



# *Visual Narrative and Lacanian Psychoanalysis* by Efrat Biberman

A book review of Efrat Biberman, *Visual Narrative and Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge), 2025, ISBN 9781032850771, 226 Pages, 22 Color Illustrations.

Contrary to the prevailing assumption that visual works function analogously to literary texts, Efrat Biberman's recent study compellingly argues that they operate according to their own distinct logic. In *Visual Narrative and Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, Biberman challenges the widespread tendency in art history and visual theory to treat narrativity as something already inscribed in the image, awaiting extraction through interpretive frameworks borrowed from language and literature. The book argues that such approaches often fail to recognize the unique nature of painting, instead imposing linguistic structures onto a visual medium. As Biberman notes early in the study, "there is a certain incongruity between the painting and the narrative interpretation that follows it" (p. 2). She demonstrates that visual narrativity cannot be understood independently of psychoanalytic concepts such as the unconscious, desire, and the dynamics of the gaze.

Biberman's study is divided into eight chapters, each of which contributes to a cumulative rethinking of how images produce meaning over time. Taken together, the chapters consider how literary frameworks both expose the limits of visual narrativity and, paradoxically, illuminate its

**Corresponding Author:**  
**GILBERT BRAUN\***  
Independent Researcher

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 **北京大學藝術學院**  
School of Arts Peking University

 Milano University Press

\* Email:  
gilbert.hr.braun@gmail.com  
ORCID: 0009-0009-5105-853X  
Mailing address: 152 Packington  
St, London, N1 8RA, UK

unique capacity to tell stories. Biberman addresses a series of conceptual questions that have remained insufficiently theorized in art history, theory, and aesthetics, particularly regarding the relationship between narrative structure, temporality, and the viewer's position. By mobilizing Lacanian psychoanalysis as her primary theoretical framework, she offers a nuanced account of visual storytelling that resists reductive readings of images as static or merely illustrative. Instead, painting emerges as a dynamic field in which meaning unfolds through the encounter between image and viewer.

The opening section of the book traces three pivotal moments in the debate on narrative painting through successive re-readings of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Laocoon* (1766), Clement Greenberg's high-modernist manifesto "Towards a Newer Laocoon" (1940), and W. J. T. Mitchell's postmodern intervention, "Space and Time: Lessing's *Laocoon* and the Politics of Gender." Despite their historical and ideological differences, Biberman demonstrates that these texts share an identical structure that perpetuates the recurring tension in Western thought between painting and narrative. Lessing's influential distinction between the spatial and temporal arts establishes a hierarchy that assigns narrative primarily to literature, relegating painting to the realm of static visuality. Greenberg's modernist revision intensifies this separation by advocating for medium specificity, while Mitchell's critique exposes the political and gendered implications of such binaries. Through this comparative analysis, Biberman shows that each intervention, while attempting to resolve the problem of narrativity in painting, ultimately reinscribes the same conceptual opposition between space and time. This recurring conflict provides the theoretical backdrop against which Biberman develops her alternative model of visual narrativity.

The following pages bring works by Rembrandt, Greuze, Courbet, and other artists into critical dialogue with foundational psychoanalytic frameworks. By mobilizing

the ideas of Freud, Žižek, and most notably Lacan, the author develops a framework that foregrounds questions of subjectivity and representation. Rather than treating visual narrative as a unified system, the work focuses on its intrinsic heterogeneity, arguing that it operates through layered meanings. Notably, Biberman reexamines the Lacanian concept of the gaze through temporality, reflexivity, and blindness, placing it in dialogue with Bryson and Merleau-Ponty to shed light on its significance for the pictorial field. The author underscores that “the painting fashions an internal parallelism within the viewer and awakens within him a sensual formula of his presence” (p.114). By doing so, she presents a non-dualistic, time-sensitive model of vision that challenges not only Lessing’s spatial hierarchy but also traditional theories of visual perception.

In the final chapter, the author draws on interpretations of Velázquez’s *Las Meninas* by Lacan, Foucault and others to reconsider how narrative functions within visual art. As Biberman observes: “*Las Meninas* is a painting that challenges the paradigm which dominated the relation of representation in Western culture up to the seventeenth century” (p. 174). It is a unique work of art in that it foregrounds the gaze, the impossibility of representation, and a system of imaginary projections. The analysis allows the author to clarify the function of narrativity within the visual field. Biberman observes that narrativity is not merely an overlay but is embedded in the very structure of the visual field, where the observing subject is as integral to the experience as the object being perceived. It manifests as a direct consequence of the act of seeing.

The text maintains methodological rigor, refusing to simplify either psychoanalytic theory or artistic practice, in continuity with the author’s earlier work, *Art, Death and Lacanian Psychoanalysis*<sup>1</sup>. It advances a layered analytical approach,

and although Biberman's interpretations offer valuable insights into the structural dynamics of visual narrative, their psychoanalytic focus can at times draw attention away from the particularities of the painted image itself, such as facture, medium, or context. The sustained reliance on psychoanalysis can also raise methodological questions that remain only partially addressed. There is a risk of absorbing the unique characteristics of artworks into an established theoretical framework, as some of them appear primarily as opportunities to apply psychoanalytic concepts.

The book's main strengths are its critical study of theoretical frameworks and its interdisciplinary approach. Rather than operating within the confines of a single discipline, it engages with multiple academic fields to foster a perspective that also uncovers the social production of subjectivity and meaning. In doing so, it aligns with approaches that conceive meaning as relational, historically situated, and contextually contingent. This approach highlights that the importance of visual storytelling goes beyond aesthetic or psychoanalytic considerations. Images actively influence how individuals perceive themselves and others within shared symbolic systems. The work will therefore be of interest to scholars of visual culture concerned with the instability of meaning, art historians seeking novel conceptual tools, and Lacanian clinicians exploring the implications of the gaze in clinical practice. Through the merging of theory and cross-disciplinary perspectives, this study emerges as a pivotal source for reevaluating the manner in which images convey meaning, narrative, and subjectivity.

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1. Efrat Biberman and Shirley Sharon-Zisser, *Art, Death and Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London: 2017).