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Film Analysis of Gavin Hood's Tsotsi

South Africa in Films

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published in cooperation with

filmrezension.de
online-magazin für filmkritik

Düsseldorf 2007

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The South African movie Tsotsi tells a powerful and appealing story about a young man's life in a poor shantytown at the edge of Johannesburg and the journey into his past. Director Gavin Hood lets this trip go straight through the suburbs of Joburg and links the two ends of the city's society.

1. Introduction

The movie *Tsotsi* takes the audience on a journey into a man's past and his (self-) liberation from old chains that he is wearing.

The main character, known as 'Tsotsi', which is the South African term for 'gangster' or 'thug', is played by Presley Chweneyagae. He is the leader of a small gang with three members. They spend their time robbing, stealing and drinking. The story is set in today's Johannesburg and it takes place at the edge of the city in the heart of Soweto.

There are more than three million people living in the town of Johannesburg; and there are three times more people living in the greater metropolitan area. That means that 'Jozi' belongs to the largest metropolitan areas in the world and has one of the highest crime rates in the world.¹

Especially in areas like these the differences between poor and rich are as large as between day and night and the viewer is brought deep into the poor shantytowns of Soweto.

This is the context in which the story takes place. Originally it was written in the 1960s by Athol Fugard and set in the 1950s, where the apartheid regime started to take over.

And now, four decades later, Gavin Hood, the director of the movie tells the story again, but under different aspects.

Hood has updated Fugard's book from the apartheid era to a present day in which class has replaced race as the country's most pressing issue, the township and townhouse are in jarring proximity and HIV-Aids is the country's biggest killer.²

¹ Martin Gnad, *Desegregation und neue Segregation in Johannesburg nach dem Ende der Apartheid* (Kiel, 2002), p.69

² Ali Jaafar, "Sweet and Tender Hooligan", *Sight Sound*, 16:4/April (2006), p. 5

2. Film analysis

Tsotsi is a nineteen year old teenager who lives in the poor periphery of Johannesburg. Since he has been a child, he has been on his own like thousands of other child, living in the ghetto. Now that he is a young man between adolescence and adulthood he “[...] heads up his own posse of social misfits, Boston, a failed teacher (Mothusi Magano), Butcher, a cold-blooded assassin (Zenzo Ngqobe) and Aap, a dim-witted heavy (Kenneth Nkosi)”.³

The movie starts with characterising the gang members. At first, they are shown as uneducated kids, throwing dices and being unable to count the eyes. Only Boston, the failed teacher, can count the numbers.

As a second step the director characterises the gang members as brutal bandits, who do not think about the consequences of their deeds. The viewer witnesses, how they rob and even kill a man in an underground train amongst the other passengers. The teenagers are just living their life the way they learned it: ‘survival of the fittest’. That seems to be the result of the environment they are living in, where people are poor and the only way to make a living is to make money as a criminal. Their life is a microcosm of crime which is (until now) not scrutinised by them.

After this cold-blooded murder Boston confronts Tsotsi with the question if he knows the meaning of ‘decency’. Furthermore he wants to know, why Tsotsi does not speak about his past and which name his parents gave him. That is the point, where the audience learns, that the protagonist is only called Tsotsi and that this is not his original name. Tsotsi is just a term for a “[...] black urban criminal, a street thug or gang member in the vernacular of black townships in South Africa”.⁴

This foreshadows that Tsotsi suppresses his past and everything that is connected with it e.g. his real name.

Tsotsi reacts with extreme brutality on this kind of Boston’s interrogation and beats him up in a very short but brutal explosion of violence. After that, Tsotsi runs away into the night and tries literally to flee from his past that he feels is coming back. What the young man does not know is that this is the beginning of a journey into his past.

