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Abstract

In this essay I want to discuss art as a power discourse, and I want to discuss it by asking a particular question of a particular group of paintings. How can some art critics maintain that the Ghanaian painter Ablade Glover's paintings of market scenes are a provocation whilst others see them as inauthentic and others again admire them for their aesthetic value?

KIRSTEN HOLST PETERSEN

Art, Power and Aesthetics: A Discussion of Ablade Glover's Township Paintings

In this essay I want to discuss art as a power discourse, and I want to discuss it by asking a particular question of a particular group of paintings. How can some art critics maintain that the Ghanaian painter Ablade Glover's paintings of market scenes are a provocation whilst others see them as inauthentic and others again admire them for their aesthetic value?

Ablade Glover (b. 1934, Accra, Ghana) has studied in Ghana, England and America where he received his Doctorate in 1974. He was Professor and Dean of the College of Art at the University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana until 1994. In 1993 he established the Artists' Alliance Gallery in Accra which quickly became the centre for modern Ghanaian art. Centrally placed, Professor Glover has divided his time between art education and the at-times fierce discussions of the place and role of modern Ghanaian art, and creative work. Starting in the 1960s he has exhibited widely in Africa, America and Europe, including a large number of solo exhibitions. In 2008 he was part of the exhibition *Visions and Dreams*, Tasneem Gallery, Barcelona, and in 2009 he had a solo exhibition at the October Gallery, London.

The power discourse in question is the contest between Africa and the West for cultural hegemony, expressed in terms of aesthetics. What are the criteria for judging what is good or bad, primitive or modern, beautiful or ugly, important or unimportant in art? The reason why this discussion seems to me to be important is that it is not just reflexive, it has a strong influence on the development of modern art in Africa. Modern African art forms are not free in the sense that that they can ignore or avoid this hegemonic struggle. It could be objected that no art form is — and that is undoubtedly true — but the African situation is exacerbated by the rupture of natural development caused by the colonial incursion and by the continued inequality of power. The colonising powers brought with them firm ideas about the meaning and aesthetic principles of art which differed and at times clashed with those of indigenous art (Maruska Svašek 1997). Not only indigenous art, but indigenous culture found itself subjected to a view of itself as primitive, backwards and so on. McEvelley explains this in a very Said-inspired analysis. 'In the colonial periods objects made in non-Western cultures were brought back to the West, not just as booty, but as evidence. They were understood ... as proof of the superiority of the colonialists; that was the point of calling the colonized cultures "primitive"' (Svašek qtd in MacClancey). The opposition to this view

predates political movement for independence in West Africa (Casely Hayford) and it fuelled the cultural nationalism which was an important component of the political movements that eventually won independence in Ghana as well as in the rest of the British colonies in Africa. This meant that culture, not just as an abstract idea, but in all its manifestations as sculpture, mask, dance, decoration, music and orature was a contested site. Rupture and denigration forced artists on the other side of the colonial void into a dialogue with their traditions, not with a view to having a fruitful interchange with that tradition, but with a view to refuting Western allegations of primitivism. The outside (Western) scorn forced the African artists into a defence of their tradition which made a natural development of new art forms difficult. These allegations were in fact clothed in paternalistic concerns for preserving the original and — in the view of the early colonial art teachers — unchanging tradition of African art, centred on fetish objects associated with ‘primitive’ religion and a pre- Enlightenment world view that was perceived as Africa’s special gift and contribution to world culture. This enforced dialogue with the past, whether carried out in sculpture and paintings or in literature, is an essential part of the various political movements such as Negritude or Pan Africanism or the ideological construct of ‘The African Personality’, all of which agitated first for political independence, and after that for equality on the international market of cultural values. In this way Western attitudes to African traditional art have a direct bearing on the direction of modern African art in Ghana. The terms in which the West criticised traditional African art became the terms, or concepts around which the modern African artists’ interaction with their tradition took place: In terms of aesthetics, it centred on discussions/ debates or quarrels about the relative merit of realism and abstraction and about the value of individual, unique works of art as opposed to works adhering to a tradition; in terms of meaning the discussion centred on the division of values between art as cult objects and therefore applied versus fine arts. With regard to the role of the African artist in society, on the one hand there is a tension between the role of guardian and upholder of traditional values, partly carried over from tradition, and the need for positive portrayal of traditional society stemming from solidarity with the movement of cultural nationalism; and on the other hand political protest or a desire to belong to an international community of artists without any obligations to represent African culture. Ironically, this last stance — the desire to be modern — is seriously threatened by the firm Western view that only traditional, tribal art is authentic African art, and since the main market for African art is still in the West the economic inequality is still an important factor.

