

**“A Headless Statue” and “A Headless Ghana” –****A case study on the role of Signs and Symbols in creating Factual Stories**Anna-Marie Jansen van Vuuren<sup>1</sup> \*<sup>1</sup>University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa

\*Corresponding author email: Ajansenvanvuuren@uj.ac.za

**Abstract**

“The headless statue of Nkrumah symbolises that we have become a headless Ghana.” These words of a Ghanaian politician became the starting point for a short documentary that explored the mythical image of the first leader of the independent Ghana. However, what began as a few interviews with political members, resulted in much more – as the filmmakers followed the visual signs of this icon all over the city of Accra – and ended up finding an interesting tale about how people reacted to these visuals, and the message one could read between the lines of *their* words.

In visual storytelling, whether it be producing documentaries or television news inserts, we tend to think of the story first and the pictures thereafter. However, the author of this paper found in directing and producing the short documentary “Finding Nkrumah” that sometimes following the visuals will dictate its own angle and create its own story.

Furthermore, the author also found that certain visual images (or “signs”) would get the documentary participants/interviewees as well as the viewers to respond to the story in interesting ways by attributing their own symbolism to it. According to many scholars, that is part of the power of the visual image, as Browne (1983:vi) states “Pictures ... are exceptionally effective because, although words lie flat and dormant to some readers, it is difficult to miss messages carried in a motion picture.”

Unfortunately, journalists or producers at times tend to forget the visual as a tool of creating meaning and telling its own story. In interviewees with TV journalists, the author has found that these journalists often have a set story in mind, and if they aren’t able to film suitable images, they settle for archive footage and cutaways and use voice over narration to tell the story in the way they wanted to tell it from the initial stages of the production, without keeping their current material in mind.

The author of this paper used to have this perception as well – that as a journalist one sets out on a story with a specific angle and that it will only change if an interviewee gives one a so-called “scoop” that changes the direction of the story, or if interviewees’ unwillingness to divulge information or engage with the camera forces one to diverge from one’s original intention in creating the story. However, the specific case study in point, a five-minute documentary filmed in Accra, Ghana, changed her perception.

The film initially began as a story about what made Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana’s first leader after gaining independence from Britain, a hero. It progressed from the latter - to recording the heroic signs of Nkrumah in Accra – to investigating how historical heroes become mythical figures and how the visual symbols that represent them in turn enhances their myth inside others’ minds.

In Accra there are quite a few statues, monuments and other visual symbols of Nkrumah. As with most iconic statues, their function is to pay tribute to historical figures and cement the heroes of a bygone past into the minds of those who see them. In a time where these types of statues cause a lot of controversy: the most notable case in point is the statue of Cecil John Rhodes at the University of Cape Town in the author’s home country (South Africa) that led to the start of the #RhodesMustFall-hashtag campaign that, in turn, also sparked debates about a statue of the same figure at the campus of the UK’s Oxford University. However, it was the statue

of Nkrumah without a head that captured her imagination. This statue of Nkrumah was beheaded after Nkrumah was overthrown in a *coup d'état*.

One would think that the statues would become the main focus of the story, but again, the author of this paper (as the producer of the documentary) was proved wrong. When asking one of the interviewees who participated in the documentary how he felt about seeing the statue of his hero without a head, he answered that to him the statue represents what Ghana has become today, in his words: “a country without a proper leader, in other words – a headless Ghana.” Finally, the metaphor in this sentence, visualised by the headless statue and what it represented in a contemporary Ghana, became the gist of the story. The potent image of a headless statue of Nkrumah became a prompt to be used in interviewing other Ghanaians – and although the questions centred on Nkrumah – their questions revealed some subtext about how they felt about contemporary Ghana.

This paper is a qualitative study that aims to make a contribution to journalism, documentary and media studies. The main methodologies used will be participant observation and the author’s own experience during the production of the documentary “Finding Nkrumah” – and interviews with her fellow crew members and other collaborators on this project. An important aspect to emphasise is that this is a practice-lead research project and that the author believes that in sharing her experience in making this case study, she can inspire similar projects and interesting debates about the various practical and theoretical aspects this article touches on.

**Key words:** Accra, Documentary, Film Production, Heroes, Myth, Nkrumah, Practice-lead Research, Representation, Signs, Statues, Storytelling, Symbols, Visual Narratives.

