intervention imposed on her body. This distinction clarifies how the scene contributes to the study's understanding of female agency without treating every act of resistance as an equivalent expression of bodily autonomy.

Bodily Autonomy through Rejecting the Institutional Ownership of the Female Body

Vivien's discovery of Miss Brixil's surgical scars represents a further development in her understanding of bodily autonomy and patriarchal institutional control. Unlike her previous acts of resisting institutional discipline, this scene reveals that the institution's control extends beyond surveillance and obedience to the commodification of women's bodies. Vivien's recognition of this exploitation becomes a basis for rejecting the institution's claim over female bodies and contributes to the girls' collective resistance against institutional domination.

Data 4. Rejecting the Institutional Ownership of the Female Body



Figure 4. Vivien Discovers Miss Brixil's Surgical Scar (01:28:37)

Dialogue:
Vivien: "Tell them about the dead girls. You killed Rita."
Miss Brixil: "I've never killed anyone."
Vivien: "Maybe you didn't carve her up yourself. But you killed her. You killed her. How many girls have died in this place?"
Miss Brixil: "There's nothing I can do... It's too late."
(Vivien notices the surgical scars on Miss Brixil's face.)
Vivien: "You're one of the sponsors."
Miss Brixil: "I just wanted to help him. He's a brilliant man. A genius. I didn't know."
Vivien: "Whose face are you wearing?"

The scene begins after Vivien discovers the institution's hidden promotional video, which reveals that the students are being raised as sources of skin for wealthy sponsors seeking rejuvenation procedures. Confronting Miss Brixil, Vivien accuses her of participating in the deaths of the girls exploited by the institution. Although Miss Brixil denies personally killing anyone, Vivien challenges her complicity in sustaining the system. The confrontation reaches its turning point when Vivien notices the surgical scars on Miss Brixil's face and asks, "Whose face are you wearing?" This discovery reveals to Vivien that the institution's violence extends beyond surveillance and discipline to the commodification of women's bodies. She and the other girls subsequently confine Miss Brixil in the same isolation room previously used to punish disobedient students, turning their recognition of institutional exploitation into collective resistance.

Vivien's question reflects a change in how she understands both the institution and the female body. Earlier, she encounters institutional power through surveillance, medication, and punishment. The discovery of Miss Brixil's reconstructed face reveals a deeper form of domination, the girls are treated not simply as individuals to be disciplined but as biological resources whose bodies can be harvested and exchanged. This realization shifts Vivien's resistance beyond opposing institutional discipline to rejecting the institution's claim of ownership over female bodies. Her response illustrates agency as action undertaken within existing institutional constraints (Ahearn, 2001), while the subsequent collective action shows that resistance in this scene extends beyond Vivien's individual decisions.

The scars also change the meaning associated with the female body. Throughout Vestalis Academy, beauty, purity, and obedience are presented as ideals to which every girl should aspire. The discovery of the origin of Miss Brixil's appearance exposes these ideals as part of a system that conceals exploitation. The female body is revealed as an object of institutional and economic value rather than simply a symbol of perfection or virtue. This change can be interpreted through Mead's (1934) concept of the self, which helps explain how meanings are reconstructed through social interaction. In this scene, bodily autonomy becomes connected not only to decisions concerning one's own body but also to the rejection of institutional claims to possess, exchange, and profit from female bodies.

The girls' decision to confine Miss Brixil in the isolation room further reverses the institution's disciplinary logic. Earlier in the film, the room functions as a space where obedience is enforced through punishment and fear. When the girls confine Miss Brixil there, they repurpose a mechanism previously used to enforce institutional authority. This reversal can be interpreted through Foucault's (1977) concept of disciplinary power because the girls redirect the function of an institutional space against one of its representatives. However, this action should be distinguished from bodily autonomy itself, confining Miss Brixil is an act of collective resistance, while its connection to bodily autonomy lies in the girls' response to a system that treats their bodies as institutional property.

