

# Reading the Void: Nil Yalter's Semiotics of the Body

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**Abstract** This article examines Nil Yalter's seminal work *The Headless Woman or the Belly Dance* (1974), reinterpreting the void not as a category of absence but as a semiotic strategy – a relational field in which body, text, and viewer converge. The analysis unfolds along three interrelated axes: erasure, latency, and potentiality. Yalter transforms her fragmented, headless body into a dynamic site of resistance and feminist self-inscription, destabilising the conventional gaze and opening new possibilities of meaning. Ultimately, the article demonstrates how the void operates as a performative and political force that actively reconfigures identity, turning absence into an act of emancipation.

**Keywords** Void. Nil Yalter. Feminist art. Semiotics of the body. Relational aesthetics. Performance. Video art.

**Summary** 1 Introduction and Theoretical Framework. – 2 Literature Review. – 3 Spatial and Visual Void: Pre-Text and Relational Space. – 4 Synecdoche: Object/Subject of Desire. – 5 Erasure: Headless Body. – 6 Latency: Deferred Presence in Absence. – 7 Potentiality: Generative Force of the Void. – 8 Conclusion.

## 1 Introduction and Theoretical Framework

Nil Yalter's *The Headless Woman or the Belly Dance* (1974) presents a critical paradox; it is an uncompromising act of feminist self-inscription that transforms corporeal presence and fragmentation into a site of embodied agency [fig. 1]. Using a Portapak camera,<sup>1</sup> Yalter isolates the abdomen as a surface of inscription while deliberately excluding the head from the frame. This partial visibility of the body and the absent head establish a 'visual void' as a semiotic strategy, to reconfigure the subject's presence. This compositional choice disrupts the organic perception of corporeality and unsettles conventional structures of representation. Circular ink patterns transition to vertical lines, tracing a rhythm that reflects women's long-term experience of violence. In this work, the void becomes a relational condition, expressive and generative, through which Yalter inscribes herself in a position of resistance. This approach is consistent with Yalter's own critical methodology, where she highlights the body as a site of social commentary:

By using new media in the field of art, by working on cultural topography, I process the body of the artist aging in a degenerating society. The body of the artist is a vector for social topics [...] I am a female shaman on a knife's edge. The surface I write my message on is my own skin. (Yalter 2001, 1857-60)

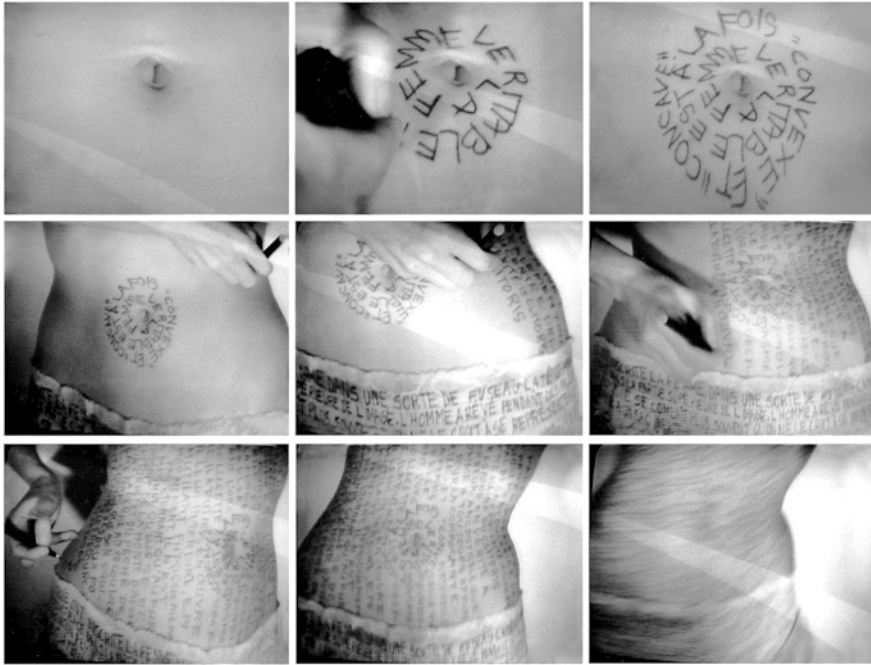
In the following pages, the void is explored in semiotic terms, positioned as an aesthetic and feminist strategy that radically redefines the relationship between body, text, and viewer. This analysis is structured along three interrelated axes: erasure, understood as the strategic subtraction of dominant representational codes; latency, conceived as a temporal suspension in which meaning is deferred; and potentiality, interpreted as the opening towards alternative subjectivities and historical narratives.