³ www.tsotsi.com →Tsotsi the Film →Synopsis

⁴ www.tsotsi.com →Press Centre →The Term “Tsotsi”

When he stops running, he finds himself in the nice and rich part of the town: the northern suburbs. Only by chance he stands in front of a house where a luxury car drives up the entranceway. Because of a defect remote control the gate does not open automatically and a young woman gets out of the car to ring the doorbell. Tsotsi sees his chance and gets into the car. He wants to steal it but the woman tries to stop him and so he simply shoots her and drives away. When he has found his way out of town, suddenly a baby starts crying from the backseat and he realises that he has 'accidentally' kidnapped a few months old child. Because of this shock he loses control of the car and crashes into a sign at the roadside.

His first reaction is to run away but when he hears the baby crying, he returns to the car wreck. When the young child sees Tsotsi it stops crying. Overwhelmed by his feelings, he puts the baby into a shopping bag and takes it with him into the township.

In the background of the scene, one is able to see the full moon. This also reinforces this scene with a deep human touch. Because in front of such natural powers every human being is equal. It does not matter if someone is rich (the baby) or if someone is poor (Tsotsi). At least there is a minimal common basis, namely that they are humans. And this is presented by the moon because the moon shines for every human being.

But here again the viewer is able to observe that Tsotsi is not a very rational person. His decision to keep the baby is rather intuitive than rational. He is not able yet, to evaluate the consequences of his acting. But he soon finds out that he cannot feed the baby only with tin milk and that it is impossible to leave such a dependent being on its own for a couple of hours.

Hood provides the audience with a good picture here, when his protagonist needs to put on the baby's nappy. He takes the old nappy away and exchanges it with an old newspaper. This happens in such a natural way as if Tsotsi has never done anything else. On the one hand this shows that Tsotsi is intelligent and creative in dealing with new situations, on the other hand it shows that he has no knowledge at all about little children.

Slowly but steadily Tsotsi starts to reflect about his life. For instance in one night he meets a man who is sitting in a wheelchair and begging for some change. He follows him through the streets and at some point compels him to stand up and walk because he thinks that he is only trying to evoke pity

to make more money. But soon he realises that this man is really disabled. Tsotsi is impressed, because for him there is no real meaning in life and suddenly he meets a man whose situation is even worse and nevertheless thinks that life is worth living.

Tsotsi was introduced as a brutal gangster who shows no respect to anybody. Then he accidentally kidnapped a baby and showed that he has the ability to take responsibility. Finally he also starts to reflect about his life.

At this point of the movie, Tsotsi has a dream about his parents. The audience learns that his mother was fatally ill (most probably infected with HIV/Aids) and his father was a brutal drunkard. At one point in his childhood he could not stand this situation any longer and ran away. His father keeps on shouting after him: "David! David!".

Now that the audience has this kind of background information and finally knows Tsotsi's real name – David – the viewer is able to accept and respect the protagonist as a human being and not to see him as the assassin he was introduced as. It is possible to follow the way he is going – that he planned a brutal robbery, that he has beaten up his friend, that he shot the woman.

It is not possible to forgive him but one can comprehend his actions and therefore respect him as the person he is.

Finally David starts to deal with the consequences of his actions. He knows that he has to care for the baby; otherwise it would die.

Because David is an intelligent person he finds out a young mother at the water-well, which is a central point in the townships with no running water. He follows her to her home which is easy for him as a 'professional stalker'. There he forces her with a weapon to breastfeed the baby.

Here Tsotsi enters a totally opposite world. This is also underlined with colour. While David is dressed in dark colours, the woman wears a colourful dress. While the interior of his hut is also very dark, the woman's decor is very colourful and lively.

The woman's name is Miriam (Terry Pheto) and she has a far more positive attitude towards life than David (like the man in the wheelchair). She thinks

that life is beautiful and worth living it, although she has recently lost her husband through a robbery.

So on one side it is even possible that David, who now needs Miriam's help, has murdered her husband. On the other side it could have also been one of the uncountable other tsotsi's in *Joburg*.

Miriam's way of life and her strength leave such a big impression on David that he even reveals her his name. He opens himself and talks about what was kept so deep inside. She also effects that David decides to bring back the child to his real parents.

