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THE TOWNSHIP AND THE GANGSTER IN *TSOTSI*: LOCAL AND GLOBAL ASPIRATIONS OF THE NEW SOUTH AFRICAN CINEMA

Annael LE POULLENNEC

After the downfall of apartheid, the advent of democracy in 1994 led South Africa to a restructuring of its institutions that reached beyond the strictly political realm, also reshaping policy in terms of arts and culture. Decisions were made to reorganise the film industry and assign it new objectives in the context of post-apartheid nation-building. Over a decade later, the South African film production has acquired a place on the international scene that can be attested by the worldwide success of Neill Blomkamp's *District 9*¹ or again the 2005 Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film received by Gavin Hood's *Tsotsi*.²

However, as far as box-office is concerned, the South African audience still favours American feature films over their local counterparts.³ To counteract this, the South African film industry has been attempting to concomitantly touch national and international audiences. Local objectives include making commercially viable films that succeed at the national box-office while focusing on telling authentic local stories about South African realities. Meanwhile, global ambitions mean making internationally competitive films that will project an image of South Africa abroad. In more practical terms, the industry aspires to a commercial and critical success abroad, and to fruitful co-productions.

The aim of this article is to analyse the tensions that arise from these conflicting goals. In that perspective, this paper proposes to examine how local and global aspirations came into play in the making of one individual South African feature film, Gavin Hood's *Tsotsi* (2005). *Tsotsi* was shot in 2004 and released in 2005 in South Africa and in the course of 2006 internationally. The story of a gangster's redemption was shot on a five million dollar budget, in Kliptown, in the famous township of Soweto, near Johannesburg. Analysing *Tsotsi* seems particularly relevant due to the film's commercial success locally and abroad, to its international recognition culminating in the 2005 Oscar, and to the debate that surrounded the film, making it a source of national pride while questioning the image of South Africa it projected – both at home and abroad. The production and reception of *Tsotsi* reveal much of the difficulty for the South African film industry to reconcile its ambitions.

1 *District 9*, Neill Blomkamp, 2009, produced by the director of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, Peter Jackson.

2 Rewarded South African films include: *U-Carmen eKhayelitsha* (Mark Dornford-May's adaptation of Bizet's opera which received the 2005 Golden Bear) or Darrell Roodt's *Yesterday*, nominated for the 2004 Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film.

3 Ian GLENN, 'Film Viewing in South Africa in 2007: Some vexed questions', *Communitas*, 13, 2008, pp. 4-5.

In an attempt to shed some light on the question, this paper focuses firstly on how local and global objectives of today's South African film industry came into play in the making of *Tsotsi*, and what missions the film was invested with. Secondly, it aims to demonstrate how the focus laid on local authenticity becomes problematic when the film is meant to not only faithfully represent but also signify South Africa. We will analyse how markers of South Africa and South African-ness were used to locally ground the film and promote an image of South Africa abroad. Finally, we will critically examine the problematic equation of the township space with the figure of the gangster as a signifier for South Africa

***Tsotsi* in the context of the South African film industry: 'a tsotsi in Parliament'**

***Tsotsi*: a South African co-production**

Although *Tsotsi* is a co-production between South Africa and the United Kingdom,⁴ it is considered a South African film. Despite the influence of international co-production on the content, which will be analysed in this article, this quote from South African director Mickey Madoba Dube points out what we consider to characterise a South African film: 'written by a South African, directed by a South African'.⁵

Tsotsi is adapted from the only novel written by South African playwright Athol Fugard. Although the novel was written in 1961, it was only published in 1980. Surprisingly this is not due to state censorship but to the fact that Fugard had put it away, unconvinced by his own prose writing. Fugard's version is set in the 1950s in the context of forced removals in Sophiatown. The main character, a gangster named Tsotsi, is handed a baby by a young mother he is attempting to rape. The novel describes his path toward redemption in the context of apartheid oppression, until he dies in an endeavour to save the baby from a crumbling building in the state-organised destruction of Sophiatown.