Methodologically, this discussion synthesises diverse theoretical lenses: the semiotics of the void (Burini 2010); the aesthetics of emptiness in Eastern philosophy (Pasqualotto 2001); and feminist theory (Cixous 1975; Pollock 1996; Bal 1996; Kristeva 2009; Braidotti 1994). By bringing these perspectives into dialogue, the article

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<sup>1</sup> The arrival of the Portapak - a lightweight, portable camera - in Europe in 1967 opened the practice of videoart to feminist and militant discourse. Video thus becomes a medium to denounce, transmit, and create, giving visibility and voice to women's experiences. See the transcription of the podcast "Art et féminismes: épisode 2. Nil Yalter, *La femme sans tête*, 1974", Centre Pompidou. [https://www.centrepompidou.fr/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Un\\_podcast\\_une\\_oeuvre\\_-\\_Art\\_et\\_feminisme\\_-\\_Ep.\\_2\\_Nil\\_Yalter\\_-\\_transcription.pdf](https://www.centrepompidou.fr/fileadmin/user_upload/Un_podcast_une_oeuvre_-_Art_et_feminisme_-_Ep._2_Nil_Yalter_-_transcription.pdf).

demonstrates how Yalter transforms absence and emptiness into a site of resistance and renegotiation.



**Figure 1** Nil Yalter, *The Headless Woman or The Belly Dance*. 1974. Black-and-white video, Betacam Digital PAL, 4:3, sound, 24'47". Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris

The void has been explored across diverse theoretical traditions relevant to Yalter's practice. Within feminist art history, Griselda Pollock (1996) and Mieke Bal (1996) demonstrated how visual culture inscribes yet contests gendered representations, framing the female body as a site of discursive struggle. Their analyses provide a framework to understand Yalter's performance as a negotiation with dominant cultural codes.<sup>2</sup> This study, therefore, offers a new interpretative framework, positioning the void not as a category of emptiness but as

<sup>2</sup> The main existing scholarship on Yalter's work includes: Dumont, *Nil Yalter*; MAC VAL, *Nil Yalter: TRANS/HUMANCE*; Smolik, "Nil Yalter"; ArtReview, *Nil Yalter: Exile Is a Hard Job*; Nil Yalter, *Temporary Dwellings* (1974-2005), Tate Collection. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/yalter-temporary-dwellings-t13652>; Museum Ludwig, *Nil Yalter*; ReactFeminism, "Nil Yalter - La femme sans tête (1974)"; Dumont, "Interview with Nil Yalter".

a productive field of relational aesthetics.<sup>3</sup> From a broader feminist theoretical perspective, Hélène Cixous's seminal essay *Le Rire de la Méduse* (1975) introduced the notion of *écriture féminine*, where writing becomes an inscription of the female body and destabilises patriarchal language. Julia Kristeva (2009) further expands this view by emphasising the significance of absence in processes of subject formation. Similarly, Rosi Braidotti (1994) develops the concept of "nomadic subjectivity", a critical tool for reading Yalter's fragmented representations of the body and mobile identity.<sup>4</sup>