This interaction with the past took (and still takes) place, not just in words and writing, but in actual art works (paintings, sculptures), and as I have maintained that the actual art work is partly shaped by an opposition to the European attitude to traditional African art I shall start my investigation into the status of Glover’s paintings of market scenes by outlining the development of the Western attitudes to traditional African art.

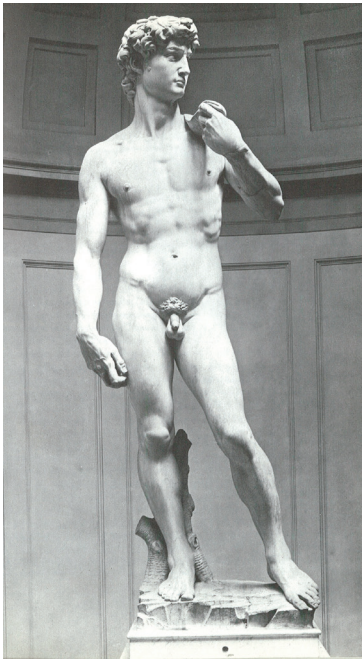


Fig. 1: Michelangelo's 'David'.



Fig. 2: 'Nail Fetish from Baongo, Congo'.

The idea that African art is primitive builds on the idea that realism in art is superior to nonrealism or abstraction and that fine arts is superior to applied art. The first distinction has its origin in the Renaissance and later Neo-classicism in which the Greek classical ideal in sculpture, which is realistic and aesthetically pleasing in scope, is held up as the ideal art form. It was considered superior to medieval art which is both non-realistic and — in the case of icons — applied art, as the icons, like some traditional African art, had religious efficacy. The non-realism of medieval painting was perceived as a lack; these artists had not yet learnt the art of perspective or the effects of light. They painted as they did because they did not know any better. When this criterion for value judgment was applied to African art at the first moment of the European colonisation in late eighteenth and early twentieth centuries, it suffered the same fate: it was considered primitive, with connotations of childishness.

This view obviously suffered a blow in the 1920s when French painters, among them Picasso, discovered African art and emulated it in the development of Cubism. This gave wide exposure to certain types of African art, particularly certain types of masks, like those of the Fang from Gabon or the Baulé from The Ivory Coast, and it created a greater understanding of the aesthetics of African art, at least among art connoisseurs. However, it also froze African art in a supposedly immutable traditional mould to fit the supposedly immutable prehistoric essence

of African-ness, as the exoticism of its difference proved a commercial success. Ironically, the very aspect which had appalled the Victorian missionaries — that is, the religious function of the art, what they referred to as fetishism — became part of the attraction of this art to a wider European public. It conjures up a world lost to the modern, secular mind, but apparently still yearned for. This attention to the religious aspect of traditional art in art books produced for a European market is well illustrated by Elsy Leuzinger in her book, *The Art of Black Africa from 1972*.