## 1. Introduction

In the first part of the paper the author gives a brief background of the context in which the documentary artefact, which serves as a case study for this paper, was created. This is followed by a description of the research purpose of this paper.

### 1.1 Background

The author of this paper travelled to Ghana in October 2015 to attend the Documentary and Diversity Network's Doctoral School hosted by the National Film and Television Institute (NAFTI) in Accra. The Doctoral School's goal was to create a forum to explore the PhD students' research in the context of the city of Accra, and to create documentaries by using as crew undergraduate students from the various participating institutions in the network, namely the University of Johannesburg (South Africa), the University of the Witwatersrand (South Africa), Arcada University of Applied Sciences (Finland), the University of Helsinki (Finland), NAFTI (Ghana) and The South African School of of Motion Picture Medium and Live Performance (AFDA). The two-fold approach was aimed at enhancing and supporting the visual and research aspects of the doctoral research conducted by the PhD participants. The overall aim was to consider how practice-led research and field research might enhance the methodologies of the doctoral students in their own work. Additionally, the organisers wanted to give the doctoral students access to creative support for practice-based work [1].

The documentary *Finding Nkrumah*, which the author directed and produced during this programme with the two undergraduate students, Rickard Stolpe (Finland) and Josephine Aikins (Ghana), is used as the case study that will be explored in this paper.

### 1.2 Research purpose

As a journalist, the author has produced many television news inserts and short documentaries in the course of her career. After a news meeting and a brainstorming session with her editor and other journalists in the newsroom, she would set out on a story with a specific angle in mind. She would interview a role player with this specific angle in mind, and would only change the approach to the story if an interviewee gives her a so-called "scoop" that changes the direction of the story, or if the interviewee's unwillingness to divulge information or engage with the camera forces her to diverge from her original intention with the story. If she and the camera person were unable to film suitable images to visually tell the story, they would settle for archive footage and cutaways, and use voice-over narration to tell the story in the way they originally intended to. Therefore, the *story* or narrative would *dictate* the visuals. However, with the documentary *Finding Nkrumah* the process worked the other way around. In this case, it was the *visuals* as *signs* that played a key role in the interviews that were conducted, and therefore the *visuals* dictated the direction of the narrative.

This study could therefore serve as a practice-led research project, and in this paper the author aims to share her experience and the process of creating this documentary. Her goal is therefore to inspire similar practice-led or practice-based research projects and to ignite debates about the various practical and theoretical aspects that the paper touches on. Furthermore, she wishes to contribute to the fields of Visual Storytelling, Aesthetic Journalism, Semiotics and Image Studies.

## 2. Research methodologies

The various research methodologies that the author took into consideration while writing this paper are the focus of this section.

### 2.1 Participant-observation and field research

As was mentioned above, the author was the director and producer of the documentary film that serves as a case study for this paper, and the process of creating *Finding Nkrumah* forms an integral part of this paper. Therefore she took on a *participant-as-observer* [2] role in which she experienced events from the perspective of the group members and was also a key decision maker in the documentary creation process.

The entire project took place over the course of one week as part of the D&D Network Doctoral School and Intensive course [1]. At the beginning of the course, the participants were divided into groups that consisted of a doctoral student, who acted as team leader, and two undergraduate students. Every group consisted of a South African, a Ghanaian and a Finnish student [3].

The group that produced *Finding Nkrumah*, constantly reflected on their process in a public space in front of the other participants of the network as well as the “elders”, the academics who served as external advisors on the project. This formed part of the Documentary and Diversity project’s goals. Therefore, what would typically happen was that each documentary group would spend one day on the pre-production/production/post-production process of their documentary; then on the alternative day, all the participants of the project would gather at the NAFTAI campus, screen a small section of their work-in-progress, and then receive feedback from the audience. This led to the creation of a final documentary that was screened to a wider audience on the seventh day of the Doctoral School [3]. Therefore, in writing down this process, the author aims to use the main methodology of practice-led research.

### 2.2 Practice-based vs. Practice-led research

Before describing the other methodologies used for creating this paper, first the difference between practice-based and practice-led research has to be explained, as it was understood and applied by the author in creating her paper.