## 2 Literature Review

In semiotic theory, notably Lotman's (Burini 2010) concept of the void identifies emptiness as a fundamental problem in cultural semiotics, proposing that meaning emerges not only from signs but also from silences and unarticulated spaces.<sup>5</sup> This theoretical framework

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**3** Nil Yalter's exploration of the void and fragmentation is consistent throughout her work. For example, Yalter has focused on immigration. In *Exile Is a Hard Job* (1983), the social invisibility of migrant women underscores displacement and marginality, while in the *Migrations/Passages* series (1973-75), fragmented and masked bodies operate as surfaces of inscription, reflecting on corporeality and relational identity. Across these works, the void functions as a generative semiotic and performative strategy, revealing also its significance as a feminist tactic of resistance and renegotiation.

**4** Rosi Braidotti's notion of "nomadic subjectivity" (1994) emphasises the fluid, relational, and processual nature of identity, which is continuously produced through interactions with multiple forces, bodies, and discourses. In describing this figure, Braidotti engages in a dialogue with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1980), particularly with the concept of the deterritorialisation of knowledge – a rhizomatic mode of thought which, rejecting the idea of a centre and of an authentic identity, traces networks of connections and transitions between experiences. As Braidotti states: "Nomadic shifts designate therefore a creative sort of becoming; a performative metaphor that allows for otherwise unlikely encounters and unsuspected sources of interaction of experience and of knowledge" (Braidotti 1994, 6). In dialogue with Deleuze's semiotics and diagrammatic understanding of substance and matter, subjectivity is not a pre-existing, autonomous center but emerges from assemblages of relations and differences. Considering also Foucault, as reread by Deleuze, the focus shifts from tracing a historical referent – such as the gendered, racialised, human, or natural body – to examining the regime of objects and power relations that constitute it. These include forms of domination and subordination that participate in processes of becoming (Demaria 2019). Yalter's performances, with their segmented and mobile representations of the body, exemplify this perspective by deterritorialising normative identities and foregrounding the semiotic-material processes through which subjectivity and alterity are produced, including attention to the women and their cultural figurations.

**5** Lotman in 1993 dictated an article entitled "The Void as a Fundamental Problem" where he argues that it is only under the conditions of an empty space-time that the world gains the possibility of movement. This concept connects to Lotman's idea – previously expressed in other writings including *La cultura e l'esplosione* (1993) – that the path of the individual, and the humanity, is marked by unrealised possibilities and lost roads, often dismissed by Hegelian tradition (Burini 2010, 20-2).

enables us to reimagine emptiness as a space of possibility rather than negation.

Further contributions from performance studies and visual culture provide additional grounding. Peggy Phelan (1993) argues that performance is defined by disappearance and non-reproducibility, suggesting that invisibility itself may be a source of meaning. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1996) conceptualise the *Corps sans Organes* (CsO), thereby disrupting the unity of the organic body and opening a field of multiple becomings – a perspective resonant with Yalter's headless figure.

This synthesis suggests that the void should not be understood merely as absence, but as a dynamic site of negotiation, resistance, and potentiality. Against this backdrop, the article sets out to examine Yalter's *The Headless Woman or the Belly Dance* through the interrelated lenses of erasure, latency, and potentiality.

### 3 Spatial and Visual Void: Pre-Text and Relational Space

*The Headless Woman or the Belly Dance* (1974) is a twenty-four-minute video performance in which the camera frames the artist's abdomen in close-up. Yalter inscribes circular lines from the poet and anthropologist René Nelli's *Erotique et civilisations* (1972) in black ink on her skin.<sup>6</sup> The performance features Turkish music and Yalter's voice reading the text aloud:

La femme est à la fois convexe et concave, mais encore faut-il qu'on ne l'ait point privée, moralement ou physiquement, du centre principal de sa convexité: le clitoris. (René Nelli 1972)<sup>7</sup>

The black handwriting on the light skin of her belly, amplified by the black-and-white contrast, thus denounces a specific form of violence

