

1.1 - Institutional Information

Director: Gavin Hood **Release:** March 2006 (UK)

Production company: UK Film & TV Production Company
Industrial Development Corporation of South Africa

Country of production: UK, South Africa

Genres: Crime; drama; teen drama; coming of age

Starring: Presley Chweneyagae, Terry Pheto, Mothusi Magano, Zola

Other info: Won Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film of the Year.

Adapted from a novel by Athol Fugard.

1.2 - Links to technology timeline

Wide-screen: Shot in wide-screen aspect ration (2:35:1) on Super 35mm to create an epic feel to this intimate story. The widescreen format allows for compositions that, even in close up, contain a sense of the environment.

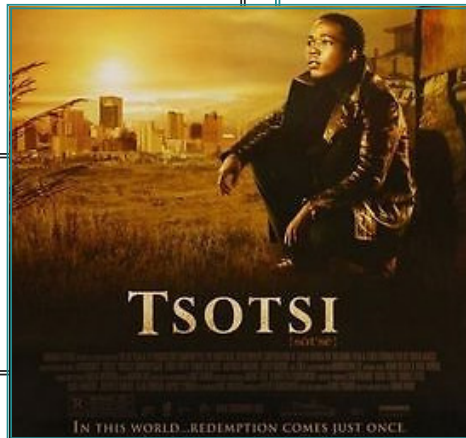
1.3 - Context

Social: set in a shanty town like **Soweto** on the outskirts of Johannesburg, South Africa. The film is a clear reflection of post-**Apartheid** South Africa; reflected in the narrative and aesthetic. SA remains the most economically unequal country in the world with **poverty** levels highest among black people, with whites making up the majority of the top 5% of the population.

Cultural: hobbies such as games of dice, drinking at a local **shebeen** and dancing are all seen in the film. The **Kwaito music** of South African star Zola (who plays gangster Fela), is a key cultural element of the film and helps establish a contemporary context from the moment it starts.

Political: the legacy of Apartheid is a devastating one. For decades education for young black people ended earlier compared to white people, so that they could be forced into low-skilled, manual jobs with a pitifully low-wage. As well as the **segregation** that came with apartheid, the services for black people were significantly worse than for their white peers, leading to a lack of good education, medical care or access to basic utilities. This created generations of people who were incredibly resourceful and proud as they had to find ways around the system, doing what they had to do in order to survive. The lack of education and poor medical services also contributed to the **AIDS epidemic** in the 80s and beyond - reference through the mise-en-scene, i.e. posters, as well as the death of Tsotsi's mother, which is heavily implied to be AIDS related.

Institutional: The film was made for \$3million, shot on location, and made with local amateur actors. It was a huge critical success, winning an Oscar and getting excellent reviews worldwide. It helped to raise the profile of director Gavin Hood. In many markets it was distributed and promoted by Miramax.



1.4 - Characters

Tsotsi (Protagonist): his name means 'little thug' - a young man who leads a small gang, committing crimes to survive in a poverty stricken township. His mother died when he was a child and his father was abusive so he ran away. He learns over the course of the film that there is another path from the one he is on and seeks **redemption** and forgiveness at the end.

Aap (Sidekick): Tsotsi's childhood friend. He is obedient and happy-go-lucky, relying heavily on Tsotsi and rarely thinking for himself. His name, in **Afrikaans** means "monkey", suggesting he has a more comedic role in the narrative. He is loyal to Tsotsi for most of the film and seems sad and lost when he doesn't have Tsotsi to follow.

Miriam (sidekick/helper): a young mother, forced at gunpoint to help Tsotsi with the baby. She is a strong moral guide in the film and helps Tsotsi see that **decency** and respect can be obtained in other ways. She could be seen as a possible love interest for Tsotsi but this is not explored.

Boston/Teacher boy: the most educated of the gang and the oldest. He acts as the voice of reason and plays on Tsotsi's conscience even after he beats him up. He is the vehicle through which the audience begin to see Tsotsi making things right. - when he apologises and looks after him.