This finding relates to Fikri and Rosida's (2022) discussion of the commodification of women's bodies and Bhanbhro et al.'s (2025) analysis of resistance to systems that exploit female bodies. The scene adds a connection between recognizing bodily commodification and acting collectively against the institution that enables it. In *Level 16* (2018), Vivien's confrontation with Miss Brixil illustrates how the rejection of

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institutional ownership becomes a basis for collective resistance. The finding therefore extends the discussion of bodily autonomy beyond individual decisions about bodily intervention to the struggle against institutional claims to define, possess, and commodify female bodies within the film's narrative.

Bodily Autonomy Through Self-Scarring

Vivien's decision to deliberately scar her own face represents the culmination of bodily resistance in *Level 16* (2018). Unlike her earlier acts of refusing medication, rejecting medical intervention, and challenging institutional authority, this final act directly challenges the value that the institution assigns to her body. By damaging the feature that has made her valuable to the institution, Vivien attempts to reclaim control over her body and resist its commodification. However, because this act involves permanent physical harm and occurs under severe institutional constraints, it also reveals the painful limits of her available choices.

Data 5. Reclaiming Bodily Autonomy Through Self-Scarring



Figure 5. Vivien Deliberately Scars Her Own Face (01:34:53)

Dialogue:
Vivien: "We know what you've done. We found Rita."
Dr. Miro: "Oh, my dear, you're confused... I just want to help you."
Vivien: "No, you don't. You want to kill us."
Dr. Miro: "No. I saved you... I saved you from poverty and parents who were more than happy to sell you. I built a home for you."
Vivien: "You locked us up. You drugged us."
Dr. Miro: "You had no future, Vivien. I gave you food and safety..."
Vivien: "...Ignorance."
Dr. Miro: "It's too late to save her, but it's not too late for you, Vivien. I can't save the other girls, but I could save you. I could help you, and you could help me."
Vivien: "How could I help you?"
Dr. Miro: "Open the door and help me find all the other lost girls. Help me get them back to the school... You don't have to share the same fate as this poor girl. You're not like her.
You're not like the other girls."
Vivien: "You're wrong. I am. I am just like the other girls."
Vivien: (gripping her own face) "So, how much am I worth? How much is this worth?"
Dr. Miro: "I've invested sixteen years of my life for that face. I'm not leaving without it." (Vivien deliberately slashes her own face, attempting to disrupt the value that the institution assigns to her appearance.)

The scene begins when Vivien confronts Dr. Miro after discovering the institution's exploitation of the girls. Dr. Miro presents himself as their savior, claiming that he rescued them from poverty and provided them with safety and a future. Vivien challenges this account by reminding him that the girls have been imprisoned and drugged. When Dr. Miro attempts to persuade her that she is different from the other girls and can still be saved, Vivien rejects this distinction by declaring, "I am just like the other girls." She then asks, "So, how much am I worth? How much is this worth?" Dr. Miro's response, "I've invested sixteen years of my life for that face," exposes the economic logic behind the institution's treatment of Vivien. Her face is treated not simply as part of her identity but as an investment whose value the institution seeks to control.

Vivien's decision to scar her face can be interpreted as an attempt to disrupt this imposed valuation. Rather than allowing Dr. Miro to determine the future of her body, she makes a deliberate decision within the limited choices available to her. This illustrates Ahearn's (2001) understanding of agency as action exercised within social and structural constraints. Nevertheless, the scene does not depict freedom from institutional power: Vivien remains in a coercive situation, and her decision entails lasting physical harm. Her agency is therefore visible in her attempt to resist the institution's claim over her body, while the cost of that resistance reveals the severe limitations placed on her choices.

The exchange also changes the meaning associated with Vivien's face. Throughout the film, beauty and physical perfection are presented as qualities the girls must preserve. Dr. Miro's description of her face as an investment reveals that these ideals serve the institution's economic interests. Through her action, Vivien challenges the meaning imposed on her appearance and refuses to preserve it for the institution's benefit. This can be related to Mead's (1934) view that meanings are shaped and reconstructed through social interaction. However, the scar should not be interpreted as automatically replacing an imposed identity with complete self-determination. Instead, it signifies Vivien's attempt to contest the institution's definition of her worth under conditions in which meaningful alternatives have been severely restricted.

