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# Art and the Sublime: (De)Illusionism in the statue of Azumah Nelson at the Essipon Stadium, Ghana

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# Abstract

The relevance of the sublime is seen in the statue of Azumah Nelson at the Sekondi Essipon National Sports Stadium, Ghana, particularly of his philosophies and boxing achievements. Although the life-size cast aluminium scrap statue of the national sporting icon Azumah Nelson is mimetic and inspires awe and grandeur, there has been professional and public (de)illusions of the work. Many have observed and argued that though the statue conveys a message of nationality and vigour of his rule in the boxing ring for over two decades, others hold that there are issues of illusionism between the real and the fictive often served as the most poignant intensifier of visual pleasure of the statue. This study looks at the art of the sublime and (de)illusions of the statue of Azumah Nelson mounted at the Essipon National Sports Stadium in the Western Region of Ghana. Azumah Nelson is a boxing icon who brought fame and honour to Ghana. Using narrative and interpretive methods, the discussions revealed that there are (de)illusions reflecting in the statue of Azumah Nelson. These visual (de)illusions of mimesis, optical and reality were seen to be reflecting a state of bravery, courage, achievement and love for nation by Azumah Nelson.

# Keywords

(De)illusionism, life-size statue. Azumah Nelson, **Essipon National** Sports Stadium, mimesis

#### 1.1 Introduction

The life-size statue of Azumah Nelson, one of the greatest boxers who made Ghana proud continues to attract art lovers and public attention at the Essipon National Sports Stadium in Takoradi, Western Region. The statue which has been mounted at a pavilion outside the stadium shows the boxer in a sublime posture of boxing skills. The grandeur of the statue depicts vitality and strength that Azumah Nelson showed to the world during his time as a boxer. Morrison (2014) describes Azumah Nelson as one of a kind to have come from Africa. The author added that Azumah Nelson was one of the very few champions in the Ghanaian boxing fraternity who carried out such a burden of expectation; and delivered such success at a time when Ghana needed a hero. When he fought, the country Ghana fought and was so admired by Ghanaians that his followers would keep awake just to watch the champion deliver the promises he often made to Ghana. It is with this motivating background that a statue was made by Owusu-Ansah Ankrah to assist in immortalizing the image of Azumah Nelson.

It is, however, worthy of note that within the art fraternity several questions have arisen after the creation of the statue and its mounting at the Essipon National Sports Stadium in the Western region of Ghana. Though many have observed and argued that the statue conveys a message of nationality and vigour of his rule in the boxing ring for over two decades' others hold that there are issues of illusionism between the real and the fictive often served as the most poignant intensifier of visual pleasure. This study, therefore, looks at key artistic features of the statue of Azumah Nelson and the (de)illusionism, which appears to be manifested in several forms and shades.

#### 2.0 Methods

The study adopted Silvia's appraisal theory (as cited in Axelsson, 2011) for aesthetic appreciation of the cast work based on the subjective (narrative and interpretive) breakdown by the authors. The appraisal theory is explored on "how individual differences arise based on stimulus properties, like arousal potential, cannot explain why people respond differently to the same aesthetic entity, or why a person may respond differently to an aesthetic entity over time" (Axelsson, 2011, p.11; Silvia, 2005b). Using the appraisal theory, the lifesize statue of Azumah Nelson in cast aluminium scrap metal by Owusu-Ansah Ankrah involving individuals' thoughts about the aesthetic prerequisites on the work were therefore the immediate causes of responses. This theory explained the authors' appraisal on the title, description, philosophy and interpretation of

the work and people's responses through the narrative and interpretive analysis on the work.

Aesthetization of life-size cast aluminium scrap statue of Azumah Nelson, Ghana's sporting icon, using the normative system of aesthetics, which judges the quality of the statue based on how pleasing it is to the senses, intends to bring out the appraisal of its sensory properties (Reference, 2020). The life-size statue as an art possesses aesthetics as philosophy that concerned itself with the nature of taste and beauty in cast aluminium scrap metal. Appreciating art through aesthetical discourse involves communicative prerequisites of the creative work. In line with this statement, Sundstrom (2002), as cited in deGraft-Yankson (2013, p.159), perceives "art as a way of communicating that which is within to those who are on the outside and to express much more in depth than with the limits of vision for written communication".

