

# LITERATUROZNAWSTWO/LITERARY STUDIES

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## A PHOTOMONTAGE OF MEMORY: THE ROLE OF THE VISUAL IN ANGHARAD PRICE'S “THE LIFE OF REBECCA JONES”

**Abstract.** The article examines the visual aspect of the novel *The Life of Rebecca Jones* by the contemporary Welsh writer Angharad Price. The book is an imaginary autobiography of the eponymous Rebecca Jones, Price's distant relative, who died of diphtheria in 1916, aged 11. Apart from Rebecca's family photographs reproduced in the text, ekphrastic descriptions of a photograph, a painting (by a blind artist) and the video recording of a television programme, the novel problematizes the dichotomy between seeing and blindness. The aim of this essay is to demonstrate how these elements in Price's novel contribute to the production of meaning by generating tension between two different modes of discourse: verbal and visual. Price's novel is read as an 'imagetext' which, by adopting photographic/visual features, creates an illusion of 'photographic' verisimilitude (described as a *trompe-l'œil* effect). This mechanism is interpreted as the manifestation of the narrator's struggle to assert her authority as a perceiving subject and the text itself as a site where the memory of place and family history can be preserved.

**Key words:** *The Life of Rebecca Jones*; Angharad Price; Welsh fiction; visuality; photomontage; photography; ekphrasis.

In his pioneering work which has been ongoing for nearly three decades, Peter Lord has established the heretofore little-explored visual culture of Wales as a factor co-shaping Welsh history and identity.<sup>1</sup> As Lord himself

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Lord has broadcast and published extensively on the history of Welsh art. His best known work is the three-volume study *The Visual Culture of Wales* complemented by CD-Roms,

observes, this role was for a long time reserved for literature, as writing in Welsh was seen as a marker of difference and distinct identity as well as a space where “the obsessive comparison with England could be avoided” (Lord 1994, 10). The result was “an extreme imbalance” in favour of Welsh-language literature (Lord 1994, 10). In a similar vein, M. Wynn Thomas and Angharad Price point to the tendency in Wales to see Welsh-language writing as the *raison d’être* of the growth and survival of the indigenous language and culture (Thomas 1992, 165; Price 2002b [*Rhwng Gwyn a Du*], 16). Although Lord’s monumental work has done much to redress the balance, one of the areas virtually untouched by critical scrutiny is the visual dimension of Welsh literature itself. Problems like ekphrasis, multimodality,<sup>2</sup> and all kinds of image-related issues taken up on the thematic level, are frequent phenomena in modern Welsh fiction but they have not, to date, received much critical attention.<sup>3</sup>

One novel that employs an exceptionally wide gamut of aspects related to visuality is *The Life of Rebecca Jones* by Angharad Price. The book is an imaginary autobiography of the eponymous Rebecca Jones, Price’s distant relative, who died of diphtheria in 1916, aged 11 (the reader does not learn about Rebecca’s death until the epilogue note at the end of the book). The fictional Rebecca tells the story of her life from the perspective of an old woman who is remembering facts from her family history and its relationship with her native Maesglasau valley. Apart from Rebecca’s family photographs reproduced in the text and ekphrastic descriptions of a photograph, a painting (by a blind artist) and the video recording of a television programme, the novel problematises the dichotomy between seeing and blindness. This is primarily due to Rebecca’s brothers, on whom her narrative is repeatedly centred, and who are either born blind or lose their sight early in life.<sup>4</sup> The aim of the present essay is to demonstrate how these elements in

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published as part of The University of Wales’ ‘The Visual Culture of Wales Project’ between 2000 and 2003. Other works exploring Welsh visual culture include e.g. Harvey 1995.

<sup>2</sup> The criteria defining the multimodal novel are an area of considerable debate, but they usually include such features as visual and/or typographic effects, varied page design and hand-written notes. A more detailed discussion of the problem can be found in Maziarczyk 2013.

<sup>3</sup> In prose fiction, examples include, for instance, the artist figures in *The Valley*, *The City*, *The Village* by Glyn Jones, *Y Dylluan Wen* by Angharad Jones or *Ffenestri Tua’r Gwyll* by Islwyn Ffowc Elis, television and video in Fflur Dafydd’s novels, e.g. CCTV footages as simulacra in *Y Llyfrgell*, multimodality in *Bird Blood Snow* by Cynan Jones, ekphrasis in Robin Llywelyn’s *From Empty Harbour to White Ocean* or photography in *Trwy’r Tywyllwch* by Elfyn Pritchard and *The Ninth Wave* by Russel Celyn Jones.