The director, Gavin Hood, is a South African actor and film-maker who became known nationally for his 1999 film *A Reasonable Man*, which despite little commercial success was praised for its acutely pointing out conflicts between Western and traditional African laws and beliefs. *Tsotsi* was his first widely-acclaimed film as a director. Hood's following projects have been Hollywood films: *Rendition* (2007) and *X-Men origins: Wolverine* (2009).

The film relates how the eponymous character, a nineteen-year-old Sowetan gangster, hijacks a woman's car, finds her baby on the back seat, and starts taking care of him. As in Fugard's novel the story revolves around the changes that Tsotsi's new role as a nanny brings into his life. He gradually amends, meets

4 The film was produced by Peter Fudakowski, CEO of the UK Film and Television Production Company and on the South African side by the Industrial Development Corporation of South Africa and the National Film and Video Foundation of South Africa, with the co-production services of Paul Raleigh of Moviworld.

5 Audrey McCLUSKEY, *The Devil You Dance With: Film Culture in the New South Africa*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 2009, p. 39.

This needs to be distinguished from South-African themed cinema, *i.e.* movies about South Africa made by non-South Africans, such as Clint Eastwood's *Invictus* (2009).

characters such as Miriam, a young mother, or Morris, a cripple, and eventually becomes estranged from crime. Meanwhile, Tsotsi remembers his own past, his actual name : David, and how he was himself driven away from his sick mother, who was dying of AIDS.⁶ This eventually leads him to bringing the baby back to his parents in the wealthy suburbs of Johannesburg, where the police catches him. The closing shot of the film shows the main character surrendering to the police, after handing the baby back. This open ending is more hopeful than Tsotsi's death in the novel, yet originally Hood had filmed an ending in which he was mistakenly shot by policemen.

In both the book and the film, the main character has lost his identity, bearing a generic nickname instead. 'Tsotsi' is often translated as 'gangster, or 'hustler', although the term bears strong historical and cultural South African connotations.⁷ Although Hood insists on the universal dimension of his protagonist's redemption, we will see that the film is purposefully anchored in a specifically South African context. If the character's identity is lost, the film on the other hand strongly claims its post-apartheid identity. Firstly, the film seeks to fulfil a number of missions set by the new film industry to inscribe film productions in wider post-94 national projects: repairing past imbalances and enabling South Africa to play a significant role on the international stage.

Compensating for the apartheid film industry

To understand what is at stake for post-1994 South African cinema, it is crucial to be aware of what the national production consisted in under apartheid. It was heavily controlled by the state, notably through a system of subsidy,⁸ which was introduced in 1956 and marked the start of a collaboration between the National Party government and private production companies. Martin Botha explains that the subsidy system was outcome-oriented, rewarding box-office success, and meant for film-making to fit in the apartheid agenda and favour Afrikaans productions.⁹

In parallel, the industry was marked by severe government censorship from the

6 Although implicit in the film, this is explicit in Gavin Hood's interventions on the topic, including in the DVD bonus entitled 'The slick gangster'.

7 These connotations are explained by Lindiwe Dovey as such: "Tsotsi" is difficult to translate: it refers to a type of streetwise criminal who operated in the larger South African townships, and particularly in Sophiatown, from the 1930s onwards. The *tsotsis* spoke what is called 'tsotsi-taal', a mixture of Xhosa, Zulu, Afrikaans, Sotho, Tswana, and even Spanish, and which is the ancestor of *isicamtho*. The term's origins supposedly lie in the phrase 'zoot suit'—which *tsotsis* of the 1930s and 1940s used to wear—and which was later adapted into the Sesotho word *tsotsa*, which meant to 'dress flashily.', in Lindiwe DOVEY Lindiwe, *African Film and Literature: Adapting Violence to the Screen*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2009, p. 94. For further analysis of the gangster in South African film, see MARX 1996.

8 For an extensive study of censorship and the subsidy system, see Keyan TOMASELLI, *The Cinema of Apartheid*, Routledge, London, 1989, pp. 9-53.