Leuzinger first situates herself very carefully in terms of European traditions of art appreciation: 'We no longer measure art by the Greek ideal of beauty, or by the degree to which it is true to life. The first thing we look for today is the expression of spiritual ideas in artistically convincing form. From the very first, African artists have fulfilled this requirement to an astonishing extent' (5). Leuzinger's text shows solidarity with African art against the allegations of primitiveness, ugliness, childishness or obscenity of early Western descriptions. She sees the African artist as trying to 'create something spiritual, something transcendent' (5). 'Africans create their art largely as an instrument by which to make contact with supernatural forces ... they create a sculpture which serves as a medium giving access to the spirit world: the figures of ancestors and spirits, masks and other cult objects' (9–10). On the vexed question of individual creativity versus religiously inspired demands for conformity to type she wavers. On the one hand, sculptures have to 'follow all the regulations exactly, and must be so beautiful that they please the spirit and invite him to make his dwelling in the figure' (10); but on the other hand the artist is not 'hindered by religious pressure and standard forms from varying and enriching his work by his own imaginative creation and from influencing the existing style. Every work is a unique creation and yet it departs only a little from the conceptions and feelings of his tribe' (14). On the question of the role of the artist, Leuzinger emphasises the special and spiritual nature of that role: The artist (who is always a man):

retreats into solitude and devotes himself with undivided concentration to his work. He has to observe a series of ordinances and taboos, for it is dangerous to have anything to do with spirits, and it is important for a wood carver to adopt a conciliatory attitude to the soul of the felled tree. The whole work is accompanied by sacrifices and incantations. (14)

This description closely resembles Soyinka's treatment of the artist Demoke in his play written for the independence celebration in Nigeria, 1960, *A Dance of the Forrest*, and my point is not that this is not true, but rather that it is a deliberate choice that does very conveniently vindicate both the religious tenet and the desire for individual creativity of the Western demands on African art.

The truth is more likely to be partial and to vary locally, and knowledge about the exact nature of this is gained through detailed studies of individual cultures. Daniel J. Crowley's investigation into the aesthetics of the art of the Chokwe is

an example of such a study. He found that: 'Although these masks are obviously connected with traditional Chokwe religious concepts, they are not now considered to be representations of ancestors...' (321). Also, new masks were preferred to old ones which were considered old-fashioned, and bright colours obtained from modern means preferred to dull ones. He also arrives at the somewhat surprising conclusion that 'religious art among the Chokwe is crude since it need function only magically, and not aesthetically. But the secular objects used on religio-secular occasions are carefully executed because the prestige of a chief, a village, a dancer or a carver is determined by them' (326). Individual creativity is not restrained by religious demands, and the distinction between applied and fine arts seems meaningless to the Chokwe. They have ornamental carvings of snakes and birds in their homes, and when asked whether these small sculptures had symbolic value they denied this and instead asked the interviewer: 'This is what we make for ourselves. What do you like (in your homes)?' (325). This does seem like a very goal-directed set of findings, aimed at de-mythologising traditional African art and it forms a stark contrast to Leuzinger's view.

A way of bypassing this division between sacred and profane roles of African art is to discuss it purely in terms of style, using the language of European concepts of art. This is the approach taken by William Fagg and Margaret Plasse in their book *African Sculpture*. They argue that: 'Since these categories are those in which we are accustomed to think about the more familiar kinds of art, the attempt to use them in the very different conditions of African art may help us to free ourselves from the preconceptions which we unconsciously harbour about the exotic arts' (5). They start their investigation by quoting Cezanne's dictum, 'You must see in nature the cylinder, the sphere and the cone', and following that advice, they deliberately ignore geographical location and tribal affiliation and proceed to discuss sculpture and masks in terms of categories in European art. (Here cubism and expressionism are seen to form the most obvious parallels.) European artists like Picasso, Brancusi and Moore function as reference points, and classical terms, like caryatids (for the figures supporting headrests) are used. Apart from cubism, abstraction, surrealism and the gothic are isolated as styles, and the book makes a special point of emphasising the presence of realism in African sculpture. This stylistic approach is carefully surrounded by caveats: 'if we find convergences of form, however striking, between tribal and modern art, we must not assume any identity of purpose, inspiration or real content' (41); and the anti-evolutionary purpose of taking this a-historical stance is spelled out on the last page of the book. Quoting Leon Underwood that 'technological advances in the history of mankind have always been followed by equally great developments in art', Fagg & Plasse predict that if new movements in art are to follow new advances in Western technology 'it seems likely that the new ground will be found to have been reconnoitred long before by the intuitive artists of the tribal world' (158).