Academics from the University of Technology in Sydney have defined *practice-based research* as an “original investigation in order to gain new knowledge partly by means of practice and the outcomes of that practice” [4]. A creative artefact is the basis of the contribution of the knowledge and may be included in the submission for examination and peer review. *Practice-led research* is described as a practice “that leads to new knowledge that has operational significance of that practice. The primary focus of the research is to advance knowledge about practice, or to advance knowledge within practice” [4].

The author’s work in this paper falls into the latter category of practice-led research, because although the creative work forms an integral part of the research process, the author rather focuses on the practice-led process that involves a study of the decision-making that took place while constructing the documentary, similar to an artist constructing an artwork [4].

Nithikul Nimkulrat [5] explains this as follows:

“Within practice-led research it is the design process moving from problem to solution that is the point of departure for the rhetoric research direction ... The research direction of an artist is a transparent process in which conscious steps are taken, in which knowledge is used, or knowledge is searched for and articulated in the process ... The artist therefore, must also demonstrate that he possesses sufficient knowledge to justify the choices he has made” [5, p. 2].

It is however important to note that this paper is more of a *reflection* on the process that took place in Accra, as the author was not aware at that point that she would be writing an academic paper inspired by the process. Therefore, the role of semiotics, signs and symbols in creating the documentary was not part of the original plan, and was merely something that transpired during the production and post-production process. The author kept an informal diary in her native tongue, Afrikaans, during the week of the Doctoral School, and she often refers back to those notes in this paper [4].

Two other main methodologies that the author used to analyse and reflect on the documentary process are semiotics and aesthetic journalism. These methodologies are discussed in the “literature review” part of this paper.

The interplay between the theoretical concepts and the process of designing the documentary are important parts of the paper. Therefore, although a brief literature review is given in the following section, the author will still extensively draw on literature as part of her discussion in the “Main research results” section of the paper.

### 3. Literature review of main theoretical concepts

The various theoretical concepts that serve as a framework for this paper are discussed in this section.

#### 3.1 Aesthetic journalism

The idea for this paper originally came from reading Alfredo Cramerotti’s work on *Aesthetic journalism* [6], which he describes as one method of bringing together various practices and ideas related to meaning production in terms of arts and literature:

“What I call aesthetic journalism involves artistic practices in the form of investigation of social, cultural or political circumstances” [6, p. 21].

In addition, the rationale that Cramerotti gives for using the concept of aesthetic journalism, is the fact that the methodology was created to “contribute to building critical knowledge” [6, p. 22].

Cramerotti’s work seemed to be quite relevant to this paper, as he also produced a three-minute video, similar to the author, and this became a starting point for his research [6, p. 17]. Cramerotti was commissioned to create an art piece inspired by the Bosphorus Bridge that connects Asia and Europe. He and his research partner conducted 13 interviews with the inhabitants of Istanbul, asking them what their perceptions of two of the bridges in their city

were. They used hand-held cameras to film the interviews, and after editing out the questions they also gave visual illustrations of the statements [6, p. 17].

According to Cramerotti, the visuals became a graphic metaphor of the bridges and part of a larger artistic investigation into the relationship between aesthetics and information. In a similar fashion, the headless statue of Kwame Nkrumah became a visual metaphor of some Ghanaians' own feelings during the rest of the documentary. This will be discussed extensively in section 4 of this paper.

### 3.2 Semiotics

As this paper focuses on the roles of signs and symbols in creating a short documentary or a so-called factual story, a research methodology would be incomplete if it did not refer to the role of semiotics in studying a media text. Semiotics is described as being the study of signs, "or of the social production of meanings and pleasures by sign systems, or the study of how things come to have significance" [7, p. 12].

This form of analysis is especially relevant to this paper, as can be deduced from this quote by Gill Branston and Roy Stafford [7]:

"Media, especially news and factual media, have often been thought of as kinds of conveyor belts of meaning between 'the world' and audiences, producing images 'about' or 'from' this or that debate, event or place" [7, p. 11].

However, Branston and Stafford [7, p. 12] emphasise that by using semiotics as a form of analysis, one does not assume that the media function as a reflection of reality or as a "simple channel of communication":

"Instead they [the media] are seen as actually structuring the very realities which they seem to 'describe' or 'stand in for'. This disturbs powerful notions of 'a truth' to the complex worlds we inhabit ..." [7, p. 12].