Butcher (antagonist): the fourth member of Tsotsi's gang, and the most violent/angry. Butcher is a cheat and a **loose cannon** who does not hesitate to commit murder. He is a direct contrast to Boston and Tsotsi has to kill him to save the father of the baby (and himself!)

Morris: a beggar who worked in the gold mines until he was in an accident which cost him his legs. He is used as a metaphorical link to the story about Tsotsi's dog having his back broken by his abusive father. He provides another way for Tsotsi to redeem himself.

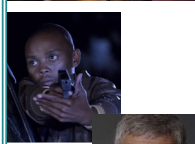
Pumla + John Dube: as the baby's parents they provide a clear example of the film being set in post-Apartheid S.Africa; as the black community are represented as middle class here speaking Isi Xhosa - the language of the educated black community. They are used to show redemption and provide a stark contrast to those living in the township. Their house suggests **affluence** and they speak to the police with authority and without fear.

Soekie: the bar owner of the Shebeen. She has good business skills as she knows that if she encourages Boston to drink he will keep coming back! She is the one who tells Captain Smit where Tsotsi is. She does care about people, but equally appears to put herself and her needs first.

Fela: another gang leader with a higher level of respect than Tsotsi. He buys and sells stolen cars and employs the other young males as drivers and hitmen. He tries to get Aap and Butcher to join his gang. He is well dressed and **flashy** - exhibiting more stereotypical gangster behaviour than Tsotsi.

Sergeant Zuma: provides the link between the local black people and the police. He knows the area well and can relate to the hard lifestyle.

Captain Smit: the only white speaking character in the film. He doesn't speak the local language which adds realism to the film. White people would only speak Afrikaans which links back to the Apartheid structure.



1.5 - Themes/Issues

Decency: this is the main theme in the film - explained by Fela as *a sense of having respect for self and others*. It takes on many forms in the narrative but the main vehicle for this is Tsotsi making the decision to look after the child, which ultimately leads to his redemption.

Crime: seems to be seen as a way of life for many of those living in the township. It is a potential way out of poverty and is represented at times as being aspirational. Tsotsi seeks to be the biggest gangster and there is a sense of the 'more dangerous the crime the higher the rewards'.

Family: the family unit is seen as aspiration for many in the black communities due to the fact so many people have lost family members to the harsh realities of the country they live in. The Dube's are seen as a family in a glorified situation. This appears to be represented as the ideal.

Responsibility: Many do not take responsibility for their actions in the film, but when Tsotsi does, he changes and becomes more mature and responsible.

Redemption: Tsotsi must take the audience with him on his journey to decency via some form of redemption. By Hollywood's standards this means he must kill someone worse than him, i.e. Butcher - but he also achieves this through righting the other wrongs we witness, e.g. he gives money to Morris and returns the baby to his parents.

Apartheid: Segregation still exists in South Africa. This is perhaps most evident in terms of the **binary opposition** of poverty and affluence - reflected through Tsotsi's shack Vs the Dube's gated house.

1.6 - Representations + Stereotypes

Youth/Teens

- Tsotsi is a clear example of the black urban stereotype of an angry young man, a thug by nature and a thug by name
- Embodies the gangs who steal and use violence to get what they want.
- The young men we see would be at home in any inner city around the world.
- By the end we see that this is a story that shows there is humanity in everyone - in the end this is a story of individuals and the 'thug' Tsotsi is in fact David.

Mothers and Fathers

Tsotsi is a film concerned with parental figures and the lack of them. It seems to present 'highly traditional' gender roles, i.e. women perform domestic duties. All the female characters appear to have motherly behaviours at some point:

- *Tsotsi's mother* in flashback. Lit by candlelight she tells Tsotsi not to be afraid. She is sick – probably dying from HIV/Aids. 2.
- Soekie refuses to bring drinks when called by the gang – 'I'll come when I'm ready', but she also has a motherly side taking a stand and reporting Tsotsi
- *Miriam's* care for the stolen baby alongside her own is crucial in breaking down Tsotsi's resistance to emotion.
- *Pumla Dube* – another selfless mum, demonstrating motherly behaviour towards Tsotsi and the police.