Despite their widely different approaches, Leuzinger and Fagg & Plass (and many more writers of African art-books who follow in their footsteps) are united in their efforts to rescue traditional African art from the allegations of primitiveness by variously asserting that the artists did master realism, that idols and fetishes were, in fact, considered expressions of faith, that there was scope for individual creativity and that the artistic quality stood up to the best of European art. So far, so good; but there is another point on which they agree: Modern African art is not really African. Leuzinger is worried about the tourist market which 'has caused many artists to decline into routine and careless work and to put vapid novelties on the market' (13). Fagg & Plass's objections are more ideological in scope: 'we are not concerned here with "contemporary" African art, which for all its merits is an extension of European art by a kind of voluntary cultural colonialism' (6). A culmination of this approach was the exhibition, *Magiciens de la Terre*, Paris, May 1989. A main feature of this exhibition was the Ghanaian wayside artist Kane Kwei's coffins, shaped like animals, vegetables, airplanes or cars.

With friends like these how did contemporary — without inverted commas — African art emerge? One answer to that question is that it emerged both as a result of, and as a response to, colonialism. Colonialism forced Western modernity on African societies and in the process threatened, altered or destroyed the fabric of traditional society. Concepts like nationalism and individualism became issues around which new discussions formed, spurred by the Western-style education system. The resulting tension is most clearly expressed in the culture-clash theme in the emerging English language literature produced by the Western educated elite in the British colonies, particularly in Nigeria where Chinua Achebe's second novel, *No Longer at Ease* (1960), set the pattern for a long list of culture-clash novels. If one accepts the idea that art forms as well as the content expressed through those forms both influence and are influenced by the current cultural environment, an altered world picture will demand to be discussed and reflected in new art forms which can interact in an active way with the society of which they form a part.

Formal art school training through the colonial education system started in the '50s in large city centres in West Africa like Lagos, Accra and Freetown, and it was run by white expatriate teachers who taught European art and concepts of value. An important aspect of this, and therefore a site of contention was the value of originality and uniqueness, the one-of-a-kind approach as opposed to traditional forms in which emulation is an important aspect. A well known dictum during the '60s, the East African artist Elimu Njau's sentence, 'Copying puts God to sleep' (Kasfir 130), shows how eagerly this idea was taken up and also how provocative it was vis-a-vis traditional practices. A distinction appeared in the art world between university educated, individualistic and experimenting artists and wayside artists who learned to copy master moulds and sold to tourists. As their art was, and is, closer to the traditional art forms that Westerners desire, they

were, and are, a greater commercial success. Kane Kwei's coffins are a much desired mixture between charming artistic naivety and quaint traditional customs of burying people in coffins associated with their character, job or wishes.

The '60s were a watershed in colonised Africa; it was the decade of independence, optimism and cultural nationalism in its various forms (negritude, cultural pride, a general mood of self assertion). This brought with it a rejection of the European cultural models which the political elite had learned through the education system. When Okot p'Bitek, the Ugandan poet, took over as Director of the National Theatre in Kampala in 1967 he promptly replaced the British council grand piano with a drum post driven into the ground outside, and announced: 'Our national instrument is not the piano — tinkletinkle-tinkle — but the drum — boom-boom-boom' (Kasfir 166). Neo-colonialism, national culture, the African personality, and pan-africanism were concepts debated and painted during the '60s, but there were other trends as well. The theme of culture clash and the artist as a child of two worlds, trying to find a way of combining those two worlds, preferably in a unique way, took over when the promise of independence started to go sour. In the '80s and '90s the wayside artists with their less radical adaptations of traditional material were still seen as the true representatives of Africanness, and the academy-educated artists ran the risk of being considered sellouts. In response, some of them have turned to more explicitly Western forms and styles, demanding to be looked at as international painters, in their own right, not representatives of Africa.