<sup>4</sup> The theme is even more pronounced by the novel’s *paratext* — Gérard Genette’s term

Price's novel contribute to the production of meaning by generating tension between two different modes of discourse (verbal and visual). Price's novel is read here as a hybrid text in which the textual discourse assumes pictorial/photographic qualities. This semiotic hybridity is interpreted in a twofold way: as the manifestation of the narrator's struggle to assert her authority as a perceiving subject, and as the factor which makes the text itself a site where the memory of place and family history can be preserved.

The dominant visual mode of representation in Price's novel is photography, and a brief overview of the theoretical considerations concerning this medium can provide a useful framework for further analysis. Naturally, it is impossible to do justice to all aspects of photography criticism here, and for the present purpose the discussion will be limited to selected aspects of this vast field of study. Although it is tempting to treat the photographs in Price's novel as documents testifying to the existence of the historical Rebecca, their status is, in fact, far from unequivocal. On the one hand, the inherent connection between photography and physical reality is not usually questioned. Susan Sontag calls photographs pieces of the world (2) and "thin slice[s] of space as well as time" (17). Photographs are duplicates of the world (Sontag 2005, 18), artifacts or found objects (Sontag 2005, 54). In *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography*, Roland Barthes reminds us of photography's power to authenticate existence and its function as "a certificate of presence" (87). Photography's iconic<sup>5</sup> link with reality is supported by the natural process of its creation which involves the registration of an emanation—the light reflected from the object. It is this characteristic of photography which has already been associated with writing by such early inventors as Nicéphore Niépce, who coined the term heliograph – "sun drawing" (Osterman 2007, 27), and William Henry Fox Talbot, who called his work *The Pencil of Nature* (Talbot 2010, my emphasis).

At the same time, however, theoreticians of photography draw attention to its paradoxicality and inherent dichotomy: despite making the real directly

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encompassing such elements as the title, prefaces, notices, illustrations or blurbs (3). Thus, the Welsh title is *O! Tyn y Gorchudd* ('Remove the veil'), and the cover of the Welsh-language edition features a blurred face crossed by a vivid blue smudge, which evokes the effect of poor eyesight. Another reference to the blind brothers takes the form of inconspicuous Braille dots embossed on the cover's surface.

<sup>5</sup> In Charles Sanders Peirce's classification of signs, an icon is a sign that physically resembles what it stands for. An index, in turn, implies or points to the object it signifies (Burzyńska and Markowski 2009, 237).

present, the photograph is not, after all, the real itself (Clemmen 2006, 400). In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as Marta Koszowy (2013) notes, the iconicity of photography has been replaced by an indexical understanding of it (20). In the same vein, Sontag emphasises the remoteness of the real “imprisoned” in the photograph (127). For Barthes (2000), the photograph, despite its power to authenticate reality, at the same time creates a completely new time-space category: the awareness that the object photographed ‘has been there’, which underscores the insurmountable distance between the subject and spectator (77). From this perspective, photography is merely a trace of an absent object, a simulacrum. Be that as it may, the very existence of the two approaches to photography testifies to the paradoxicality of the medium itself. The ontological status of photographed objects is therefore always ambivalent, suspended between existence and nonexistence (Koszowy 2013, 36).

Another significant aspect of photography in the context of the analysis of literature is its relationship with language. As has been mentioned, analogies between photography and writing had already been observed by the 19<sup>th</sup> century pioneers of the then new medium. Yet photography’s relation to language is more complex than the chemical processes involved in its creation. In his essay “The Photographic Message,” Barthes (1977) observes that the photograph, as a perfect, mechanical analogue of reality, is a message without a code (17). The paradoxicality of photography lies, however, in the fact that the photographic image cannot be described without “joining to the denoted message a relay or second-order message derived from a code which is that of language and constituting ... a connotation” (Barthes 1977, 18). The photograph (or, generally, the image) has virtually no denoted state — any attempt to describe it immediately activates its verbalisation and categorisation (Barthes 1977, 28). The ways the second meaning is added to the image vary, but Barthes generally sees the text as a “parasitic”, second-order element (Barthes 1977, 25). Similarly, in “The Photographic Essay: Four Case Studies” (included in his collection of essays *Picture Theory*), W.J.T. Mitchell (1995) demonstrates the notorious contamination of photographic images by textual discourse. In his analyses of selected photographic essays, he demonstrates different degrees to which language intrudes into the realm of the image. Even if the independence of the photograph is achieved, it is the result of a resistance to language and the effect is that photographs become narratives themselves (Mitchell 1995, 292).