This corresponds to Cramerotti's notion of representation in aesthetic journalism, as he denounces the claim that "journalistic representation is the same as the facts represented":

"Truth in reporting is a myth: except for a direct involvement in the events of life, only degrees of approximation are possible, those being more or less reliable according to the position of the author, prejudices and obligation towards employers" [6, p. 22].

The notion of 'truth' is also an important concept in terms of documentary and reality debates.

### 3.3 Assumptions about 'realism' and 'truth' in documentary theory

David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson [8, p. 128] define a documentary as a film format which "purports to present factual information about the world outside the film", and Stella Bruzzi [9] paraphrases the documentary film *This is Spinal Tap* as follows:

“It’s a fine line between the real and the fake, and what is of far more interest to documentarists at the moment is the complexity and productiveness of the relationship between the two” [9, p. 6].

Probably the most quoted academic in the field of documentary filmmaking has been Bill Nichols, who identifies five modes of documentaries, namely “the Expository, the Observational, the Interactive, the Reflexive and the Performative” [10]. Authors who wrote extensively on the topic were Paul Rotha [11], Eric Branauw [12] and Michael Renov [13].

Branston and Stafford [7, p. 360] explain that similar to news, “documentaries are commonly seen as particularly truthful, as being a kind of trace of reality, dealing with the ‘factual’ or ‘unconstructed’ as far as possible”. They contrast this to fiction films, “which usually stage and pre-script their events and generally use actors” [7, p. 360]. However, these academics do emphasise that documentaries, similar to other types of films, are also constructed and that it is not a mere matter of pointing a camera at ‘the truth’:

“Documentaries have a choice of materials from which to shape their film – interviews, recording of events, sound materials, documents/evidence and archive footage” [7, p. 360].

Branston and Stafford make an important point which one needs to take into account in terms of *this* paper, namely how documentarians contribute to the “*narrative shaping* of the film” and “what to emphasize” within their documentary: “And throughout, there is the question of how events are framed, ‘staged’ and then edited – the ‘angle’ in both senses” [7, p. 360].

#### **4. Main research results: Reflecting on the process of creating *Finding Nkrumah***

##### **4.1 “Aesthetics” and conceptualisation**

Cramerotti explains that “aesthetics is that process in which we open our sensibility to the diversity of the forces of nature and the manmade environment, and convert them into tangible experience” [6, p. 21].

“The conception of what is artistically valid or beautiful” [6] came up very soon in the pre-production part of the documentary, as our first day became a day of location scouting. The function of this location scouting was firstly to get to know and understand Accra (as most of the participants had never visited the city before and secondly to identify possible locations that could be used for our initial PowerPoint pitch and our eventual documentary [4].

The brief for the documentary was that each group participating in the course should create a documentary that drew on the theoretical concepts that the doctoral student investigates in his/her PhD thesis. However, the documentary also had to reflect and explore Accra as a city and as an essential backdrop to the film [1].

This brief led to numerous conversations between the three participants of the author’s group, as the author’s PhD thesis focused on “Myths and the ideological representation of the Hero in Anglo-Boer War Films and Drama Series”. The Anglo-Boer War is also referred to as the South African War and describes the conflict that took place between the Boers and the

British Empire in the period of 1899 – 1902 [14]. Initially it seemed that it would be completely far-fetched to find a point of connection between the above-mentioned topic and the city of Accra. But as the three participants proceeded to explore the city of Accra, informal conversations revealed that there were quite a few similarities between Ghana and South Africa.

Firstly, both Ghana and South Africa were British colonies. It is in fact the Boers' steadfast resolve to remain independent from Great Britain that had caused the Anglo-Boer War [14, p. 4]. Secondly, most South African historians agree that it was the British cabinet's hunger for the gold discovered in the Witwatersrand that had led to the mighty Empire's interest in annexing the South African Republic in the first place [15, p. 161]. And quite aptly, Ghana was called the Gold Coast before it became known as Ghana upon its independence from Britain in 1957. The English colonists adopted the term 'Gold Coast', since Ghana has been a fertile ground for mining this mineral since the Portuguese who had come to this region discovered gold there in the 15<sup>th</sup> century [16].

However, the similarities between Ghana and South Africa did not seem to be sufficient to warrant an interesting documentary by itself. The group members faced the question of where to go next. The next step on the schedule would be to find suitable locations to film the documentary, but still a suitable starting point had evaded the author and her group. The key seemed to lie in the term 'the Hero', as this was the central focus of the author's PhD thesis. Then, one of the members of the group, Josephine, had an idea.