This is a very general outline of trends, and there were, and are, of course a variety of local variations. The painter on whom this essay focuses, Ablade Glover, is Ghanaian, and in order to be able to answer the question of how his paintings could be considered a political statement I shall now turn to the Ghanaian development.

The first secondary school with a specialised art department was Achimota college, established in 1920 in the Gold Coast Colony and moved to Kumasi as The Academy of Arts in 1951. The art teaching at the Academy reflected a paradox in the English attitude to Africans. On the one hand they despised African culture and tried to civilise Africans, but on the other hand they wanted to preserve that culture, or at least the artistic expression of it in as unchanged a form as possible. This rested on the belief that African art (sculpture) was a timeless, unchanged leftover from the dawn of mankind, floating up to the surface of history to offer them a glimpse of their own beginnings which they had left safely behind. So in 1931 a traditional sculptor and Osei Bonsu, the master carver of the Ashantehene were appointed, and the students were encouraged to learn the patterns of traditional sculptures and masks. This clashed with their reality which was shaped by modern life in a big city, and an opposition grew between students and teachers. This development partook in the more general movement of individualising art, but it also had some local variations.

Already in the early '50s some artists such as Amon Kotei, Kofi Atubam and Saka Acquaye started to fight the myth of static, primitive tradition, and the means they chose was European realism. Their reasons for this choice narrowly reflect, or deflect European prejudices:

The prejudice was that the Ghanaian is not fit, capable or that it is not African art to do anything that is realistic. Let us change this prejudice and prove that the colour of our skin has nothing to do with acquisition of knowledge which is power. (Kotei qtd in MacClancy, 5)

This is the sort of reasoning which in literature produced the 'write back' genre. It turns the colonial category on its head, but it does not question the category as such. When attached to the theme of nationalism, which demands glorification, or at least very positive versions of the national life, this produced idyllic paintings of village life, excluding any modern intrusion, like big cities or modern buildings. Ironically this realistic style, which started as a reaction to European prejudices, pleased the tourist market, and it was soon taken over by the wayside painters who mass produced it and sold it at markets and in airports. In the prevailing mood of cultural self assertion they painted durbars, chiefs, musicians and dancers, village women fetching water, sunsets behind palm trees and straw huts. This genre is still lucrative and therefore it is still produced. This should not obscure the fact that at



Fig. 3: 'Night'.

its inception it was an important move into self conscious reflection and rejection of stereotypes. The power relations of aesthetics are exceptionally naked here.

Starting at the same time (early '50s) and running parallel with this movement was another movement, reacting against the same stereotyping, but choosing another way. The artists of this movement rejected Western styles and sought inspiration in abstract forms of traditional art. This fitted in well with the cultural nationalism of early independence. In the words of one of the artists, Ampofo: 'Nkrumah was behind me. My work meant a step in the direction of a further development of a typical African identity' (8). The result of this ideological stance was an abstract neo-traditional genre in which the painter takes his starting point in traditional forms (masks, swords, ornamental patterns) but develops abstract, cubist like patterns from them. This style is also still produced today.

What these two schools had in common was an exclusive concern with the past and with country life, and to a certain extent they also shared the romanticised version of the past. It was these aspects that the next wave of painters objected to, and here, finally, Glover turns up. He studied painting in the late '60s at the Kumasi School of Fine Arts of which he later became the director. Here, he and co-student, Ato Delaquis, who later on taught at the Kumasi School of Fine Arts, broke another myth, the myth of the romantic African past by starting to paint pictures of present day city life. This sounds innocuous enough, but in the circumstances it was not. They faced charges of not being African enough, and they resented the implication that modernity would make Africa less African. This complexity of thought is still hotly debated. Glover expresses his view of the African-ness of his paintings in the following way.

It is sad. I keep telling my students and everybody I meet that it is sad to make a conscious effort to do something called an African painting... I think it is wrong to make something African, because there is nothing like African. The African is me, so if what comes out of me cannot be taken as African then what is African?