How might some of the male characters be seen as Father figures? What elements of being a father do they illustrate?
(*Tsotsi's father/John Dube/Morris/Boston/Fela/Captain Smit*)

Africa and African people

- Africa has long been seen as a continent of poverty, famine and war; with African people on film presented as needing saving.
- Tsotsi seems to challenge this through characters, as none are tribal stereotypes and characters such as The Dube's and Sergeant Zuma present wealth and aspiration
- Miriam is shown as quite happy with her life as it is!

1.7 - Key Scenes

The opening sequence

- Establishes character, location, tone and representation.
- uses the **mise-en-scene** to connote poverty:
 - dirty, messy, dark and cluttered shack
 - props of the dice helps to show how characters pass time, what they do to earn money and how some of the characters are more intelligent than others.
 - the warm colours of the township connote warmth but not cleanliness.
- camera tracks the gang highlighting the poverty, resilience and resourcefulness of the people who live there.
- Tsotsi is the central figure, established through a long shot with him in the centre and slightly ahead. The slightly tighter shots of his face show others out of focus - indicating they're not as important.
- Tsotsi's costume - leather jacket, + 'hoody' are **synonymous** with gang culture and crime. The red t-shirt may also connote danger - representing a symbol of the threat he poses.

Miriam's Shack

- offers a stark contrast to Tsotsi's shack. Miriam's is bright, clean and safe for children.
- use of light is key; bright, warm and even, with little in the way of dark areas or shadows. Connotes the light and positivity that Miriam represents in the film.
- the use of the mobile/dreamcatcher made of broken glass hanging from the ceiling shows her resourcefulness and the ability to see the bright side of any situation - making something beautiful from something broken. Contrastingly, the mobile made of rust that Tsotsi is drawn to symbolises his negative outlook and sadness.

Robbing the Dube's house

- highlights the motives and values of the characters involved:
 - Aap's lack of education is highlighted through his ignorance about wine (its expensive!)
 - Butcher's desire for violence is seen through his aggression towards John Dube.
 - Tsotsi's change and path to redemption is seen in his quest to find things for baby David.
- mural of the African jungle is significant, as it highlights an idea of a classic Africa and a version of a nice childhood. Tsotsi's upbringing was not like this and there is a big difference between where he grew up and this clean, tidy and welcoming home.

The Ending

- the final scene shows how Tsotsi has changed to become someone who has taken responsibility for his actions and who wants to be a better person.
- his gangster clothing has been replaced with a white shirt, which is a symbol of innocence, purity and also surrender, which is what he does with baby David.
- use of key lights place focus on characters rather than the setting showing that place and surroundings aren't important if your actions are morally correct.

1.8 - KEY TERMS

Soweto - a township with a reputation for danger.

Apartheid - a system used to separate non-white citizens of South Africa from 1948-1994.

poverty - lacking resources to provide food, clean water, shelter and clothing; as well as access to health care, education and even transportation.

shebeen - a bar or club where alcoholic beverages were sold without a licence.

kwai-to music - a variant of house music that emerged in Soweto, during the 1990s. It uses African sounds and samples.

segregation - the action or state of setting someone or something apart from others.

AIDS epidemic - a widespread occurrence of the AIDS virus in SA starting in the early 1980s.

redemption - the action of saving or being saved from sin, error or evil.

Afrikaans - developed from the language of the Dutch colonialists. It is the 3rd most spoken language in S.Africa

decency - behaviour that conforms to accepted standards of morality or respectability.

'a loose canon' - an unpredictable or uncontrolled person who is liable to cause unintentional damage.

affluence - the state of having a great deal of money

flashy - attractive + impressive!

binary opposition - a pair of related terms or concepts that are opposite in meaning

mise-en-scene - everything in the scene

synonymous - a word or phrase with the same meaning as another word or phrase in the same language.