#### **4.2 'The Hero' – From conceptualisation to pre-production**

The Oxford Dictionary describes a "hero" as a "person, especially a man, who is admired by many people for doing something brave or good" [17]. The theorist Joseph Campbell defines a hero as "a man of self-achieved submission" who acts heroically and solves a dilemma within an archetypal story or myth [18, p. 11]. If one brings this closer to reality and modern society, it would be functional to consider Jack A. Hobbs's definition of the relation between "the hero" and "society":

"Next to the gods themselves, heroes are the most important figures in the myths of any society ... The hero is inevitably a person of greater abilities than the rest of society, one who is able to meet a crisis and overcome great dangers" [19, p. 178].

As mentioned before, these were central concepts that formed part of the author's PhD research, and that would have been ideal to explore in a documentary, as per the Doctoral School's brief, but the author faced the question: "Was there such a Hero in the Ghanaian society?" "Yes!" was the definite answer from the Ghanaian member of the group, Josephine: "The man who gave Ghana its independence – the first prime minister: Kwame Nkrumah" [4]. Thus began our search for Nkrumah, as the title of our documentary would later more aptly describe [20].

"Where would one go to search for Kwame Nkrumah in Accra?" Again, Josephine was ready with the answer. Our first stop would be the Kwame Nkrumah Memorial Park, where the mausoleum with Nkrumah's remains is also housed [4].



### 4.3 “Finding Nkrumah” and pre-production

During the journey to the Kwame Nkrumah Memorial Park, the author planned that the most obvious theme for the documentary would be “What makes Kwame Nkrumah a hero for Ghanaian people?” After all, as Hobbs states:

“By studying the heroes of a given society, we can discover a great deal about the people who made them myths, for heroes invariably embody the ideals of that society” [19, p. 179].

On reaching the park, the author and group members were greeted by an impressive mausoleum built for the remains of Kwame Nkrumah. At the front of the mausoleum was a large bronze statue of Nkrumah (it appeared to be gold to the author when the sun reflected on it). The statue is of Nkrumah clad in cloth and with his hand pointing forward. According to the tour guide, the statue was erected on the same place where Nkrumah had stood when he declared Ghana’s independence from Britain on 6 March 1957 [4]. Behind the statue are two fountains. The fountains are decorated by statues of bare-chested flute players that seem to be welcoming dignitaries to the mausoleum. A bit further in the park, on an old Ferris wheel, is another statue of Nkrumah, again pointing forward [4]. However, what the group found most interesting was the “headless statue” of Nkrumah next to the mausoleum. The guide explained that the statue had been beheaded during the 1967 coup d’état, when Nkrumah was overthrown as leader while being out of the country. The guide explained that for a long time the head was missing. Since then it has been found, but instead of placing it back on top of the statue’s shoulders, it was mounted next to the body of the statue, on a separate slab. One of the arms have still not been found, and the guide even joked with us that any information about the remaining arm would be welcome [4].

The anecdotes of the guide were very welcome and made for an enriching experience, but the author did not really feel that it brought the group any closer to making a documentary about “What made Nkrumah a hero?” The park’s museum that housed many of Nkrumah’s artefacts were also interesting, but as filming was not allowed there and the guide’s tales also reeked a bit of hero worship, the group members did not feel it would provide for interviews that would showcase the real Ghana. Where to next?

Again Josephine came with a suggestion. By this time she seemed to be the hero of this project itself. She suggested that we interview some of the members of the CPP, the Convention People’s Party. This was the party that Nkrumah himself had founded in 1949, and his legacy still serves as the base of the party’s ideology, as their website explains:

“Nkrumaism is the ideological principle underpinning Nkrumaist political parties, namely the CPP” [21].

The group made an appointment with the head of communication at the CPP and went for an interview at the party’s head office. The author put various questions to him, and as he was well versed, he spoke at length about Nkrumah’s legacy, why he could be considered to be a hero and, when the spokesperson found out that the author was from South Africa, also about the similarities between the two countries [4]. However, the breakthrough moment came when the author asked the CPP spokesperson how he felt about seeing a statue of his hero,

headless. As a prompt, Josephine also showed him a picture of the statue that she had taken on her phone while visiting the Memorial. His answer surprised all the members of the group: “The headless statue of Nkrumah represents what Ghana has become today: a country without a proper leader, in other words – a headless Ghana.” According to the author, the symbolism was hard to miss [4].