(MacClancy 14)

Glover's question is rhetorical, of course, and his is a strong voice in the debate about what constitutes modern African art, maintaining his right to choose whatever style or medium he wants. A close analysis of his painting 'Night' (fig. 3) might help to tease out the various positions in the debate and allow for a tentative opinion, based on the painting (which can be taken to represent a large number of Glover's paintings).

Before undertaking this, however, it is important to be reminded of the position of the reader/viewer/critic.

He [the reader] insinuates into another person's text the ruses of pleasure and appropriation: he poaches on it, is transported into it, pluralises himself in it like the internal rumblings of one's body... This mutation makes the text habitable, like a rented apartment. It transforms another person's property into a space borrowed for a moment by a transient. Renters make comparable changes in an apartment they furnish with their acts and memories; as do speakers, in the language into which they insert

both the messages of their native tongue, and, through their accent, through their own 'turns of phrase', etc. their own history. (de Certeau xxi)

Although English is not my native tongue the Western discourse of analysing visual images is the discourse I am schooled in. I am familiar with the language, the cultural institutions, the history, and the practices of what is considered 'high culture', exemplified by the academic analysis of visual images. It is from the position of occupier of a rented apartment that the following analysis is carried out.

Looked at close up, the oil on canvas painting 'Night' consists of a number of daubs of paint, applied unevenly with a palette knife. The slabs are larger and more thickly applied at the bottom half of the painting and become gradually smaller and less distinct towards the top. There is almost a three-dimensional aspect to the bottom half of the picture, as the surface is deliberately left very uneven. If the painting is held up against the light it will shine through the canvas where the layer of paint is thin or absent. The colour scheme is muted, and the night atmosphere is created by shades of blue and green, but mostly by the addition of white, creating an atmosphere of moonlit reflections. There is no moon in the painting, in fact there is no recognisable representation, but an abstract surface of seemingly random slabs of paint. The colour scheme, on the other hand is representational, as it strongly suggests a moonlit night. The bold application of paint, the abstraction and the addition to this of an emotional, reflective mood place the painting in the tradition of Abstract Expressionism. (Jackson Pollock comes to mind.) The critic David Anfam explains, '[a] common



Fig. 4: Ambrogio Lorenzetti, 'City by the Sea'.

goal was perceived to be the mystery, violence and spontaneity associated with the modern experience on all its levels' (79), and this placing of the painting in a modern, mainly American tradition carries with it assumptions (in the Western viewer) of the thoughts and desires of that tradition. In the case of Glover this makes sense, as he, like the Abstract Expressionists, paints on a background of violence and suffering (in their case Pearl Harbour and the Cold War) and in his case (slavery, colonialism, exploitation, poverty), and he, like them, insists on focusing on the modern experience, in his case city life.

If one takes some steps backwards and looks at the painting from a distance it acquires a new dimension: a perspective of a foreground, a middle ground and a background, receding to an infinite point, but not meeting a horizon. The perspective is that of an aeroplane, dipping its wing and turning in the air above a city. This moment offers a brief glimpse of the city underneath, tilted and suddenly close on the down side and far away or invisible on the up side. (Hence no horizon.) On a night flight one would see the bright lights of the city, but in Glover's painting one sees the light of the moon, reflected off the corrugated iron roofs of an African township. This brings to mind the European genre of cityscapes, or *Vedute*, as they were called in the 18th century in Venice, and painted by Canaletto, among others. The first true cityscape in art history is considered to be Ambrogio Lorenzetti's painting 'City by the Sea' from ca. 1335 (fig. 4). It has the same dizzying view from above as Glover's painting, avoiding, like him, the complete bird's eye view. In his case, perhaps it was because the bird's-eye view had not yet been experienced. The genre has been used, and made famous by artists as different as Vermeer, Pissarro, Chagall and Mondrian, each of them using the motif to express the tenets of their various philosophies and ways of painting. Read through this genre, Glover joins an illustrious tradition, wholly Western, and following that tradition he uses it to express his particular concerns through his particular sensibility which is embedded in his African experience.