9 'Of the 60 films made between 1956 and 1962, 43 were in Afrikaans. Four were bilingual and the remaining 13 were in English.', Martin BOTHA, 'Post-Apartheid Cinema: Policy, Structures, Themes and New Aesthetics' in *Roetes: Conversations and reflections on South African cinema*, Open Doek Film Festival, Turnhout, pp. 15-34.

creation of the National Film Board in 1954. This institution isolated the South African audience from international films and local productions, proposing drastic cuts, while the locally-produced films were conservative and escapist.

Not only were audiences physically segregated into different cinemas until 1985, but they also saw different films. Lindiwe Dovey mentions the 'differential censorship' that deemed certain films 'safe' to show to white audiences only. 'Films for blacks' were made, although not by black film-makers, to ensure control over what was seen by black South Africans.¹⁰ To summarize, one can underline that most of South African film-making was not only cinema under apartheid, but to use Keyan Tomaselli's expression a 'cinema of apartheid', strongly shaped by the regime.¹¹

Another consequence of the apartheid film policy is underlined by Martin Botha as such: 'By the beginning of the 1990s we had a fragmented film industry with fragmented audiences.'¹² On this issue, Ian Glenn's 2008 study concludes to a persisting division in audiences in those terms: 'Some evidence certainly suggests that South Africans remain racially and linguistically divided, particularly in their attitudes to what we might call cultural and social politics'.¹³ The restructuring of the film industry therefore first and foremost consisted in compensating for the past division and state control.

Post-1994 restructuring and policy

After the advent of democracy in 1994, film and media institutions were completely restructured. In 1995, following a 1994 study by the Human Sciences Research Council,¹⁴ a group of fourteen film specialists from the industry and film academics wrote a White Paper known as the Film Development Strategy Document, that led to the creation of the National Film and Video Foundation¹⁵ in 1999.

The missions attributed to the NFVF in the context of a democratic and inclusive South Africa are representative of the will to address and redress the issues created by apartheid policies.¹⁶ One can distinguish between several types of

10 Lindiwe DOVEY, *African Film and Literature: Adapting Violence to the Screen*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2009, pp. 45-47.

11 Keyan TOMASELLI, *op. cit. supra*.

12 Martin BOTHA, 'Post-Apartheid Cinema: Policy, Structures, Themes and New Aesthetics' in *Roetes: Conversations and reflections on South African cinema*, Open Doek Film Festival, Turnhout, 2006, pp. 15-34.

13 Ian GLENN, *op. cit. supra*, pp. 13.

14 Martin BOTHA *et al.*, *Proposals for the Restructuring of the South African Film Industry*, Human Sciences Research Council, Pretoria, 1994.

15 Initially South African Film and Video Foundation. On its creation and the restructuring of the South African industry, read BOTHA, 2006, pp. 182-186.

16 They are listed in full on the NFVF website as such:

'The NFVF has ten main goals derived from its business plan as well as its mandate from government:

- To develop effective relationships between government, the film industry and regulatory bodies.

- To access finance through public funding, private investments, the lottery and other means.

missions : restructuring state support to the industry, developing the conditions necessary to a viable domestic film industry – such as skills development, audience development and funding, and counteracting the structural imbalances of the industry inherited from apartheid. I foregrounded three objectives that put forth the dynamics of local and global in film production in South Africa.

-To develop local content and production. (1)

-To develop film exports, and attract international productions and investment. (2)

-To help reflect South African culture and language to both local and international audiences. (3)

The focus is twofolds: on local content (1) and on international investment and export (2).¹⁷ Considering that the NFVF was a major investor in the making of *Tsotsi*,¹⁸ we will examine how this double focus is reflected in the production of the film.

The objective I labelled (3) is the one to take into consideration when looking at representations of South Africa and tropes of South African-ness in the film. It aims at ‘reflecting’ South Africa’s culture and language (surprisingly, plural forms are not chosen here) both inside and outside the country. ‘Reflection’ implies the projection of an image at once faithful to South African realities and recognizable by international audiences, and it is that image and its mission of verisimilitude that we will critically examine in *Tsotsi*.