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<sup>6</sup> Nil Yalter left Turkey in the 1960s for Paris, just before the events of May 1968, a period of social and political upheaval. She navigates two realities: the contestatory atmosphere of France and the repressive political climate in Turkey, marked by the 1971 military coup. Her art and her body act as a medium to take a stance, with the camera functioning as a 'carrier pigeon' transmitting political and feminist messages. Nil Yalter experimented with video after initially working with Polaroid photography, which allowed her to capture the instant and exercise immediate control. She found video offered greater freedom because, through the principle of 'feedback', a gesture could be instantly replayed. Yalter described this as discovering a 'bodily writing' that led her toward a more politicised practice. The work was first presented in the international exhibition *ArtVidéo Confrontation* at Arc 2, Paris, at the end of 1974 (Dallier 1975).

<sup>7</sup> The English translation of the quotation inscribed on the abdomen reads: "The true woman is both convex and concave, but only if she has not been deprived, morally or physically, of the main centre of her convexity: the clitoris" (Author's transl.).

against women. Crucially, this gesture also refers to an ancestral Anatolian rite in which an imam writes verses from the Koran on the belly of an infertile or disobedient woman, at her husband's request, in a 'healing' gesture. Once she finishes writing, the artist begins to dance accompanied by traditional Turkish music.<sup>8</sup> Yalter reappropriates this ritual and the traditional dance, juxtaposing it with the text of René Nelli, thereby initiating an act of liberation for both her own body, as a Turkish-born female artist, and for women's body collectively.<sup>9</sup>

In this work, the belly operates as both a blank space and a palimpsest – a surface where text, memory, and discourse coexist in latent form, awaiting activation by the viewer. It is the erasure of the head that, generating a gap that disrupts conventional modes of recognition, elevates the abdomen to a primary site of semiotic focus. Meaning arises through the interplay of visibility and invisibility, of fragments that are revealed and those that are withheld. The performance never offers the viewer a complete body; rather, it stages a partial presence. The resulting fragmented body, composed of the exposed belly, the gesturing hands, and the voice, constructs a relational space in which interpretation requires the viewer's active participation.

#### 4 Synecdoche: Object/Subject of Desire

At the core of Yalter's visual language lies absence and deferment. Yalter's performance transforms the figure into abstraction, by reducing it to a single bodily fragment.<sup>10</sup> This discourse on a body that we never see in its entirety leads us to the use of a specific rhetorical figure, that of the synecdoche. Against the authority of a masculine *logos*, Yalter deploys a form of repetition and mimesis that borders on subversion – a syntax in which the fragments destabilise the unity of the body while affirming its resistant specificity.

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<sup>8</sup> Belly dance, originating from the Middle East and Arab countries, was introduced to France in the eighteenth century by Napoleon's soldiers in Egypt, often associated with sensuality. Nil Yalter reclaims this dance as a means of artistic and political expression. Her body becomes a medium for text and memory. In the video, the body is depicted headless, focusing attention on the belly and its movements, transforming the body into a space for narrative and protest. See the transcription of the podcast "Art et féminismes: episode 2. Nil Yalter, *La femme sans tête*, 1974", Centre Pompidou. [https://www.centrepompidou.fr/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Un\\_podcast\\_\\_une\\_oeuvre\\_-\\_Art\\_et\\_feminisme\\_-\\_Ep.\\_2\\_Nil\\_Yalter\\_-\\_transcription.pdf](https://www.centrepompidou.fr/fileadmin/user_upload/Un_podcast__une_oeuvre_-_Art_et_feminisme_-_Ep._2_Nil_Yalter_-_transcription.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> The work evokes Yalter's migration from Turkey to France in 1965, situating the performance within feminist and political contexts.

<sup>10</sup> This visual strategy recalls cultural traditions in which women's bodies are revealed only in fragments – for instance, the Islamic practice of partial veiling – yet in this context acquires a critical dimension.