It seems that it is the dialectal and dynamic nature of photography as outlined above that makes it a potentially attractive component of literary

texts, both on the thematic level and in the form of reproduced pictures. The reproduction of images or the thematisation of photographs have long been present in fiction, André Breton's *Nadja*, Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* and W.G. Sebald's work being, perhaps, the best known examples. As noted by Marta Koszowy in reference to modern Polish literature, however, photography in contemporary fiction (both thematised and reproduced) is rarely limited to illustrative functions and it frequently tends to penetrate and affect the narrative fabric of the text (Koszowy 2013, 28). The referentiality of photography provides a more tangible anchorage in reality than that offered by language, and especially so when the status of the fictional world proves problematic (Koszowy 2013, 34), as is the case with Rebecca-narrator. Thus, the employment of photography may signal an ontological instability of the text which needs to be assuaged by a prosthetic anchorage in the world. The anchorage is prosthetic because the referentiality of photography can easily be questioned. This way of using photography in literature, which underscores the ambivalence of the medium, is described by Koszowy as 'apophatic' – evoking something by denying or negating it (28). The apophatic use of photography in a text, according to Koszowy, is driven by a sense of lacking and a "yearning for presence" (50, my translation). The most common strategies for dealing with the situation, Koszowy observes, involve masking or camouflaging the lacunae in the reality mediated by the photograph, or compensating for the lack by means of the insertion of 'fake', 'prosthetic' elements.

It seems, however, that photographs, being images in the first place (either as reproductions inserted into the narrative, or else as ekphrastic descriptions), constitute the text's other, and have the potential for generating tension between modes of discourse regardless of their intended function. On the other hand, the close interrelation between image (including photography) and text may result in a hybrid discourse, as in many instances it is the text which acquires photographic qualities itself by borrowing practices from photography (Clemmen 2006, 400). Examples of photography-like techniques employed by narrative may include freeze frames, enlarging, zooming or cropping (Koszowy 2013, 102).

Yet the mode most frequently activated when language encounters its 'resident alien', be it a photograph or any other kind of visual representation, is ekphrasis (Mitchell 1995, 157). Ekphrasis, and the word-image relationships it entails, defy easy definitions and have generated volumes of often competing theories, and here we must limit the discussion to only the most

basic aspects necessary for an analysis of Price's novel.<sup>6</sup> Originally, the ancient understanding of ekphrasis as a rhetorical term referred to the verbal description of a thing, and was only later narrowed to the description of a work of (visual) art. Modern critics differ over what can serve as the object of ekphrasis. For the purpose of the present paper, we may evoke James A.W. Heffernan's definition, according to which ekphrasis is "*the verbal representation of visual representation*" (Heffernan 1993, 3), which would conveniently encompass the references to the reproductions of photographs in Price's novel. Apart from ekphrases, however, *The Life of Rebecca Jones* also includes descriptions reminiscent of snapshots or freeze frames. This practice of language to adopt photographic (or, generally, pictorial) qualities chimes well with Heffernan's general conception of 'pictorialism' which "generates in language effects similar to those created by pictures" like "focusing, framing, and scanning" (3).

In more general terms, following Mitchell, ekphrasis can be seen as the manifestation of the invasive tendency of language faced with its visual 'other'. According to him, this mechanism is especially manifest in the presence of the described image, as then ekphrasis displaces the object which disappears "in favor of the textual image being produced by [it]" (Mitchell 1993, 157). In fiction, the ekphrasis of photography, as Koszowy explains, provides the narrative with the *illusion* of realism, as it endows the text with the qualities of photographic perception (118). If, however, the ambiguous nature of photography is kept in mind (i.e. the illusion of presence it creates), the verbal description of a photograph would then merely be an illusion of the elimination of an illusion.

Brief as it must of necessity be, this overview of the problems concerning photography and its relationship with a text is sufficient to serve as a theoretical framework for the analysis of *The Life of Rebecca Jones*.<sup>7</sup> Price's novel employs eight reproduced photographs,<sup>8</sup> with ekphrastic descriptions and the motif of Rebecca's blind brothers. Of the eight photographs printed in the novel, only one is accompanied by an ekphrastic description – it is the portrait picture of Rebecca, her parents and three brothers. The description,

<sup>6</sup> For a comprehensive overview of the theoretical approaches to ekphrasis, see Sawa 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Henceforth referenced as RJ.