When David finally returns the baby to its parents he seems to be a different person. This is for instance underlined by his clothes. As already said, since the beginning of the movie David always wore a black dress. Now that he has gone through all these changes and that he has made this decision, he is wearing a white shirt.

When he arrives at the house he puts the baby in front of the gate and wants to walk away. But it seems as if he just wants to have one last look at 'his baby', so he returns. Finally he rings the doorbell and walks away. But suddenly the little child starts to cry so he again returns, like he did after the car accident. He lifts up the baby and holds it in his hands – as if he is waiting for the police to catch him.

In the next moment the police arrives and there is no escape possible anymore. At first every police officer points a gun at David (and the child in his arms) but the real father can de-escalate the situation and is able to use 'the word'. Then David surrenders the child to him and after that himself to the police.

This is a typical closed ending. No questions are left open and the story has come from a beginning (kidnapping the baby) to an end (surrendering the baby). David can be seen as a 'round character' because he develops from a gangster to a responsible person. Furthermore one can conclude that the presented end is a happy ending:

[...] the protagonists of novels often move from the restricted awareness of childhood or adolescence to the wider experience of maturity [...]. [...] at the end of the novel he has learned to see things differently and thus has gained new insights. He is no longer the person he was in the beginning

and has changed in the direction of disillusionment and recognition. Appearances no longer deceive him [...] [and] he may be able to start a new life, as in the case of a 'happy ending'.⁵

But the term 'happy ending' in case of this movie should not be understood too literally because the protagonist has been on a good way until now. The fact that he will be arrested for what he has done is still present. And to put an arrest on the same level as a happy ending is more than doubtful.

But all in all the film leaves a feeling of hope that change is possible and this is the level on which the happy ending is put. The audience can only guess or has to discuss about what can happen in the future.

If there would have been a different closed ending, where the protagonist would have been shot, this kind of discussion will be senseless because the ending would imply that no matter what kind of change will happen, in the end it does not matter.

⁵ W. Rotter and H. Bendl, *Your Companion to English Literary Texts – Volume I Analysis and Interpretation of Narrative Prose* (München, 1984), p. 159

3. Identification

The term 'identification' in the sense it will be used below says that the protagonist of a film needs to build up an identity in order to be accepted by an audience.

As it was already mentioned in the previous part it is not so easy for filmmakers to present a brutal gangster as the hero of their movie who should be accepted by the audience. Exactly here lies the art of filmmaking; namely to develop such a film-language that this is nevertheless possible.

Whereas in real life most people would not be pleased to make contact with a person who makes his money with killing and robbing other people, in this film the situation is different. Gavin Hood manages it to present such a gangster and to provide the audience with information that have the effect that the viewer can understand the tsotsi's behaviour and even tolerate the person (not the behaviour!).

Eine Figur kann nur wie eine Person wahrgenommen werden, wenn wir eine Vorstellung davon gewinnen können, wie es ist oder wie es wäre, diese Person zu sein – gerade so, wie wir im Alltag jemanden als Person nur wahrnehmen können, wenn wir aus der wenigstens hypothetisch eingenommen Perspektive dieser Person bis zu einem gewissen Grad *verstehen* können, warum sie handelt, wie sie handelt und empfindet, wie sie empfindet. Die Fähigkeit zur – wie immer hypothetischen – Übernahme der Rolle des anderen ist eine Voraussetzung seiner Anerkennung oder Auffassung als Person. Die Identifikation mit medialen Figuren, bedeutet dies, basiert auf lebensweltlichen Erfahrungen des Umgangs von Personen untereinander, mehr noch: Sie folgt denselben Mustern wie die Identifikation in der Face-to-Face-Situation des Alltags.⁶

The viewer should understand the behaviour of a character in a movie and then, as a following step, identify him- or herself with the character (in the best case!). To reach this aim there are many steps necessary as well on the filmmaker's side as on the viewer's side.