Another way of inhabiting the rented room is to ask the owner, or maker, what he thinks about it, or what his intentions with it are. Here it makes sense to include not just one of Glover's paintings, but the whole oeuvre. Glover paints, not cityscapes, but townscapes. This is an important distinction, as cities in Africa, planned and with a well-defined administrative, military and political centre are a colonial invention. This is not what Glover paints. These colonial centres attracted a vast number of people living in villages in the rural areas; they went there for work, adventure, 'the bright lights', or to escape social constrictions in the village. They settled around the centre, in townships, or slums, mainly built by themselves and (dis)organised in a haphazard way, very contrary to the colonial attempts at creating orderly, European-type cities. It is these African townships that Glover paints. A particular motif of his is market scenes which are viewed from the same perspective as the townscapes and appear as a 'sub-genre' within the townscape genre. Those paintings are in bright, bold red, yellow or blue colours, and they

include crowds of people, seen as matchstick figures, massed into narrow streets and filling up large squares. They vibrate with colour and movement, exuding an excess of energy and a sense of urgency, but they also communicate a sense of familiarity, a solidarity with a scene which is exotic to European viewers, but with which Glover is totally at home. The markets are worked and controlled by market women, and Glover explains that women are an important motif for him, and that: 'These women carried my imagination to the market — which I like to think of as a culture within a culture... I believe the political, economic, and social climate of the nation is determined at the market' (website). This celebration of the power and attraction of markets in townships surrounding cities is a strong voice in the advocacy of African agency. It celebrates the imagination and ingenuity of the township — slum inhabitants to resist the imposed order. In de Certeau's words, 'They made something else out of them; they subverted them from within, not by rejecting them or transforming them (though that occurred as well), but by many different ways of using them in the service of rules, customs or convictions foreign to the colonization which they could not escape' (de Certeau 32)

Glover's townships and crowded market scenes celebrate the closeness and haphazardness of township architecture; the slabs of paint in 'Night' face in all different directions and form no discernible pattern, except to indicate that here space is transformed into place. These places, and their inhabitants 'circulate, come and go, overflow and drift over an imposed terrain, like the snowy waves of the sea slipping in among the rocks and defiles of an established order' (de Certeau 34). There are at least two strong objections to this view of slum areas and their organic movements, and to Glover's paintings of the same. One has to do with the cityscape vision from above, and the other, related to this, is an allegation of slum romanticism.

The criticism of the choice of a bird's-eye point of view centres on the notion that the remote, overall view has the characteristics of an ordering, all powerful, empirical or panoptic view of the subject, which from that angle becomes a subject in more than one sense. It stems from a desire to create order, survey and govern. This of course is most obvious in military maps and sociological surveys. An example of the latter is Charles Booth's famous map of London (fig. 5), which is a scientific calculation of the rate and location of poverty in the slums. The red areas indicate middle class, well-to-do people, and the black areas indicate the 'lowest class, semi-criminal'. The intention is to create an objective, scientific image which can then be used for a variety of purposes, according to the viewer's background, inclination, moral standing or professional needs. Booth, of course, used it in his attempts to alleviate poverty, and his text *Life and Labour of the People* (1889), is considered to be the founding text of British sociology, particularly in the areas of social statistics and community studies. There can, however, be no question about the desire to penetrate into dark recesses of a dangerous place from a safe distance, with the aim of subjecting it to scientific objectivity and, ultimately, to alter it.