<sup>8</sup> *O! Tyn y Gorchudd* includes two more, one showing a panoramic view of the Maesglasau valley and the other featuring the ruins of the Maesglasau Mawr farm. The latter photograph at the same time makes the final page of the book. The copies of the photographs in the two language versions differ in their ordering, size and cropping.

which opens Chapter 2, is preceded by an excerpt from Hugh Jones's *Cydymaith yr Hwsmon (The Companion to Husbandry)*,<sup>9</sup> urging the reader to look ("Behold...") at the coming of spring, the light which "lingers longer every day" and the sun from whose heat nothing can hide (RJ 46). The appeal to look and the emphasis on the all-encompassing light invites associations with a photographer calling the person portrayed to stand still and look towards the camera. In the context of the photograph and its ekphrastic description immediately following, it can be seen as alerting the reader to the shift of perception from the verbal to the visual.

In Rebecca's description of the photograph a double temporal perspective is employed: the narrator emphasises the time that has elapsed between the moment the picture was taken and the moment of its description. The photograph is "faded black-and-white" (RJ 46), but at the same time the presence of the photographer is suggested when Rebecca's mother "cradles the head of her baby, William, gently turning it *towards the unseen presence of the photographer*" (RJ 47, my emphasis), and there is the excitement of the picture-taking in little Rebecca's eyes (RJ 49). The impression is that it is the moment of taking the picture that is being described and as such it evokes associations with Barthes's observation that the subject, when photographed, becomes an object or a spectre, and experiences "a micro-version of death" (Barthes 2000, 14). The photograph, despite being anchored in reality, reveals absence and the sense of a "*catastrophe which has already occurred*" (Barthes 2000, 96). As has already been noted, the effect of ekphrasis in the presence of the picture described is its "tendency to alienate or displace the object ... in favor of the textual image" (Mitchell 1993, 157). Rebecca's ekphrastic description seems to achieve a similar effect by supplementing the description with detail that cannot be seen: "Hidden from sight, my brother William's hand grips my long tresses" (RJ 49).<sup>10</sup> The detail can be seen as what Barthes (2000) calls a *punctum*—an element that disturbs the conventional perception of the photograph called the *studium* (27).

<sup>9</sup> Hugh Jones was one of Rebecca's historical ancestors. He is described as a hymnist and translator (RJ 110).

<sup>10</sup> A similar motif can be found in Trezza Azzopardi's *The Tip of My Tongue*, part of the *New Stories from the Mabinogion* series (Azzopardi 2013). The narrator, a little girl, describes the picture of her parents which also allegedly features herself hidden behind a rose bush (Azzopardi 2013, 22). The motif of the 'blind spot', a space outside the field of vision, is explored in relation to Welsh and Irish women's fiction by Linden Peach in his study *Contemporary Irish and Welsh Women's Fiction. Gender, Desire and Power*.

For Barthes, the *punctum* is often metonymic and enables the photograph to transcend itself by endowing it with a “blind field” – i.e. an effect that animates the figures represented, and provides them with an additional dimension (Barthes 2000, 57). The effect of the hidden detail in Rebecca’s ekphrasis is to mask the ontological gap between the fictional character and the reality represented in the image, all the more so as the reader/spectator does not yet know that Rebecca, whose trace is preserved in the picture, is going to die soon. Another thing it may be seen to metonymically represent, but also mask and compensate for, is the cutting short of the connection between the real Rebecca and her brothers that should have lasted much longer. The detail, allegedly ‘hidden from sight’, seems to be part of the photograph but, in fact, it is merely a simulacrum, an illusion of presence. Thus, by making an ostensibly genuine addition to the photograph, Rebecca asserts her dominance over the image. The appropriation of the image into her narrative is further emphasised when the narrator says she has the “photograph in a frame by [her] bed” (RJ 49). In this way, the textual image created by the ekphrasis is additionally embedded *inside* the narrative which takes full possession of it.