As a common formula one can notice that the higher the degree of identification with the protagonist, the higher the degree of success of a movie. This is most probably not the only ingredient for its success but in

⁶ Lothar Mikos, *Film- und Fernsehanalyse* (Konstanz, 2003), pp. 165-166

films where stories are told and the special effects are not the centre of attraction it is important to deliver authenticity; otherwise the audience is not interested.

But what kinds of parameters are essential to carry authenticity to produce identification?

First of all the filmmakers need to choose a character who can bring the story to the audience. The interesting point in 'Tsotsi' was that Presley Cheweneyagae was nominated very late for the role of the 'Tsotsi'. At first the director had an older protagonist but then the team realised that the audience would not as easily forgive him the crime deeds than they would do in the case of a younger tsotsi.⁷ The reason therefore is quite obvious: young people need to make mistakes to learn, so against this background the audience is able to forgive.

This can be seen as the basic element of an identification process. But there are also factors left like acting power of the actor, or camera shots of the camera man (director).

Much of Tsotsi's effectiveness is thanks to the performance of Presley Cheweneyagae in the title role. The debutants androgynous features provide a disconcerting contrast to his character's brutality. Called upon to convey Tsotsi's are from cold-blooded killer to remorseful adult, Chweneyagae imbues the role with a lingering sadness.⁸

The fact that Cheweneyagae himself grew up "in a really tough neighborhood"⁹ in Johannesburg and the point that the dialogues are spoken in 'tsotsi-taal', which is the 'gangster language' of *Joburg*, helps to construct the needed authenticity.

As mentioned above camera shots are also an identification forming element. In comparison to other movies which deal with a similar story (*City of God*, Fernando Meirelles; *Amores perros*, Alejandro Gonzales Inárritu) the camera shots are made differently.

⁷ Gavin Hood, *Tsotsi* (Johannesburg, 2005), audio comments from the director

⁸ Ali Jaafar, "Sweet and Tender Hooligan", *Sight Sound*, 16:4/April (2006), p. 5

⁹ Jafaar, (2006), p.5

[The] Latin American ghetto films *City of God* and *Amores perros* were memorable for their gritty, handheld aesthetic, [whereby] Hood frequently opts for widescreen panoramas shot on super 35mm. The South African [...] was keen to avoid the close-up approach adopted by the likes of Fernando Meirelles and Alejandro Gonzales Inárritu. "Tsotsi is in some ways a parable or a fable," he explains. "It really is a far more intimate story. If you're waving a handheld camera around, you're not intimate. The audience is aware that the director and the cameraman are in the room because the camera is moving around a lot. It's cool, but it's not intimate."¹⁰

These ways of story telling lead to an opinion in the viewer's mind. Especially the main character, the camera shots and the resulting authenticity are responsible for identification processes. But next to these large factors is an armada of smaller parameters that have to fit into the concept to create a movie which the audience can comprehend.

¹⁰ Jafaar, (2006), p.5

4. Music

Until now the visual elements of the movie *Tsotsi* have been analysed. Furthermore there was emphasis on how these visual elements can create identification building processes.

Now, in the last part of this work there will be a close look on audio elements in films. This audio part carries, like the visual medium, meaning as well and it has the purpose to transport the story.

Aufgabe der Musik ist es nicht nur, Emotionen abzubilden, sondern auch beim Betrachter [...] Identifikationsprozesse zu erwecken bzw. stimulieren. Funktion der Filmmusik soll es sein die Distanz zum Geschehen zu mindern und die Wahrnehmung der Bilder affektiv aufzuladen.¹¹

Under these aspects the music in *Tsotsi* will be analysed.

First of all it is necessary to know what kind of music is used in the film. The music in *Tsotsi* is called 'Kwaito'.

'Kwaito' is the modern music of South African townships. [...] Kwaito is [...] dance music that is rooted in Johannesburg urban culture and features rhythmically recited vocals over an instrumental backing with strong bass lines. [...] It derives its name from an Afrikaans word 'kwaai' – meaning 'angry' or 'vicious'.¹²

Since 'Kwaito' is a very modern and up to date kind of music (or even an own genre), the listener can assume that it has the same function in the movie like 'Tsotsi-taal': It is used to create authenticity.