Vivien's action also exposes the disciplinary logic of the academy. As Foucault (1977) explains, disciplinary power operates by regulating bodies and producing bodies that serve particular institutional purposes. In Level 16, the girls' physical appearance becomes part of a system that disciplines and commodifies them for the benefit of wealthy sponsors. By damaging the feature that the institution values, Vivien attempts to disrupt its claim over her body. Yet the scene also demonstrates the violence of the institution's control: resistance takes the form of self-inflicted injury because the institution has restricted the alternatives available to her. The act thus reveals both the possibility of agency and the damaging conditions under which that agency is exercised.

This reading relates to Bhanbhro et al.'s (2025) discussion of female agency as resistance to patriarchal systems that regulate and exploit women's bodies and to Sanjaya and Fitriana's (2026) discussion of resistance to patriarchal control over identity. The scene adds a more ambivalent dimension by depicting resistance through an act that challenges bodily commodification while also causing permanent harm. Within the film's narrative, self-scarring marks the culmination of Vivien's resistance and contributes to the girls' eventual escape from the institution, where they discover that the outside air is not poisonous. The ending connects Vivien's attempt to reclaim control over her body with the broader possibility of collective freedom. Nevertheless, the scene does not

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suggest that bodily autonomy requires self-injury or that resistance automatically eliminates every form of institutional power.

Taken together, the five findings illustrate how bodily autonomy in *Level 16* (2018) is represented through different responses to patriarchal institutional control. Vivien first questions institutional authority through the covert refusal of medication, then openly rejects medical intervention before physically interrupting an imposed procedure. Her discovery of the commodification of the girls' bodies expands this resistance into collective action, while self-scarring marks the culmination of her personal resistance by challenging the value assigned to her appearance.

Although these scenes suggest a development in Vivien's awareness and actions, they do not establish a fixed or universally linear progression of agency. Read through Ahearn's (2001) theory of agency, Foucault's (1977) concept of disciplinary power, and Mead's (1934) concept of the self, the findings show how bodily autonomy involves negotiating institutional constraints, challenging the meanings imposed on the female body, and resisting its commodification. The film's ending connects Vivien's individual resistance with the girls' collective escape, while the permanent harm involved in self-scarring reveals the costs of resistance under coercive conditions. This study therefore contributes to feminist dystopian film studies by examining bodily autonomy as a complex manifestation of female agency within a specific narrative of patriarchal institutional control.

5. Conclusions

This study examined how female agency is constructed through bodily autonomy in *Level 16* (2018), focusing on Vivien's resistance to patriarchal institutional control. The findings show that female agency is expressed through five forms of bodily resistance: refusing institutional medication, rejecting medical intervention, reversing institutional control, challenging the institutional ownership and commodification of women's bodies, and reclaiming bodily autonomy through self-scarring. Together, these findings demonstrate how Vivien increasingly challenges the institution's authority over her body and identity. Although these forms of resistance suggest a development in her awareness and actions, female agency does not necessarily follow a fixed or linear progression.

Through Ahearn's (2001) theory of agency, Vivien's actions can be understood as attempts to act within existing social constraints. Foucault's (1977) concept of disciplinary power explains how the academy regulates and controls the girls' bodies, while Mead's (1934) concept of the self helps explain how Vivien challenges the meanings imposed on her identity and appearance. The film's ending places Vivien's individual resistance within a broader movement toward collective freedom, as the girls escape the institution's control and discover that the outside air is not poisonous.

This study contributes to feminist dystopian film studies by examining bodily autonomy as a process of resisting and negotiating patriarchal institutional power, culminating in Vivien's attempt to reclaim control over her body while highlighting the constraints and costs involved in that resistance. However, this study is limited to one feminist dystopian film, *Level 16* (2018), and five selected scenes focusing on Vivien's resistance to patriarchal institutional control.

Therefore, the findings are interpretive and specific to the selected scenes rather than generalizable to all feminist dystopian films or representations of female agency. Future studies may examine bodily autonomy in other dystopian films or literary works to explore how different institutional contexts shape the representation of female agency.

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