Through synecdoche, Yalter challenges the reduction of women to objects of desire and reclaims the fragment as a locus of agency, resistance, and embodied speech. The performance interrogates the ways in which the female body is produced through power relations, "mapped by phallic desire, and territorialised within oedipal discourse" (de Lauretis 1999, 37; Author's transl.).

Yalter's intervention aligns with feminist understanding of the body as a:

libidinal surface which allows for the construction of subjectivity through the complex interplay of identifications, and consequently of language and alterity. (Braidotti 1991, 248)<sup>11</sup>

Language, therefore, gives voice to the body – the link between subjectivity and sexuality – through figures, namely the belly in this study, and through a syntax that mimics female desire as a transformative energy that reconfigures the boundary between self and other, subject and object. This metonymic language:

suggests a continuous, non-hierarchical recontextualization of language and speech, where the metaphorical regime could not escape the patriarchal code of belonging. (Monticelli 1997, 211; Author's transl.)

Furthermore, the metonymic belly functions as a metaphor – a figure for desire that belongs to the realm of the unspoken (Demaria 2019).

This strategy resonates with Hélène Cixous's theorisation of *écriture féminine*, where writing is intimately bound to the female body. The link of body and writing – often figured as maternal milk and ink – expresses the necessity of inscribing feminine experience into discourse (Cixous 1977, 224). *Écriture* challenges the supremacy of phallogentric language, enabling women to escape roles historically defined by emptiness and silence. In her work, the artist enacts such an inscription by transforming her own body into a site of textual and libidinal expression, a "counter-text, capable of decoding the blank spaces of language" (Demaria 2019, 87; Author's transl.).<sup>12</sup>

Yalter's headless figure, deprived of the traditional site of subjectivization – the face –, suspends recognisability and reconfigures the gaze. The body in the video is deliberately 'gazeless',

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**11** Braidotti (1991) draws here on Luce Irigaray's (1987, 420-37) reflections on the relation between the body, subjectivity, and language.

**12** This resonates with the libidinal tone of the post-1968 era, when art politics, and eroticism intersected as sites of liberation, and desire became a political and aesthetic tool to challenge systems of domination (Deleuze, Guattari 1972, 121).

a strategy that destabilises the viewer's position. The absence of the head does not suppress vision but rather decentralises it. The viewer is positioned in a displaced and non-neutral relationship to the body on screen, caught within a visual regime that Yalter herself constructs and controls. This shift renders the belly, once an object of male desire, an expressive resource and an operative device through which identity is articulated. This decentralised framing operates as an interface (*sutura*) that binds camera, artist and spectator in a dynamic regime of gazes, determining both the act of being seen and seeing.

The act of writing converges around the navel, transforming it into the focal point of the gaze. As Arasse (1983, 55-70; 2021, 320-7) observed in his analysis of the asymmetrical navel of *Saint Sebastian* (1476) by Antonello da Messina, the navel inscribes in the body the desire of someone who, when looked at, responds to the beholder.<sup>13</sup>

Reinforced by the presence of the circular written word around the same axis, the navel resembles an "eye" that looks back at viewers from within the woman's body, keeping them *nel mirino* – a meta-reflective response to the viewer's gaze (Arasse 1983, 60; Arasse 2021, 322-3; Migliore 2018, 398). This 'navel-eye' looks back from within itself, returns and absorbs the viewer's gaze (Arasse 1983, 60). This exchange of glances acts as a *catharsis* of the sexualised female body and desire. Yalter transforms herself into an embodied gaze and a locus of desire, reclaimed by the rhythm of the torso and the tremor of the text. From this centripetal focus on the navel, the dynamics of looking extend to the body as a whole, where Yalter's removal of the head further complicates the exchange of gazes.

## 5 Erasure: Headless Body

The erasure of the head constitutes the most radical and literal void in this visual economy. The absent head deprives the viewer of the conventional site of subjectivization, destabilising the logic of recognition. Yalter challenges conventions, shifting female identity construction from a place of recognition and submission to a place of 'becoming'.