The textual image evoked by the ekphrasis aims at acquiring a status that would be more real than the photograph itself. In this way, it provides Rebecca’s narrative with firmer anchorage in reality and asserts her existence as a ‘real’ person. The effect is therefore analogous to the *trompe l’oeil*, the art technique aimed at producing an optical illusion, and in literary terms, as defined by Brian McHale, “deliberately misleading the reader into regarding an embedded, secondary world as the primary, diegetic world” (McHale 1987, 115)—in this case, it is the fictionality of the elderly Rebecca which can be regarded as primary in relation to the photograph. Thus, the ekphrastic description enables the narrator to mask the seams between the fictional and historical Rebecca and camouflage the missing link with the brothers. The circumstances of the taking of the photograph, however, unrelentingly evoke the parting of the siblings. The picture was taken not long before one of the brothers was sent to London and the approaching separation is already sensed by the fictional Rebecca: “There is sadness in his [William’s] eyes, as though he were already sensing the finality of that scene” (RJ 46). The motif of separation is continued when, immediately following the description of the picture, the narrator reports the moment the little brothers William and Gruff leave the farm to start education in a school for blind children. The brothers’ departure is watched by their sister, another



brother and the mother. Neither Gruff nor William turns back, which the narrator puts down to the different way they perceive the world – there is no point in looking back if they cannot see her. Yet what is worth pausing over is that the scene itself is constructed in visual terms. It features the characters (Rebecca, her mother and brother) looking literally at a vanishing point: “We are three grey idols ... staring at three other idols fading into the distance” (RJ 50). The spectators stare into ‘emptiness’, enfolded in pre-dawn darkness, but the moment the cart vanishes from sight they are blinded by the rising sun: “Finally, they vanish from sight. And at that moment we are blinded by the sun’s first rays coming over Ffridd mountain, casting long shadows behind us” (50). The motif resembles that from Hugh Jones’s text quoted at the beginning of the chapter, and can be construed in photographic terms: exposure to sun rays is the necessary prerequisite of being photographed, i.e. ‘written by light’.

The scene may therefore be taken to reproduce the spatial arrangement of the photographed object and the gaze of the ‘camera’. In photographic terms, however, the object (the fictional Rebecca) does not seem to be part of the potential picture: it is not—and cannot be—*seen* (the brothers do *not* look back, and even if they did, they would not see anything anyway) and the blinding light precludes the reflection of the gaze and suggests overexposure. In other words, the visual assertion of the narrator’s existence may be seen as problematic (she is not seen, and is also blinded by the sun) and as a result reveals her fictional (‘spectral’) nature. Rebecca’s subjectivity seems to be, however, asserted in the very next scene in which another model of visual perception is constructed. Moved by what is, for her, a traumatic event, the girl runs into the house to her room and through the window she catches “a glimpse of [her] mother, still staring in front of her, as if trying to comprehend the breaking of day” (RJ 50). The mediation of the window evokes associations with the mediatory function of photography but also with Leon Battista Alberti’s metaphor of the painting plane as an open window (Alberti 2004, 54). This concept positions the object of perception in the outer world and creates a distance between it and the subject. The effect, as Erwin Panofsky observes, is the firmer objectification of the object and the personalisation of the subject (qtd. in Holm 1992, 36). In the scene, Rebecca assumes the position of the subject observing the act of looking, which illustrates her (Rebecca’s) status as the perceiving subject, the one that writes/takes photographs as opposed to the one that is written/photographed. In this way she is also established as a personalised subject, and the

reality she reports is imbued with credibility. The traumatic event is also freeze-framed and cropped, which mimics the photographic (and, generally, visual) mode of representation and makes the textual discourse acquire photographic qualities. Again, the effect is the concealment of the gap between the referentiality of the reproduced photographs and the fictionality of the narrator.

The hybridisation of the discourse in Price's novel, manifested by the blurring of the visual and textual categories, is interestingly figured by one of the characters, Rebecca's blind artist brother, Lewis. Lewis can be construed as straddling the categories of text and image and constituting a seam that binds the two aspects of the work. He loses his sight when he is six and therefore retains the memory of shapes and colours. He enjoys "listening to visual descriptions: evocations of landscapes; the description of a face, or a painting" (RJ 70). On the other hand, his work is often inspired by poetry: "a sonnet by Shakespeare, a poem by Shelley or Keats, or the poetry of his compatriots Dylan Thomas and R.S. Thomas. Each of his paintings is a representation of the emotions evoked by the poems" (RJ 71). The switching between categories is epitomised by Lewis's love of comparing "two different descriptions of the same object. He would note how the descriptions varied; the differences of emphasis" (RJ 70). Yet another manifestation of Lewis's hybrid situation, this time related to religion and theology, is his conversion to Catholicism, "despite his deep feelings towards non-conformism ... close ties with his upbringing and with Welshness in general" (RJ 70).<sup>11</sup>