# 3.0 Results and Discussion

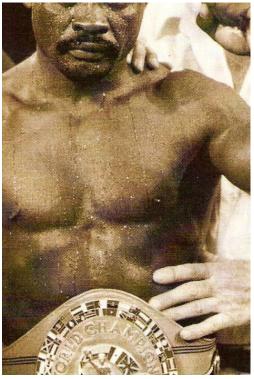
# Azumah Nelson: Bio perspective, philosophy and boxing career

The study points to the biographical perspective of Azumah Nelson and his boxing skills that has been a great inspiration to many in the Ga-Mashie area in the Greater Accra region as attested by Botchway (2019). The boxing tradition in Ghana, which takes its historical genesis from foreign (English) and local sporting inventiveness, in the view of Botchway (2019), has produced famous occupational boxers who have obtained international sports laurels that have glorified their nation and contributed in diverse ways to the popular culture and socioeconomic development of the country. The most celebrated of these is undoubtedly Azumah Nelson (Botchway, 2019). Azumah Nelson, born on 19th July 1958, is a Ghanaian former professional boxer who competed from 1979 to 2008. Azumah Nelson comes from the Ga-Mashie ethnic group of Accra, the first group to take up organised English-style boxing when it was formally introduced to the colonial territory in 1930s. Growing up in the environment of "Bukom" a province in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana, Azumah Nelson took fighting as a hobby. His early formal school education was turbulent due to the harsh financial constraints on his nuclear family. His father's financial constraints undermined the stable progress of his basic education. This unfavourable circumstance compelled Azumah Nelson to undertake boxing as a career to alleviate the financial hardship on his nuclear family (Botchway, 2019 & Kindred, 2015).

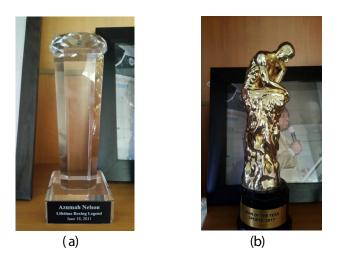
Undoubtedly, the philosophical progeny of Azumah Nelson is elevated through his sense of strength, wit, and agility in the ring. In other words, the ring professor, Azumah Nelson, is more diligent and consistent in defending his national pride in Ghanaian and African (Prempeh, 2019). The philosophy that sets this cast aluminium scrap statue is glamour on the socio-economic and political leverage of Ghana's sport icon, as he remained a dominant figure in boxing hall of fame both locally and internationally. The mark of expertise and the skill incorporated into the work bring out the welcoming spirit of Azumah Nelson's feats in his entire boxing career. The boxing career of Azumah Nelson reflected his philosophy. The cast work titled Professor was a name earned through his professional boxing career. Azumah Nelson who was a school dropout, never gave up his dreams to become a better person. He trained himself through difficult and challenging moments to outwit the gloomy situations that stared at him in the face. He overcame the gloomy situation with love and fought with aggressiveness and in the end became one of the glorious sports citizens that Ghana has ever produced.

The value of sportsmanship is better understood through the physical and psychological reflexes of a personality (sportsman). The significance of sports brings physical and mental fitness to the person involved and plays a vital role in developing values and mutual trust of a nation. His paramount character and elevation of confidence have yielded the sports icon impressive accolades. He has received world titles (Figure 1), International and local awards (Figures 2, 3 & 4). It is paramount and valuable for aesthetically appreciating the social history of boxing of Azumah Nelson in sports and sculpture context.

He is widely considered as one of the greatest African boxers of all time. He held the World Boxing Council (WBC) featherweight title once and the WBC Super Featherweight title (Figure 1) twice titles in the 1980s. Azumah, affectionately called The Professor or Zoom Zoom was ranked as the 31st greatest pound for pound boxer of all time by BoxRec (Ashitey, 2020). Nelson's dominant position in boxing both local and international, gave him tremendous social, economic and political leverage, as he remained a dominant figure in the featherweights until his retirement 1998. Nelson's sense of discipline, humility, sporting excellence in boxing, and repute as a self-made millionaire businessman, employer, philanthropist and social activist made him a national hero and an international boxing legend (Botchway, 2019).



**Figure 1.** Azumah Nelson with WBC super featherweight title belt (Source: Bonhams, 2012).



**Figure 2.** Lifetime boxing legend awards in 2011 (Source: Ankrah, 2018)



**Figure 3.** GUBA Awards 2015 for sporting legend (Source: Ankrah, 2018).



**Figure 4.** SWAG (Sport Writers Association of Ghana) Award and Prof. Azumah Nelson with WBC super featherweight title belt. (Source: Ankrah, 2018)

#### The Statue

The Professor is a life-size statue in aluminum scrap metal mounted at Essipon National Sports Stadium in Sekondi, Western Region of Ghana. It measures 68.4 inches high (5.7 feet) with 14.2 inches width. The work comes into life through the modelling and casting method. This shows how the work was sculpted to appear in a proper stance of a boxer with one of his accomplished belts around the waist. The gloves and the laced boots are all accompanying elements of the

trade that the 'lcon' engaged himself in. The pair of boot stretches almost to the knee. The tong of the pair of boots are created in attractive way depicting its lace with feet firmly grounded on the pedestal giving the work more stability. The firmness on the ground can be likened to his fitness in the boxing ring and unmovable nature of him even under extreme pressure from the opponent. The statue therefore shows this salient illusionism of reality of Azumah Nelson as a great boxer.