By removing the head Yalter renders the body effectively 'gazeless', depriving it of the conventional site of identity and recognition. In eluding the reciprocal gaze, she dismantles the conventional hierarchy of looking, in which the subject on screen is possessed by the viewer. This absence not only decentralises visual authority but

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**13** In Renaissance painting the navel functions almost as a fetishist detail that shifts attention from the wound to aesthetic and sensual pleasure (Arasse 2021, 320-7).

limits immediate access to the subject, opening the moving images to plural interpretation and makes the artist's gesture even more legible. In Yalter's system of enunciation, the headless body and the 'navel-eye' together orchestrate a complex regime of gazes in which identification and meaning are not imposed but negotiated. The viewer becomes conscious of their own positioning, while the body's subjectivity emerges as a site of potentiality rather than objectification.

The absence of the head also interrupts the hierarchy of bodily functions; speech, thought, and vision are displaced from their conventional locus. Instead, voice seems to emanate from an unseen source while writing and gesture dominate the field of representation. This redistribution of functions produces a disarticulated body, a corporeal fragment that defies the coherence of the organic whole.

The headless body further resonates with Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the "Body without Organs" (1996, XX), a body stripped of its hierarchical organisation and open to new flows of desire and meaning. Erasure thus emerges as a semiotic strategy; by subtracting the head, Yalter destabilises the centrality of subjective presence and introduces a productive absence that compels the viewer to reimagine the identity as relational, fragmented, and open-ended. The figure's presence is filtered and dissociated from conventional forms of lexicalisation. The body is progressively veiled and revealed, either through its ungraspable complete form or by being alienated by the written words that invade the skin; yet presence is made all the more intense (Deleuze 2002). This form of 'effacement' transforms the body into an active plane of consistency, where new forms of subjectivity are constructed and destabilised.

The absent head resonates with Kristeva's reflections on the "economy of the invisible", which insists on the necessity of the gaze to attend both to what is represented and to what remains unrepresented – death, violence, castration – and illuminates how absence continues to act as a generative presence (Kristeva 1980, 3-35; 2009).<sup>14</sup> In this context, the body becomes an icon, an 'economy' of what remains unseen, prompting reflection on that very invisibility (Kristeva 1980, 3-35). The subject's head remains unseen, yet we observe parts of the body in motion and recognise the voice as emanating from the body. The headless woman thus transitions from an object of vision to a speaking subject who appropriates an

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**14** Kristeva's (1980, 3-35) analysis of icons further enriches this interpretation. In Byzantine culture, the icon functioned not only as an image but also as a form of writing, where the visible surface pointed toward an invisible essence. This 'minimalist economy' corresponds to Yalter's use of the belly as a writing surface: an inscription that simultaneously reveals and conceals, generating meaning through the deliberate use of absence.

external text. This act of appropriation and translation functions as a strategy for departing from a subordinate position, making the abstract yet deeply embodied. The writing forms a labyrinthine pattern, demanding that the text be fully assimilated, ingested by the body. This gesture allows the body to become profoundly desiring, fully possessing its means and its desire.

Ultimately, the correlation between the narrated head and the absent body, between visibility and invisibility, opens a new theoretical space. In Yalter's work, the absence of the head is not a closure but an aperture – a void that engages the viewer and reconfigures the body as a site resistance, memory, and new subjectivities. Erasure, here, inaugurates a relational field where meaning is actively negotiated. Yalter transforms the fragmentary body into a productive writing surface, where absence is inscribed.

## 6 Latency: Deferred Presence in Absence

If erasure opens the space of meaning by subtraction, latency addresses the suspended dimension of this space, where what is absent simultaneously carries the potential of presence. While erasure operates spatially, latency unfolds temporally, holding the subject in an interval of indetermination. In Yalter's performance, the void is not merely a visual gap but a temporal suspension.