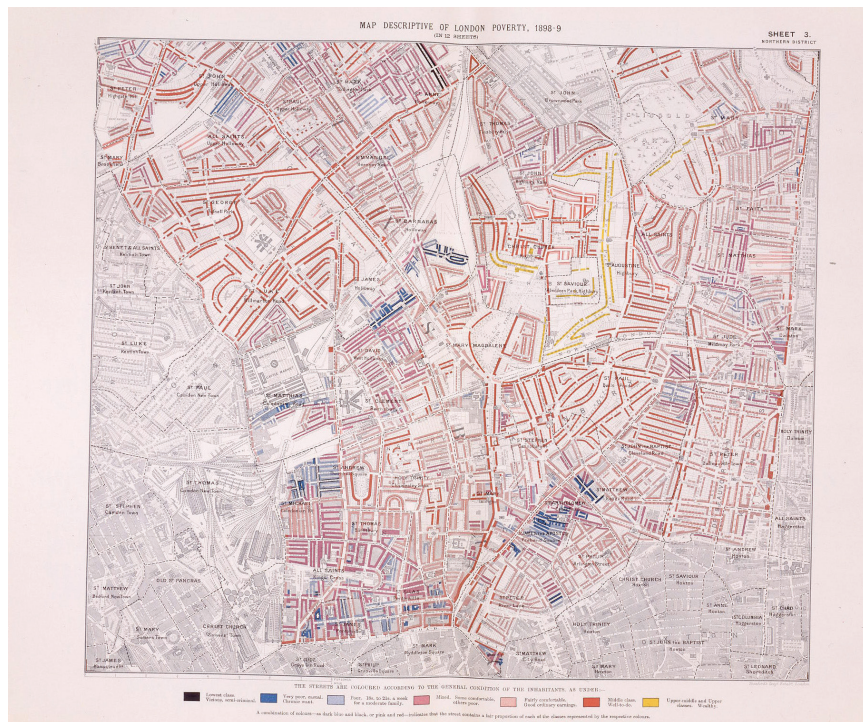


Fig. 5: Charles Booth, 'Map Descriptive of London Poverty, 1888–9' (in 12 Sheets). Sheet 3. Northern District.

It was not in fact unusual to compare the slums of the East End of London with Africa, as the title of the book by another philanthropist, the founder of the Salvation Army, General Booth indicates: *In Darkest England* (1890) alluding to the common usage 'in darkest Africa' and making a strong political point (Rose 212–214).

This view is very far from Glover's. For a start the oblique angle, the dipped wing, avoids the survey vision of the bird's-eye point of view. Glover says about his townscapes that they 'have a philosophical note to them — I often wonder what might be happening under those roofs: loving, living, hating, killing, stealing, etc. — if only those roofs could be lifted — the revelation could be devastating'; and about his market scenes he says 'I love markets... I adore the hustle and bustle of towns' (website). This view, and the resulting paintings, are not the view of an observer, but of a participant. It is the insider view of someone who likes the society he is painting, and who is not attempting to change it; in fact, he celebrates it. The townscape genre is particularly suited to celebrate 'hustle and bustle', and the abstract expressionism's bold use of vivid colours and seemingly random and extravagant application of paint lends itself to the depiction of movement and urgency, township, or (Western city) excitement. Glover uses these Western

forms to celebrate what he obviously knows intimately and loves in his own environment. It is this which places him in the vulnerable position where he is liable to be attacked from both the Africanist and the European side. On the one hand, he is seen as a sell-out of African traditional artistic traditions; and on the other hand he falls into the Western view that 'there is no African modern art. If it is modern then it is not African'. This is the view of most Western buyers of African art but despite this prevailing view when — unlike many other modern African painters — Glover's paintings sell at high prices (\$2,500–\$7,900) in the Western art market I think it is a matter of aesthetics.

If one takes the view that aesthetic value is culture-specific and not universal, Glover's townscapes may be seen to conform to the aesthetic values of paintings in the West: they are both surprising and pleasing to the eye schooled in impressionist and expressionist aesthetics. On the level of interpretation they offer the possibility to dwell on that and not have to be confronted with the squalor of the townships/slums and the concomitant accusations of colonialist guilt.

But they do also offer the opportunity to celebrate the difference between African and Western ways of life, portrayed by an insider who sees the values of that life, despite its disadvantages and victim position in the world today. Glover can also be seen to move the African townships from marginalised exotica to the centre of a vibrant, valuable and important location. In this way they can be seen as an iconological representation in non-representational form of an African way of life.

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