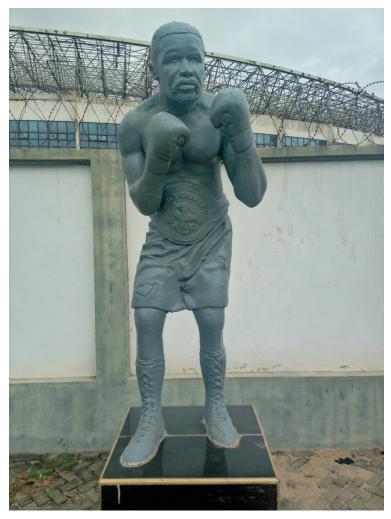
The life-size statue looks a little bigger than the life size of Azumah Nelson whose height is 5.5 feet with 68 inches reach. This was intentionally done to showcase him as a hero and a king of boxing. These are the optical illusions of the statue. The statue projects him as a distinct person and a good fighter who did all for himself, Ghana and Africa at large. The statue is slightly leaning forward with the right foot in front. The head is tilted a little towards the left and appeared to be focused on the unseeing challenger. The eyes are popping up ready to see whatever looms ahead. The nose receives slight exaggeration as if it was swelling from an opponent's punches with the mouth raised slightly because of the mouth guard he wears. The chevron moustache as his trademark of the boxer (also known as the great 'Zoom Zoom') contributes to his personal identity in the boxing ring. The inherent elements of the cast aluminum scrap metal statue with the telepathy of the artist's style make the work aesthetically amazing. This brings in sharp focus the optical illusionism that the artist portrays to the viewer. Emphasis has been placed on the moustache, eyes, and the head to show an illusion that in the boxing ring, alertness and response to attack is key to success. Definitely, with the receiving of punches from the opponent, one cannot talk of full resemblance of a boxer. Figures 5, 6, 7 show all these profound qualities the statue possesses while Figure 8 shows the back view of the statue.



**Figure 5.** Life-size statue of "Professor" Azumah Nelson by Owusu-Ansah Ankrah. Measuring 68.4 inches high (5.7 feet) with 14.2 inches width and depth. Cast aluminum scrap metal. Three-quarter view. Essipon stadium at Sekondi, Western Region-Ghana. (Source: Field study, 2020).



**Figure 6.** Life-size statue of "Professor" Azumah Nelson by Owusu-Ansah Ankrah. Measuring 68.4 inches high (5.7 feet) with 14.2 inches width and depth. Cast aluminum scrap metal. Three-quarter view. Essipon stadium at Sekondi, Western Region-Ghana. (Source: Field study, 2020).



**Figure 7.** Life-size statue of Azumah Nelson mounted at Essipon stadium in Sekondi, Western Region-Ghana. (Source: Field study, 2020).



**Figure 8.** Life-size statue of "Professor" Azumah Nelson by Owusu-Ansah Ankrah. Measuring 68.4 inches high (5.7 feet) with 14.2 inches width and depth. Cast aluminium scrap metal. Three-quarter view. Essipon stadium at Sekondi, Western Region-Ghana. (Source: Field study, 2020)

## Mimesis, Reality and Optical illusionism in the Statute of Azumah Nelson

The rhetoric behind Azumah Nelson's statue is the imaging power that reflects mimesis, reality and optical illusionism. The creation of Azumah Nelson's statue has brought the prevalent translation of mimesis as "imitation" in the realistic representation of Azumah Nelson as a professional boxer from a period of his glorious moments in the boxing ring. The life-size statue of Azumah Nelson in cast aluminium scrap metal by Owusu-Ansah Ankrah has been intrigued by the perceptual nature and the behaviour of the eye opposing the concept of reality. The sculptor's creation of the statue gives a perception to the eye as an optical illusion for both reflection and simulation that allow the viewer to see and comprehend the sculpture piece. Providing an artistic representation of Azumah Nelson based on reality, mimesis in the artwork has generated a fraught relationship from realism to optimism. Mimesis as poesis, in sculpting the statue of Azumah Nelson has been a crux of the artwork between proponents of reality and optical illusionism (Nordquist, 2020; Silka, 2016; Halliwell, 2002 & Hartman, 1999).