The writing inscribed on the belly is legible yet fleeting; it emerges, trembles with the dancer's movement, and threatens to dissolve. As the body is suspended between appearance and disappearance, meaning is deferred, postponed, compelling the viewer's gaze into an active, reconstructive state.

Latency thus denotes a form of potential energy, a state in which signification has not yet fully materialised. The viewer perceives the text and gesture in fragments, never achieving a stable or complete reading. This temporal gap reconfigures the relationship between performer and spectator; the work demands a patient, attentive gaze that reconstructs meaning through discontinuity. From a semiotic perspective, latency aligns with Lotman's conception of culture as a dynamic system, where meaning emerges not only through articulated forms but also through what remains unexpressed. The undulating movement of the belly and the cyclical repetition of the text evoke such a temporal rhythm, one that resists closure and instead affirms process, openness, and becoming.

The inscribed abdomen exemplifies the notion of the body as a site of textual latency, a concept centrally explored by Roland Barthes (1973) in *Le plaisir du texte*. He defines writing as inherently corporeal; an inscription that simultaneously represents presence and absence. The work operates on a "subtle energy", producing a

profound “sensual and visual effect” on the spectator that resists easy decomposition and settles an alternative logic of sense (Barthes 2016, 20). This technique places the medium itself – the video, the writing, and the dance – as active participants in meaning-making, highlighting the relational and generative potential of absence.

The cultural significance of the belly further anchors Yalter's work within historical narratives of gender and visibility. The woman whose headless condition is signalled in the first part of the title alludes to the invisibility and subalternity of women. The absence of the head (*tête*) and the face (*visage*) – as the machine of recognition, according to Deleuze and Guattari (1996, 37) – problematises the subject's identification, becoming an act of resistance to stereotype.<sup>15</sup> This strategy aligns with a feminist attempt to escape the paradigm of the gaze and the logics of visibility.

This video deliberately excludes the head and the face, suspending any idea of portrait or recognition, to allow the field of ‘sensation’ (Deleuze 2002) to speak instead of the fixation on identity. The figure is deprived of the *tête-flesh* – Deleuze and Guattari's terms (1996, 37) – which is part of the body. The second part of the title emphasizes the ‘object’ of our vision: the belly dance. While a synecdochic reading of the fragmented body frames her choice, it is more productive to analyse this body through the lens of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the “Body without Organs” (1996, XX). This is a body animated by ‘tensive movements’ that determine its nature and position, marking it as a body undergoing various deterritorialisations.

The belly in the foreground thus emerges from the flat surface of the background and is inscribed into a *système-visage* (Deleuze, Guattari 1996, 37). I contend that the belly itself acts as the *visage*. The circular forms of the navel and the written word surrounding it delimit and delineate a new locus of *visagéification* (Deleuze, Guattari 1996, 37). By substituting the face (*visage*) with the abdomen, the work executes a crucial theoretical operation; it subjects the body – the *tête-flesh* included – to an ‘overcoding’, transforming the corporeal substrate into a new surface of signification.

Latency, therefore, foregrounds the temporal dimension of the void – a sense of suspension, expectation and deferred meaning that inhabits Yalter's performance.

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<sup>15</sup> The face is produced only when the head ceases to be part of the body (Deleuze, Guattari 1996, 37).

## 7      **Potentiality: Generative Force of the Void**

If erasure functions spatially and latency temporally, potentiality operates as their synthesis. It is the dimension in which absence and suspension are reconfigured into new possibilities of meaning and subjectivity. In Yalter's performance, potentiality emerges through the transformation of the fragmented body into a site of becoming. It amplifies identity to be seen not as a fixed entity but as a field of possibilities.

The belly, as the surface of inscription, does not merely bear text but seems to generate it through the undulating movement. Writing and gesture converge to produce a space where the body is no longer a passive object of representation but an active agent of enunciation. The void created by the absent head and the partial visibility of the body thus opens towards alternative subjectivities. What appears incomplete or unfinished becomes the locus of potential transformation.