As a second step it is important to know in which way the music is used in the film.

Music has different purposes in a movie which can be divided into four functions: dramatic function, narrative function, structural function, persuasive function.¹³

The following part will be a short approach to the narrative and persuasive function.

¹¹ Lothar Mikos, *Film- und Fernsehanalyse* (Konstanz, 2003), p. 234

¹² www.tsotsi.com → Press Center → Kwaito Music

¹³ cf: Lothar Mikos, *Film- und Fernsehanalyse* (Konstanz, 2003), p. 232

When music causes a certain connotation in the audience and is therefore not just supporting the story, it takes over a 'narrative function'.¹⁴ This is the scientific expression for why the filmmakers decided to use 'Kwaito' in their film.

Sometimes it is necessary to underline that the story takes place at a certain point in time. To characterise this a special kind of music is used; namely the music of that certain time. In the case of *Tsotsi* it is modern music, so the viewer/listener knows that the movie deals with a contemporary matter.

They wanted to underline and even enhance the time and the place in which the story takes place. Kwaito is therefore not only a support in transporting and telling the story but has also a narrative function itself.

This also makes sense from the view that almost 50% of the South African population are aged under 21 years.¹⁵ So it is obvious that music can also be used to aim at a special target group: young people.

By the way the most famous musician of today's South Africa, Zola, plays a big gangster in the film in comparison to the little *Tsotsi*. This is also a way to make a movie more attractive to a big audience. Zola also contributed music to the soundtrack of the movie.

Another point is the manner of the music. The audience can be inspired on an emotional level by the way of the music. In case of this movie the pumping beats would take over a 'persuasive function'.¹⁶

When, for example, in the beginning of the movie the little gang sets out into the city the beats of the music makes the viewer want to move, too. The audience is reached on an emotional level.

Another interesting point is the question how the music is presented in a movie. Is it just played from the off or is it connected with images like a radio or a music group. In *Tsotsi* one can find both.

In the first scene for instance, where the gangster group is introduced, the music is played from the off. It is used here to underline that these kids are young and wild and most probably gangsters, because Kwaito is the music from the ghetto.

In another scene, where David/*Tsotsi* tries to entertain the baby when it starts crying because of hunger, it is shown how he connects a car battery

¹⁴ cf: Mikos, (2003), p. 232

¹⁵ www.tsotsi.com → Press Center → Kwaito Music

¹⁶ cf: Mikos, (2003), p. 233

with a music machine and the music starts to play. Besides the fact that you have to be creative in the shantytowns (car battery) it is emphasised that David is a young man, because he listens to Kwaito and that he is a little overstrained with the situation, because this is not a way to feed a baby.

In conclusion it can be said that it is different from film to film how important the role of the music is. In *Tsotsi* it has a relatively big part. But in every case it can be stated:

Film music [...] acts as a hypnotist inducing a trance: it focuses and binds the spectator into the narrative world.¹⁷

¹⁷ Claudia Gorbman, "Film Music", in: J. Hill, P. Church Gibson (eds), *Film Studies – critical approaches* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 41-48, p. 45

5. Conclusion

Summing it all up, *Tsotsi* is a strong movie with an interesting story. The movie carries a certain authenticity as well as intimacy. This mixture makes it a special film which deserved the Oscar in 2005.

The comparison of the pictures of the poor shantytowns and the rich suburbs is very impressive and transports the state disequilibrium very well. Also the idea to use the language, the people and the music of the shantytowns makes this movie so special. It is in fact this mirroring of everyday life that makes this film a lively and up to date piece of work.

Especially the end of the movie is very successful because it leaves room for discussion about what happened and what can happen in the future. It leaves a certain hope that things can change to their better side.

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25.03.07, 12:15CET

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