The breakout film

Since the restructuring of the industry there has been hope for a South African film that would satisfy global ambitions, revealing the national industry to the world and typifying South African cinema. This notion to my knowledge has not yet been conceptualised, therefore I base my analysis on several different terms that I believe concur in referring to the same phenomenon. I choose to use the term ‘breakout film’ used by South African academic and independent film-maker Jyoti Mistry in her interview with Audrey McCluskey.

-
- To stimulate and advance skills development, film education and training.
 - To monitor, measure and plan national strategies for the industry, and advise government on policy.
 - To develop local content and production.
 - To develop South African film and television audiences for the appreciation of locally produced materials.
 - To develop film exports, and attract international productions and investment.
 - To redress past imbalances in the film sector and develop small, medium and micro enterprises (SMME) for the effective growth of the industry.
 - To help reflect South African culture and language to both local and international audiences.
 - To provide and disburse funding for film development, production, exhibition marketing and training.’

¹⁷ The mission labelled (2) foregrounds that co-productions are a means for the development of a national industry, which in my opinion participates in considering co-productions as indigenous films.

¹⁸ The NFVF provided *Tsotsi* with about one fourth of its production budget.

The expression gaining currency is the breakout film¹⁹ – the idea that one film will launch South Africa on the international cinema scene. (...) My observation is that South Africa is seeking to create an industry, perhaps right now at the cost of a national cinema, (...) and this relates to the issue of the breakout film.²⁰

To further develop the idea of a South African film giving weight to the national production on the international scene, one can add another formulation used by South African director Akin Omotoso:

Every film-maker has this pressure of being asked, 'Is your film going to be the great South African film? Is your film going to be The Whale Rider for South Africa?'²¹ Is your film going to win awards?' That pressure is unfair. (...) Instead of wasting our time waiting for this messiah to come and save us, I think we should spend our time trying to make good films.²²

Investing films with an international commercial mission of such weight is considered in both instances as in contradiction with the national objectives – faithfulness to local realities and quality.²³ Where and why do we find this paradox in the making of *Tsotsi*?

Local and global success: *Tsotsi* as the breakout film

With the exception of the worldwide success of the *Gods Must Be Crazy* series in the 1980s,²⁴ indigenous South African cinema has not reached international audiences on a large scale. Even though South African fiction films have regularly been present on the festival scene in the 2000s, they have not – to the exception of *District 9* – been massively distributed. *Tsotsi* on the other hand made ten million dollars at the international box-office, more than double its own budget. It was released in twenty-three countries. Not to forget that on the festival scene, the film was nominated over twenty times and rewarded a dozen times.²⁵ It seems fair to consider *Tsotsi* an international breakthrough in that respect.

19 Emphasis mine.

20 Audrey McCLUSKEY, *op. cit. supra*, p. 147.

21 *The Whale Rider* (Niki Caro, 2002) is often considered to have revealed the New Zealand film industry on the world stage.

22 Audrey McCLUSKEY, *op.cit. supra*, pp. 162-163, emphasis mine.

23 What makes this even more complex is that expectations regarding the building of a national cinema – and the projection of a faithful image nationally – imply film-making that would encompass the plurality of South African experiences, and individual films that could channel diversity and create unity. Films of a rainbow nature, to refer to the hopeful ideology of the Mandela years, rather than Afrikaans films for Afrikaners, Indian films for Indians, etc. This paradox echoes the singular form used by the NFVF in its aforementioned mission to help 'reflect South African culture and language'.

24 *Gods Must Be Crazy 1* (Jamie Uys, 1980) and *Gods Must be Crazy 2* (Jamie Uys, 1989)

25 Awards include : People's Choice Award at the 2005 Toronto International Film Festival and Audience Award and Best New Picture Award at the 2005 Edinburgh International Film Festival. Nominations include :Best Film Award at the 2006 British Academy Film and Television Awards and Best Foreign Language Film at the 2006 Golden Globes.