#### 4.4 Semiotics and Nkrumah – the first production phase ...

Since the moment that the politician spoke those words (“a headless Ghana”), the author was playing with ideas of semiotics in her head. As mentioned before, semiotics is the study of signs that are used to analyse the imagery used in media texts, from films to advertisements to works of literature [22]. Dawn Heinecken, similar to many other theorists before her, explains that “imagery is not accidental”:

“The signs that are used in a text ... carry a range of meanings and associations which contribute to our evaluation of the text’s message” [22, p. 6].

It can be deduced that the people who had beheaded Nkrumah’s statue in 1967, had beheaded the statue to symbolise that Nkrumah’s power had ended. Since he was not in Ghana at the time, they needed to physically show his loss of power – and they did this through a visual image. To interpret the politician’s words in a more accurate manner, we needed some background knowledge on the current political situation in Ghana, because one cannot judge a single sign on its own, as Heinecken points out:

“The relationship of signs to other signs in a text also influences the overall meaning of a text ... Analysis of texts, therefore, cannot be based on an understanding of the text alone. It needs to be done along with an analysis of wider cultural discourses.” [22, p. 6]

In this instance, the interview with the politician was our text, and we needed to understand the so-called “wider cultural discourse” to interpret his statement.

The interview was done near the end of 2015, and at the time the CPP, the party that the spokesperson represented and also the party that Nkrumah had founded, had been out of power since Nkrumah was overthrown in the sixties [16]. According to Josephine, the country has a corrupt government that has led the country to economic stagnation. Therefore, similar to a snake without a head, the politician compared Ghana to a powerless country. A country that was the first nation in Africa to have gained independence is now seen by some to be a leaderless country [4].

After a discussion with the group members, it was decided that the next day during the viewing with the rest of the D&D Network, we would screen a short, edited version of the interview with the CPP spokesperson, as well as a *pecha kucha* (form of a PowerPoint presentation) of the various signs, symbols and images that we had recorded as photographic images during our trip [4]. We spoke a lot about the symbols of the “hero” (“Nkrumah”) that were represented in Accra, and Josephine gave her perspective of what it meant to Ghanaians to see their former hero, Nkrumah, in his various guises across the city. It would be interesting to see how the audience reacted to this during the screening of the rough footage

the next day [4].

#### 4.5 Signs and symbols and reactions at the first screening

“Symbols are the means by which archetypes, themselves unconscious, communicate to consciousness. Each archetype requires an infinite number of symbols – and symbols vary from culture to culture” [23, p. 93].

Symbols may vary from culture to culture, but almost everyone recognises a statue of a hero when they see one. This might be a generalisation on the author’s part, but it was definitely the feeling when the group screened the images of the Nkrumah statues to the audience at the D&D Network’s guidance session. Especially the sign of Nkrumah pointing forward, “as if he was showing the way to the rest of Africa” (in the words of one of the audience members), ignited quite a debate. It was agreed among the audience that, as with the most historical iconic statues, their function is to pay tribute to Nkrumah and to cement him as a hero into the minds of those who see him in and around Accra [4]. The words of another academic, Katherine Woodward, come to mind: “A person, like a nation, is represented by symbols as well as stories he/she tells about him/herself” [24, p. 3].

Another interesting discussion was raised by the audience about the value of these types of historical statues in this day and age, especially considering the current debates and controversy around historical statues in the author’s own country, South Africa [4].

In 2015, a group of students from the University of Cape Town (UCT) demanded that a statue of Cecil John Rhodes be removed from their campus, because he was seen as a colonial oppressor. This led to an entire social media movement, in which the supporters of the #RhodesMustFall-hashtag campaign had a far-reaching influence that could even be felt on the campus of Rhodes’ alma mater, Oxford University in the UK. Eventually, after a few weeks of unrest in which many historical statues in South Africa were targeted and damaged, the Rhodes statue was removed from the UCT campus, thus constituting a symbolic victory for those involved [25].