The rich locus of aesthetics of the status recognizes the significance and the effect of aluminium scrap material for realistic representation of Azumah Nelson. The imitation of nature, through Silvia's appraisal theory (as cited by Axelsson, 2011), gives the cast aluminium scrap metalwork a sense of optical illusion and a way of communication as principles perceived by the eye as ascertained by Sundstrom (2002) and deGraft-Yankson (2013). The mimetic representation of Azumah Nelson in the cast aluminium scrap metal statue attracts the four variants of the classic period. These four variants were revealed (by Tatarkiewicz, 1980 as cited in Encyclopedia of Ideas, 2020) different concepts of imitation: the ritualistic concept (expression), the concept of Democritus (imitation of natural processes), Platonic (copying of nature), Aristotelian (free creation of the work of art based on elements of nature). The various philosophical positions on mimesis in reflecting the statue of Azumah Nelson made of cast aluminium scrap bring a uniform theory of meanings and controversies abound in the cast statue. However, the mimetic representation of the sculpture often appears more suited to the understanding of the phenomena of reality than other more abstract forms of the work (Carnevali, 2010).

The interpretation of the work imitates the precise description of the personality and nature of Azumah Nelson rather than the appearance of the work that ought to imitate nature's beauty. In an explanation of mimetic representation of the cognitive values, the sculpture piece (the professor) advocates strength, hard

work and the courage to achieve greatness. The ready-to-punch posture of the statue showcases the strength and hard work that the boxer exerts into boxing to attain victory. Ghanaians witnessed Azumah Nelson's glorious moments of victory in boxing ring for 39 times from December 1, 1979 until his last defeat in January 24, 2008. His last fight on January 24, 2008 was a comeback after ten (10) years of retirement. Hard work that glamours around the statue reveals his resilient nature in boxing. The subtle looks on his face, as the statue portrays, tell how quiet, simple and forceful he was in achieving laurels.

The aluminum scrap metal as material for the cast of the life-size statue of Ghana's sporting icon Azumah Nelson, showcases durability that also reflects the boxer's strength through his boxing career. The statue is a representation of Azumah Nelson's feats in the boxing ring. The belt clad around his waist shows the accomplishment and the overall respect that Azumah achieved for himself and the nation, Ghana. The statue, mounted in a serene environment reflects his calmness but unpredictable nature in the boxing ring. In view of his unpredictable nature in the boxing ring, these character traits of Azumah Nelson, as expressed by the artist in the statue, show (de)illusionism as there is an artistic combination of opposite characters carefully blended to engage the viewer. The statue is indeed a communicative artwork and imitation of the title confirms Benjamin's (1986) statement of human capacity to producing similarities. To Benjamin, nature creates similarities and human being (artists) gift of seeing resemblance is nothing other than a rudiment of the powerful compulsion in former times to become and behave like something else.

Indeed, his wins were sublime and the boxing world became increasingly aware of his good jabbing and boxing dexterities. After winning the WBC Featherweight title, he once remarked that, "this fight was like a father and son and if your son does something wrong, you gotta punish him".

# 4.0 Conclusions

This study was centred on the life-sized statue of Azumah Nelson, one of the greatest boxers from Ghana. The discussions point to a fact that three artistic illusionism can be found in the statue of Azumah Nelson that has been mounted at the Essipon National Sports Stadium in the Western Region of Ghana. *Mimesis, reality* and *optical* were observed as (de)illusionism of the statue. These visual (de)illusions reflect a state of bravery, courage, achievement and nationality. The artist combined features of what happens in and outside the boxing ring which results in a (de)illusionism of the sublime statue. The statue communicates Azumah Nelson's legacy and achievements in boxing

ring for over two decades. There are (de)illusionism between the real and the fictive which has been the most poignant intensifier of the visual pleasure of the statue.

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#### Victor K.B Micah

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Evans Kwadwo Donkor is a Senior Lecturer at the Sculpture Technology Department, Takoradi Technical University. He is best known for his composite sculptures made from scrap metals and discarded automobile parts and other industrial detritus. Donkor is pursuing a PhD programme in Arts & Culture at University of Education, Winneba. As an artist, he strongly believes in bringing every material to life, reshaping and attaching the various components, giving old and new materials a new purpose as well as a bit of soul.

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