This conception resonates with Rosi Braidotti's notion of the "nomadic subject" (1994), a subjectivity defined not by fixed identity but by continuous movement, transition, and becoming. Yalter's body, partial and decentred, performs precisely such a nomadic identity: neither fully present nor entirely absent, suspended in a state of ongoing reconfiguration.

From a semiotic perspective, potentiality aligns with Lotman's (1993) idea that culture and art evolve through unpredictability and the creation of new codes. The void, in this sense, does not close meaning but rather multiplies its possible trajectories. The codified culture – the *semiosfera* (Lotman 1985) – must contain or generate an element of 'emptiness' or 'potential' to allow for dynamic, non-linear development. This highlights the revolutionary aspect of semiotic development; the unpredictable, the margins, and the non-systemic elements drive cultural innovation (Lotman 1993, 157).<sup>16</sup> This potentiality signifies the performative power of the void: its capacity to open beyond the given, to imagine what does not yet exist. In *The Headless Woman or the Belly Dance*, the fragmented, inscribed body becomes a threshold – a liminal space where subjectivity is not erased but continually reinvented. Potentiality concerns the generative force of the void as such; a space where alternative subjectivities and historical trajectories may emerge.

The body can be understood as a palimpsest, where multiple discursive layers – power, narrative, and representation – coexist.

The body functions as the surface upon which the thresholds of exclusion and control are inscribed. While the analysis of power's

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**16** On this topic see also Lotman 2022.

direct hold on the body entered feminism through Foucault, feminist discourse takes this inquiry a critical step further by pursuing the emancipation of that 'ambiguous fragment of space' that is the body (Foucault 1977, 37).

Foucault conceived the body as:

a surface on which events are inscribed (distinguished by language and absolved by ideas), a place of dissociation of the self (where the chimera of a substantial unity is attempted), and a volume in constant disintegration. Genealogy, as an analysis of descent, thus stands at the articulation of body and history: it must demonstrate how the body is entirely marked by history, and how history, conversely, devastates the body. (Foucault 1977, 37; Author's transl.)

Feminist attention to corporeality is not a mere application of Foucault's framework but an assertion of a primary political concern, contrasting female corporeality with the "dominant symbolism" that has instrumentalised it (Braidotti 1997, 50; Author's transl.).<sup>17</sup>

## 8 Conclusion

This article has examined *The Headless Woman or the Belly Dance* (1974) through the lens of the void, conceptualised not as absence but as a semiotic and performative force. By analysing the work along the axes of erasure, latency, and potentiality, I have argued that Yalter transforms the void into a space of resistance, relationality, and becoming.

Erasure disarticulates the body by removing its conventional site of identity and representation, destabilising the mechanisms of recognition and the authority of the gaze. Latency introduces temporality into the void, suspending meaning and opening a rhythm of appearance and disappearance. Potentiality then synthesises these dimensions, revealing the generative capacity of absence to reconfigure subjectivity and produce alternative forms of meaning.

Through this triadic framework, the body becomes a threshold between visibility and invisibility, presence and absence, silence and speech. The void emerges as a performative horizon where identity is not erased but continually reimagined.

Yalter's work contributes to broader debates in feminist aesthetics, cultural semiotics, and performance studies by re-signifying absence, demonstrating how the void may function as a site of negotiation

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<sup>17</sup> For further reference see Demaria 2019.

rather than negation, of becoming rather than lack. *The Headless Woman or the Belly Dance* thus exemplifies an art that refuses closure, unsettles fixed identities, and affirms the transformative power of the body.

The performance effectively destabilises conventional representations of the female body, opening possibilities for alternative subjectivities and feminist reconfigurations of identity. The centrality of the void as a semiotic and performative mechanism, evident across Yalter's oeuvre, interrogates power, marginality, and corporeal representation. Ultimately, Yalter's work illustrates that absence and fragmentation are sites of critical engagement, memory, and empowerment.

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