From the direction the conversation was going, it seemed that the audience wanted the group to make a documentary about historical statues in Ghana, but this was not what the group had in mind. After all, it is not really about the statue; it is the symbol of what the statue represented that mattered – the hero – Nkrumah, the original object or “angle” of the search. In all of the statues Nkrumah was represented as a “saviour”. He was represented as the “saviour archetype” for Ghana, and as such, most of the statues made of him carried this symbolism – all except one: the statue without a head. How do Ghanaians feel about seeing their saviour represented in such a way? The man who had brought independence to Ghana? Who had freed them from the colonial oppressors? That was it. That was it! The “angle” of our short three-minute documentary had just revealed itself.

#### 4.6 The “headless statue” and Makhola market – the 2<sup>nd</sup> production phase

The next day, the three members of the group: the author, Josephine and Rickard (the main photographer and videographer) set out for the streets of the Makhola Market place in Accra. There they would show the picture on Josephine’s mobile phone to anyone who did not mind to be interviewed, and ask them how they felt about seeing this picture. With the author

conducting the interview, Josephine interpreting, and Rickard, as well as one of Josephine's other friends acting as cinematographers, as many interviews and viewpoints as time would allow were captured. The final documentary was due the next day, and they still had to edit all the footage together.

The results were fascinating. The interviewees were either individuals working at the market or passers-by [3]. Although most people knew who Nkrumah was, not everyone had visited his Memorial Park, and the headless statue did not seem to be that famous, as most of the people who had never visited the park did not even know about its existence; however, most of them were adamant that the head should be put back on the statue, as one lady put it "to properly identify him to the visitors of the museum as the man who had won Ghana its independence". And her final words: "Kwame Nkrumah was a good man."

One of the most interesting respondents, an old man with a white beard and sunglasses, said he was very sad to see Nkrumah's beheaded statue. Similarly to the first interviewee, he felt that the head should be put back on the statue. Although the photo did show that the head was mounted next to the body of the statue, this did not seem to be enough for them.

Another respondent said that she had never really thought about the coup d'état and what it meant for Nkrumah, until she saw that picture of the beheaded statue, since all the other statues of him in Accra seemed to show him in all his glory. Many of the interviewees blamed the missing body parts on past presidents, and even demanded that the current president or prime minister be charged with returning it, and also replacing the statue's head.

Who would have thought that one picture, the symbol of a man, of a former hero, could ignite so many passions and emotions in people? However, we did not have time to ponder on this, as we had to rush back to edit a documentary together before the next day.

#### **4.7 Finding Nkrumah – the post-production phase**

The post-production phase was perhaps the most difficult phase of the process, as we not only had to decide which footage to use (as three minutes is a very short duration for a documentary), but we also had to agree on the structure, focus and final outcome.

The editor, Rickard, felt very strongly about the fact that it was a documentary about people, and that we should focus on them, while the author argued that the documentary should start with an opening sequence of the "signs and symbols of Nkrumah", that is, the statues, to contextualise the documentary. In the end, the group reached a compromise and Rickard edited through the night to be ready for the final screening the next day.

During the final day of the D&D Network's Doctoral School, many guests were invited to come and watch the documentaries. *Finding Nkrumah* was very well received. What was quite interesting was that a lot of the teachers and professors of NAFTI, as well as members of the public, felt that although the documentary focused on Nkrumah, it really captured the essence of what it meant to be Ghanaian in Accra. This showed not only in the visuals, but also in the interviews, especially the wittiness and the humour that the interviewees displayed. Although it began as such a serious topic, Rickard brilliantly edited it in a 'light', tongue-in-cheek way that was entertaining, while still demonstrating the seriousness of the matter: that many members of the Ghanaian society were disgruntled with the current

dispensation and were nostalgically thinking back to Nkrumah and what he had meant for their home country.

### 5. Contribution for the practice

This paper was in some ways more of an eyewitness account of, a report or reflection on the week-long process of making a short documentary in Accra, Ghana, as part of the Documentary and Diversity Network's Doctoral School. However, the author hopes that with this paper she may inspire practitioners to think of how they approach documentary making and short news inserts, and to spend more time to think of the visuals, and how these could contribute and in a sense *create* the story. In her experience as a broadcast journalist, she often finds that journalists go out on a story, conduct interviews, write a script, and then search for visuals that would fit the narrative of the script, instead of searching for a story that fits the visuals. This is her plea for the latter, namely for visual journalists and documentary makers to return to visual storytelling and to remember that journalism can be aesthetically pleasing, while also telling an engaging story.