A major problem met by local films is their lack of success on the local market, due to several factors. Firstly, the number of cinema-goers is very small in South Africa. The Social Science Research Council has issued numbers for 2008, whereby 8,7% of South Africans go to the cinema at least once a year.²⁶ What is more, that figure has been dropping since 2001. Indeed, with less than a hundred cinemas for almost fifty million people, access to films on the silver screen is highly problematic for a majority of South Africans, especially township dwellers and residents of rural areas. As a matter of fact the first commercial film theatre to be built in a township only opened in 2007 in Maponya Mall in Soweto.

South African audiences' lack of interest in national production has been extensively analysed by Ian Glenn.²⁷ *Tsotsi's* local viewership thus appears as a landmark. Indeed, upon analysis of the local box office since 1994, the film ranks sixth among South African productions.²⁸ The remarkable thing is that it was the first South African film which was not a comedy to manage commercial success.²⁹ Interestingly, when adding DVD sales, TV audiences, and piracy estimations, *Tsotsi* is arguably the most watched South African film in 2006 and 2007, as Ian Glenn argues: 'We can thus probably conclude that the most watched film in South Africa in 2007 was *Tsotsi*, which is a positive note for South African cinema'.³⁰

Even though figures remain relative, *Tsotsi* has achieved commercial success locally and internationally, while being widely rewarded on the festival scene. In that respect, *Tsotsi* has been considered the breakout film. At the Academy Award homecoming ceremony, Nelson Mandela thanked the film for putting South Africa on the map³¹ and Minister Pallo Jordan's message of congratulations stated: 'First the nomination and then the winning of an Oscar by '*Tsotsi*' will be seen by future generations as the watershed of world perceptions of South African film, our film industry and our actors.'³² In addition to that recognition, the film's success convinced the Industrial Development Corporation (IDC) to provide extra funding for South African productions, acknowledging the possibility to make lucrative indigenous films.³³

The compromise of co-production: 'the film about the guy in Soweto'

26 Joe KARAGANIS (ed.), *Media Piracy in Emerging Economies*, Social Science Research Council, New York, 2011, pp. 99.

27 Ian GLENN, *op. cit. supra*, p. 4.

28 Calculated from NFVF box office numbers available online <<http://www.nfvf.co.za>>.

29 Four of the five top-ranking comedies are by Leon Schuster, probably the most popular South African director. He specialises in slapstick humour, often using racial stereotyping as a source of comedy. His films include the biggest two commercial successes in post-apartheid cinema: *Mr Bones 2*, which ranks first, and *Mr Bones*, which ranks second.

30 Ian GLENN, *ibid.*, p. 10.

31 Gavin Hood mentions his emotion following Mr Mandela's comment in the DVD boni. 'Mandela said to us 'You've really put South Africa on the map.' But we were very embarrassed and said 'No Mister Mandela you put us on the map and now we can tell our stories'.'

32 The message was read at the official Oscar homecoming ceremony in Parliament on March 5th, 2006.

33 Lindiwe DOVEY, *op. cit. supra*, p. 91.

Tsotsi has come to be seen as reconciling local and global audiences. Yet the very idea of an international, co-produced film can be considered as prone to compromise faithfulness to local realities. In the words of film-maker Akin Omotoso:

*A lot of South African films are co-produced, and they have to bring in international actors. With that comes a certain dilution, because you are no longer making the film about the guy in Soweto.(...) That's the challenge, really – how far you are willing to compromise.*³⁴

In a speech given at a conference of the Writers' Guild Association in Johannesburg in June 2010,³⁵ Paul Raleigh, co-producer of *Tsotsi*, explained what types of conflict between local and international expectations came into play in the film-making process. According to Raleigh, the South African director and himself were focused on faithfulness to national realities. The British co-production on the other hand was concerned with providing the film with international appeal. This tension about how much compromise is too much raises the question whether *Tsotsi* is still 'the film about the guy in Soweto'.