Even more revealing in this respect is the ekphrastic description of one of Lewis's paintings. The image features a mountainous landscape and a representation of Lewis himself. Apart from the detailed depiction of the picture, the narrator explicitly states that the colour of the sun directly reflects Lewis's memory (RJ 72). Earlier, Rebecca claims that her brother, while listening to visual descriptions, used "his memory of colour" to "imagine the sights for himself" (RJ 70). One of the effects of ekphrasis

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<sup>11</sup> Lewis's straddling the two rather distant denominations may be seen as a reflection of their different approach to visual culture (Protestantism and Nonconformism stereotypically associated with scepticism towards the visual arts). Lewis's oscillation between word and image symbolically bridges that gap. The problem of the Protestant attitude to visual arts is discussed by Siergiusz Michalski in *Reformation and the Visual Arts: The Protestant Image Question in Western and Eastern Europe*. The stereotypes concerning the alleged iconophobia of Welsh Nonconformity are challenged in John Harvey's *The Art of Piety. The Visual Culture of Welsh Nonconformity*.

emphasised by Murray Krieger is the freezing of narrative temporality (Sawa 2015, 34). The narrator, by means of ekphrasis, immortalises not only an image from the blind artist's memory, but also the representation of the artist himself. At the same time, the narrator incorporates the image-memory into the fabric of the narrative and asserts herself as a *seeing* subject. Moreover, the ekphrasis contributes to the hybridity of the narrative, as it attempts to produce a synesthetic description of the painting by mentioning the sense of touch and hearing (e.g. the pattern drawn by the fingers aimed at expressing feeling and touch). The role of the narrative voice can therefore be construed as prosthetic: it 'takes pictures' of memories of the past in order to preserve them.

In more general terms, the motif of Lewis and his painting may be taken as a reflection of the topos of *ut pictura poesis* ('as is painting so is poetry') —the centuries-old discussion on the nature of the relationship between image and word. Probably the earliest statement concerning this problem is reported by Plutarch, who quotes the words of Simonides of Ceos: "painting is mute poetry and poetry a speaking picture" (Steiner 1982, 5). On the other hand, the affinity between the 'sister arts' was frequently contested; the classic argument following that trend was developed in *Laocoon: or, The Limits of Poetry and Painting*, in which Gotthold Ephraim Lessing postulated the separation of painting and poetry. The motif of Lewis in Price's novel, however, seems to articulate the former approach. The 'mute' painting is given a voice in the form of the verbal description. At the same time, the ekphrasis, because of its very nature, is an attempt to reproduce the visual effect. Thus, the layering of oppositions in the case of Lewis and the ekphrasis of his painting clearly overcomes the image-text dichotomy, and constitutes a hybrid discourse partaking of two different semiotic modes.

The third ekphrastic fragment depicting the 1964 BBC film about her three blind brothers, is the site of Rebecca's *agon*<sup>12</sup> to camouflage her fictionality, and takes, to use McHale's term, the form of an ontological "flickering effect" (McHale 1987, 32). The moment the narrator starts reporting the content of the film, as at other moments when traumatic or important events from Rebecca's life are described, the narrator switches

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<sup>12</sup> I follow Marta Koszowy's (2013) understanding of the term as a struggle between opposing categories or principles, for example the *agon* for the assertion of subjectivity authority over the text in the prose of Magdalena Tulli (240-276), rather than Harold Bloom's idea of the rivalry between the writer and his predecessor as delineated in *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*.

from the past tense to the present<sup>13</sup> and passive voice ('He is seen', 'He is shown' etc) so that the effect is a series of micro-descriptions of individual frames rather than a sequence of events: "there are camera shots of our stream flowing between bracken and rushes" (RJ 125), "There is a picture of Gruff in his clerical collar" (RJ 125), "Lewis is pictured with his wife Rachel" (RJ 126), the film is "full of familiar images" (RJ 127). The prosthetic role of the fictional Rebecca, who compensates for the brothers' lack of sight, can also be observed here: "He [William] had contributed to something – a visual representation of himself – which he could not partake of. His life had been celebrated in a medium which was, in the context of his own existence, largely meaningless" (RJ 127). It is Rebecca's voice which provides the representation with meaning by incorporating it into her narrative in the form of freeze frames.