### 6. Conclusion

This paper investigated the role that signs and symbols can play in creating a factual story such as a documentary or an insert for a current affairs or actuality programme. The author used a three-minute short documentary that she created as part of the 2015 Doctoral School of the Documentary and Diversity Network, *Finding Nkrumah*, as a case study. Her main research methodology was participant observation and she followed a practice-led approach by writing down the experiences she had while creating an artefact, the above-mentioned documentary.

One of her key arguments is that in visual storytelling, journalists tend to think of the story or "angle" first, and only secondly of the accompanying pictures. The case study in point actually demonstrated what a rich story could be created by letting the images, and the symbols they represent, be the guide. The powerful image of a headless statue of the man who had led Ghana to independence, Kwame Nkrumah, became a prompt to be used while interviewing Ghanaians. Their answers revealed not only what they thought about the former hero, but also how they felt about the current Ghanaian society.

### References

- [1] Mistry, J., *Programme and Brief for the Documentary and Diversity Doctoral School, Accra 2015*, E-mail to the author ([ajansenvanvuuren@uj.ac.za](mailto:ajansenvanvuuren@uj.ac.za)) on 30 September 2015.
- [2] Du Plooy, G. M., *Communication Research: Techniques, Methods and Applications*, Lansdowne, RSA: Juta & Co, 2005.
- [3] Candy, L., (2006), *Differences between practice-based and practice-led research*, available at: <http://www.creativityandcognition.com/> [Accessed: March 27, 2016].
- [4] Jansen van Vuuren, A., *Author's diary during the D&D Network Spring Doctoral School, Accra, Ghana: 3 – 9 October 2015*.
- [5] Nimkulrat, N., The Role of Documentation in Practice-Led Research, *Journal of Research Practice*, 3(1), 2007, pp. 1-8.
- [6] Cramerotti, A., *Aesthetic Journalism: How to inform without informing*, Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2009.

- [7] Branson, G. and Stafford, R., *The Media Student's Book*. 5<sup>th</sup> edition, Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2010.
- [8] Bordwell, D. and Thompson, K., *Film Art: An Introduction*. 8<sup>th</sup> edition, New York: McGraw-Hill International, 2004.
- [9] Bruzzi, S., *New Documentary*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2006.
- [10] Nichols, B., *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts of Documentary*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991.
- [11] Rotha, P., *The Documentary Film*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, London: Faber.
- [12] Barnouw, Erik, *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- [13] Renov, M., *The Subject of Documentary*, Minneapolis, USA: University of Minnesota Press, 2004.
- [14] Jansen van Vuuren, A., *Van Kavalier tot Verraaiers, Zombie tot Legoman: Mites en die ideologiese uitbeelding van die held in geselekteerde rolprente en dramareekse oor die Anglo-Boereoorlog*, Unpublished PhD thesis, Pretoria: University of Pretoria, December 2015.
- [15] Pretorius, F. J., *The A to Z of the Anglo-Boer War*, Lanham, M.D.: Scarecrow Press, 2009.
- [16] Ghana Web, *History of Ghana*, available at: <http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/history/> [Accessed: March 28, 2016].
- [17] Oxford Dictionary, *Hero noun*, available at: <http://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/hero?q=hero> [Accessed: March 28, 2016].
- [18] Campbell, J., *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Novato, CA: Joseph Campbell Foundation, 2008.
- [19] Hobbs, J.A., *Art in context*, San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975.
- [20] Jansen van Vuuren, A., Stolpe, R. and Aikins, J., *Finding Nkrumah*, documentary made as part of the 2015 Documentary and Diversity Spring School, Ghana, October 2015.
- [21] CPP, *Convention People's Party*, available at: <http://conventionpeoplesparty.org/?q=nod> [Accessed: March 28, 2016].
- [22] Heinecken, D., *The Warrior women of television: A Feminist Cultural Analysis of the New Female Body in Popular Media*, New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2003.
- [23] Segal, R. A., *Theorizing about Myth*, Amherst, Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999.
- [24] Woodward, K. M., *Questioning Identity: Gender, Class, Ethnicity*, New York: Routledge, 2004.
- [25] Griffiths, J., (2015), *Give Rhodes to the artists*, available at: <http://thoughtleader.co.za/readerblog/2015/03/30/give-rhodes-to-the-artists/> [Accessed: March 30, 2015].