

# Tsotsi

(2005, Hood SA, UK)

## Component 2: Global Film; Narrative, Representation & Film Style

### Focus Area Representation

#### PART 1: Key Sequence(s) and timings and/or links

##### Sequence 1

'Opening Sequence' 0.00 – 5.05

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SmXW4fkMTXY>

##### Sequence 2

'Come and hold my hand' 6.03 – 7.23

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jVNHidjRHoA>

#### PART 2: STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

##### Cinematography (including Lighting)

- The opening sequence wastes no time in introducing us to the characters and their relationships. We see a series of close ups of Aap, Butcher and Boston's hands as they gamble with money and dice, which could indicate the themes of luck, fate and destiny. We also see a close up of the bradawl which could suggest the potential for violence and the slow motion shot of the dice signals the stylised filmmaking as well as the theme.
- As the gang walk through the township the camera's dollying is motivated by movement of Tsotsi as close ups pick him out from the group. He is also favoured by point of view shots of the other young gangsters to whom he gestures.
- During the stake out (SE1) we see Tsotsi's point of view of several victims before he concentrates on one we get tighter shots of.
- Sequence 2 occurs 40 mins into the film by which time Tsotsi has 'acquired' the baby, sought out Miriam to feed him and

named him 'David'. Tsotsi's shack is a candle lit and much more peaceful place than it was in the opening sequence.

- We are looking into Tsotsi's home rather than out of it as before and a stream of light from outside falls on Tsotsi and the baby, linking them in the frame as he puts the baby down on his bed.
- The half lit nature of Tsotsi's face as he watches the baby settle suggests the two sides of his character, which are battling with each other.

##### Mise-en-Scène

- In the opening shots Tsotsi is shown separate from his gang as they play the dice game in his (very basic) house. As he looks out of the window perhaps he is already longing for a better and different life. He walks in front of them through the township – as the leader.
- The transition from the township to the city is marked by notably different colour palettes (reddish brown becomes grey blue) as well as levels of development. The huge HIV/Aids poster which dwarfs them in the station is worth noting though.
- Facial expressions during and after the murder give a clear indication of the different characters. Butcher looks in to the eyes of the victim, showing no remorse, while Aap looks at the others for some indication as to how to react and Boston is shocked and sickened. Tsotsi is harder to read, alternating between a stony impassive expression and occasional looks of fear.
- In sequence 2 we see a much more peaceful Tsotsi's home as he settles the baby by candlelight and we see a flashback to the home that Tsotsi grew up in. We see Tsotsi as a child again looking at someone in bed. This time it is his mother, who is clearly very sick. She looks at him, calls his name, David, and asks him to hold her hand. He does so briefly as a candle flickers in the foreground exactly as it does in the Tsotsi's shack.

## Editing

- In the opening sequence the initial shots are of hands, dice, beer, money and the bradawl before we see an establishing shot of the group. This series of shots combined with the impatient voices of characters makes for curiosity and directs us towards the themes of chance, fate and violence.
- The stakeout sequence in the train station features editing around shots of Tsotsi's point of view as he targets his victim. The shots become shorter and faster around the moment that he makes his decision.
- In sequence 2 editing is employed to cross-cut between Tsotsi looking at baby David in the present, and the child Tsotsi looking at his sick mother. The cutting creates the feeling of a unified geographical space so that the paralleling of these events is reinforced.

## Sound

- Initially in the opening shots the other members of Tsotsi's gang speak about their game before asking Tsotsi what they will do tonight. He is clearly the one to whom they all defer. He says nothing before we cut to them following him through the township, where he still remains silent despite the taunting of Fela about his driving.
- The 'Kwaito' music that begins as they leave provides energy and a contemporary feel as a hybrid between familiar black urban music and an indigenous South African sound.
- During the stake-out rattling sounds are used to reinforce the idea of Tsotsi hunting. This gives us the idea that he is seeking out his prey. We hear a faint heart beat as Tsotsi scouts the train station, to build the tension. When they follow him to the train the rattling sounds get louder, connoting something is about to happen. The sound comes to a sudden stop when Butcher's weapon pierces the man's skin and we cut to several close ups of the groups' faces showing their different reactions.
- In sequence 2 the quiet diegetic sounds are accompanied by music which is the quiet calm of African wind instruments, contrasting with the 'Kwaito' in the opening sequence.
- Before we cut to the flashback we hear a voice say 'David' as Tsotsi sits in his shack. We don't realise this is his mother until we cut to her, beckoning from her bed moments later.

## PART 3: STARTING POINTS - Contexts

### Social

- Set in contemporary South Africa, in the township of Soweto, where post-Apartheid survival is still a fraught process for many South Africans, who struggle to get out of poverty. Tsotsi (a nick-name meaning 'thug') has no access to the new South Africa so he seeks to take it with violence and threat.
- The stereotypical representation here is not specifically South African, despite the culturally specific term. The urban black violent criminal posing a threat to the comfortably wealthy is familiar from films of many contexts including Hollywood and the UK.
- The interesting thing about Tsotsi is the impact of the baby on his character and the transformation it causes him to undertake. The drama in the film comes from Tsotsi's emotional inner conflict rather than the physical external conflict typical of crime films.
- The co-existence of poverty and affluence in modern day South Africa, symbolised effectively by the gate with which the Dube's attempt to protect themselves from people like Tsotsi but which John Dube opens at the end as he calls Tsotsi 'brother'.
- The theme of 'decency' and the exploration of the roles of mothers and fathers as carers.

### Historical

- Films are a product of their historical context. The original story (in the novel) of *Tsotsi* was set in the late 1950s, at the height of apartheid. This was the system by which the white minority in South Africa ruled over the black majority and denied them the right to vote among other things. The film, however, is set in a post-apartheid South Africa which allows it to represent themes that are common to many black people around the world – themes that have expressed themselves in the recent 'Black Lives Matter' movement in the USA and elsewhere. It is nevertheless a film born of the history of Africa and more specifically South Africa.

## PART 4: STARTING POINTS - Specialist Focus - Representation

- What do we know about South Africa? Apartheid. Wealth vs Poverty.
- The character of Tsotsi at the outset and as he changes.

- The other members of the gang.
- Mothers and Fathers.
- Draws influence from the US crime movie and hip/hop culture.
- Key narrative elements – use of ‘black gangster’ stereotypes but ultimately about inner emotional conflict rather than external physical conflict, despite violent moments.
- Look at writer/director Gavin Hood. He is a white South African who had received critical acclaim for low budget films before *Tsotsi* and has gone on to direct Hollywood blockbusters like *Ender’s Game* and *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* since.

### PART 5 – Further resources

<http://www.filmeducation.org/pdf/resources/secondary/Tsotsi.pdf>

<http://www.scoop.it/t/tsotsi>

<http://www.film.sentamu.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/TSOTSI-STUDY-GUIDE.pdf>

<http://ames.scot/resources/pdf/MEJ41.pdf>

<http://www.slideshare.net/judithgunn/teaching-tsotsi-notes>

<http://www.bbfc.co.uk/case-studies/tsotsi>