Yet the sequence of images, which would seem to firmly anchor the narrator's voice in reality, simultaneously reveals Rebecca's precarious ontological position. The act of watching the videotape copy of the film a quarter of a century after its broadcast generates in the narrator a paradox characteristic of photography: "The greatest pain was the lie perpetrated by the film. It seemed to say that nothing changed, yet showed clearly that nothing lasted" (RJ 128). Rebecca realises that the film is merely an illusion and that the only thing it is capable of providing her with is the external prosthesis of memory: "And more than anything, I resented the way my own multi-coloured memories had been obscured by searing images in black and white" (RJ 128). Yet the paradoxicality of the 'documentary' images and the ambivalent ontological status of the narrator are perhaps most poignantly expressed by the following reflection: "It [the film] 'immortalised' the visible world. Yet, I – who had been *invisible* in the film – was the only one who still lived" (RJ 128, my emphasis). The inverted commas around the word 'immortalised' emphasise the ambivalence of the representation. Thus, the only site where the memories are preserved is the narrative, which stitches together and camouflages the ontological gap between the reproduced photographs and verbal 'family photographs'.

The verbal 'snapshots' from Rebecca's life are not, however, limited to ekphrastic descriptions of existing images or footage. Important events like the birth of the blind brother (RJ 39), the death of the five year-old Ieuan

<sup>13</sup> Although the past tense is used in the original Welsh version, the dominance of noun phrases produces a similar effect of still frames (Price 2002, 120–122).

(RJ 57), or the parting with the Italian prisoner of war whom Rebecca loved (RJ 105),<sup>14</sup> are often introduced by the predicates of vision (“I see”, “I can see,” etc.) and described with the use of the present tense. The shift from the past tense to the present results in the suspension of temporality and in an image-like stasis; the events become freeze-frame scenes imprinted on Rebecca’s memory. Even minor, but vivid, memories are marked out by this tense shift: “In my mind’s eye, I bury my face in the smell of lanolin and feel the softness of newly shorn wool” (RJ 84). The account of the time before Rebecca’s birth is also narrated in the present tense. It opens with the words “I see” and switches to the past tense the moment she is born, as if the period existed only in the form of a freeze frame—a photograph. This accentuates the illusionistic strategy of the fictional Rebecca who ‘pretends’ she cannot remember the time before her birth. For Roland Barthes (2000), the time before one’s birth corresponds to History which, in turn, is constituted only when the subject is excluded from it (65). Barthes’s words: “I am the very contrary of History, I am what belies it, destroys it for the sake of my own history” (65) are, in fact, a manifesto of the subject’s existence *here and now*, something that Rebecca the narrator also does by transgressing the word/image dichotomy.

As can thus be seen, Angharad Price’s novel is a site of both tension between, and amalgamation of, two modes of representation: the visual and the verbal. The photographs reproduced in the text validate the historicity of the character-narrator and anchor her narrative in history. The documentary character of photography is, however, undermined by the fictionality of the narrative voice, and especially so in the case of the family portrait, where the spectral presence of the ‘real’ Rebecca reveals the inherent ambiguity of photography. The tension between the documentary and the fictional permeates the whole novel, and generates the narrator’s *agon* to assert the authority of her text and a ‘real’ authorial persona. This struggle is manifested in the narrator’s attempts to establish herself as a perceiving subject, a ‘textual photographer’, so that her fictional (‘spectral’) status can be masked. This aim seems to be achieved by the employment of pictorial

<sup>14</sup> The scene describing Rebecca’s loss of the love of her life is immediately followed by an excerpt from Hugh Jones in which the sun denies its gaze to the earth “as if no joy could be had in viewing the world” (RJ 105). Alongside the conventional symbolism of loss and melancholy, the fragment may be read in photographic terms as the lack of the object of photography (nothing to photograph or to reflect the light), by the same token revealing the spectral nature of the narrator.

qualities by means of ekphrases, the photographic technique of cropping, and freeze-frames created with the use of the present tense. This mechanism is explicitly articulated in the last section of the novel. There, Rebecca, who worked as a seamstress throughout her life, describes her narrative as “a patchwork quilt of memories” (RJ 155). Her role, as she herself suggests, is to conceal the seams between different elements of the narrative fabric: “My own work on it [the narrative] has almost ended. All I need to do is sew the lining, to conceal the seams and to make it soft on the skin when I rest shrouded beneath it” (RJ 155). As we have seen, the concealment of the stitches may also refer to the masking of the seams between ontological levels (‘genuine’, historical images and situations vs. the fictionality of the narrator) and modes of representation (verbal and visual). The mechanism results in a *trompe l’oeil* effect: the narrative is scattered with ‘verbal photographs’ which strive for the status of historical documents. Such far-reaching interrelations between the visual plane and discourse make *The Life of Rebecca Jones* a composite text that can be described by W.J.T. Mitchell’s term ‘imagetext’, which refers to ‘composite, synthetic works’ that incorporate visual and verbal modes of representation (Mitchell 1995, 89). What characterises Price’s imagetext is that it is the visual aspect which seems to be the dominant aesthetic strategy,<sup>15</sup> and due to the prevalent use of different aspects of photography, including real ones and mock-documentary, it would not be far wrong to dub such an imagetext a ‘literary photomontage’.

Tellingly, the term ‘imagetext’ is also used by Mitchell (1995) to describe memory (192). As he reminds us, since antiquity memory has been commonly imagined and visualised as a combination of visual/spatial and verbal/temporal categories (Mitchell 1995, 192). Memory was usually presented metaphorically as an enclosed space (a treasure-house, a gallery, a chest, etc.), where images that corresponded to memories could be stored and from where they could be retrieved. By way of analogy with the wax tablet, memory was also associated with the book which became one of the most popular models of artificial aid to memory (Draaisma 2000, 32–33). As has been exemplified above, Price’s text, which adopts photographic/visual features to create an illusion of ‘photographic’ verisimilitude, is, in essence, an attempt at the visual/photographic reconstruction and preservation of Rebecca’s

<sup>15</sup> Again, this is even more pronounced in the Welsh-language original: the final page of the novel features a photograph of the ruins of the Maesglasau Mawr farm, so that it is a visual element which makes the frame of Rebecca’s narrative.

family memory, the figure of Rebecca herself and their continuing relationship with the place. It is thus tempting to read *The Life of Rebecca Jones* as a gallery of photomontaged memory where images, both genuine and reconstructed, are stored.

Such close relationships of the visual with the issues of memory, continuity and belonging as observed in *The Life of Rebecca Jones* suggest that the exploration of the visual dimension of Welsh writing may offer interesting avenues of access to important aspects of modern Welsh literature in both major languages. The aim of the foregoing discussion has been to signal and examine only selected aspects of visuality in Angharad Price's novel, and it must be stressed that the spectrum of possible perspectives that might be pursued in relation to *The Life of Rebecca Jones* is considerably wider. Such directions might include, for example, the analogy between Rebecca the seamstress and the figures of Arachne and Philomela, whose tapestries problematize the relationship between image and text (cf. Hefferman 1993), or an analysis of the novel against the background of Welsh autobiographic writing. These, together with the issues signalled earlier, make Price's novel an interesting showcase for potential strategies, mechanisms and motifs that engage with the problems of visuality in modern Welsh fiction.

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FOTOMONTAŻ PAMIĘCI.  
ROLA WIZUALNOŚCI W POWIEŚCI „THE LIFE OF REBECCA JONES”  
ANGHARAD PRICE

Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest analiza motywów wizualnych w powieści Angharad Price *The Life of Rebecca Jones* („Życie Rebeki Jones”). Motywy te obejmują zarówno reproduktowane fotografie, jak i świat przedstawiony: są to ekfrazy oraz wątki związane z malarstwem i niewidomymi braćmi narratorki — tytułowej Rebeki Jones. Narratorka jest postacią fikcyjną, lecz inspirowaną historyczną postacią zmarłej przedwcześnie dziewczynki, której hipotetyczne życie opowiada w dużej mierze, opierając się na autentycznych rodzinnych fotografiach. Ekfrastyczne opisy zdjęć oraz inne odniesienia do postrzegania wzrokowego interpretowane są jako próba nadania narracji fikcyjnej Rebeki walorów dokumentalnych. Mechanizm ten jest porównany do efektu *trompe-l'œil*, a jego celem jest zamaskowanie przynależności narratorki do świata fikcji literackiej. W ten sposób opowieść nabiera znamion ‘obrazotekstu’ — hybrydy medium wizualnego i językowego, na który składają się zarówno elementy historyczne, jak i fikcyjne.

**Słowa kluczowe:** *The Life of Rebecca Jones*; Angharad Price; proza walijska; wizualność; fotomontaż; fotografia; ekfrazja.