Although *Tsotsi* has an all-South African cast and was shot in Tsotsitaal,³⁶ it was not a given in the early stages of production. Understandably, the British co-producers were reluctant to shoot a film 'with no stars' and in 'a foreign tongue'.³⁷ As Raleigh explained at the conference, they favoured the casting of internationally known African-American actors, which the South African producers rejected as lacking credibility.³⁸ For similar reasons, the film-makers also insisted on using Isicamtho as the language of the film:

*The one thing we wanted to do was to make it as authentic³⁹ as possible. (...) So we finally persuaded everybody and ourselves that the right way was to do this was to tell the story as truthfully as we could. Basically Tsotsitaal with subtitles.*⁴⁰

As mentioned above, compromises were also made to satisfy audience

34 Audrey McCLUSKEY, *op.cit. supra*, p. 164.

35 My personal recording and transcription for all quotes by Paul Raleigh.

36 'Tsotsitaal' (literally tsotsi language) is used to refer to a group of languages mixing dialects of isiZulu, English, Sesotho and Afrikaans. The one used in the film is Isicamtho. Typically Tsotsitaals are street languages spoken by township youth, originally coined as a slang language by tsotsis.

37 Both expressions used by Paul Raleigh to refer to the negative reactions on the British side of the co-production.

38 Raleigh declared: 'The only real parts that could have been for African Americans were the parents of the kidnapped child.(...) Tsotsi just happens to go and kidnap the baby of the *only* Americans in South Africa? What about the language? What about the accent? Suddenly all those things started having an influence on the kind of film that this could turn out to be.'

39 Emphasis mine.

40 They are supported by actor Kenneth Nkosi who asserted the authenticity of the use of Tsotsitaal. Nkosi said in the DVD boni: 'You've gotta stay authentic. And the language safeguards that. And the language was quite important to me because you don't see South African tsotsis go 'Yo man, wassup, yo?' They're hardcore and they speak their Zulu they speak their Tsotsitaal they speak their Sotho they mix all languages.'

expectations regarding the ending of the film. Three endings were shot, and the original one – in which Tsotsi dies – was abandoned. The American one shows Tsotsi escaping from the police. But the one chosen for other markets, the European/South African version described hereabove, was considered a compromise between ‘authenticity’ and audience satisfaction.⁴¹

Gavin Hood underlines the interplay between a universal story on the one hand, and a specific local background on the other hand. In the DVD boni he explains: ‘(Tsotsi’s) central journey is a timeless and universal story that in fact could almost be set in any big city in the world, but on the other hand there is the specific setting of Johannesburg which is not often seen on screen, there is the great kwaito music that is coming out of the townships now (...)’. For this to function, the plot needs to be grounded in authentic South African-ness through the use of both visual and aural features. To analyse how these elements are used as markers of South African-ness, it is useful to keep in mind the objective of the NFVF: ‘To help reflect South African culture and language to both local and international audiences.’ What is at stake here is the ability of film to mirror and to depict today’s South Africa, the film’s representativeness as well as what it represents.

Markers of South African-ness and the challenges to authenticity

There has been a paradoxical reaction to the film in South Africa. While it has been widely watched in the country and abroad, academics and journalists as well as the public were debating *how* South Africa was depicted in the film. What elements are used to ground this internationally-oriented film in a local context? What is the film’s verisimilitude built on? Why has it been questioned?

***Tsotsi* as a post-apartheid film**

Given that *Tsotsi* is adapted from a story taking place during apartheid, we can interrogate the consequences of setting that story in 2004. The contemporary nature of the story is a deliberate addition on part of the film-makers, which brings numerous changes to the plot and to the atmosphere of the film. Lindiwe Dovey explains that this decision was both commercial – adequately picturing a contemporary setting is materially easier than a historical setting – and ideological – clarifying the moral dimension of the film for modern audiences.⁴²

Not only does the film display a non-apartheid setting, it also actively signifies the ‘new South Africa’ in its difference from apartheid. In the book, the true villain of the story is the apartheid regime itself. Tsotsi, although the author of crime, is also constantly constructed as a victim of a political system of oppression. In the

41 The producers organized test screenings in Johannesburg, Toronto, London and Los Angeles to evaluate audience reactions. Raleigh describes that on all occasions, the original ending was deemed too harsh, a reaction he attributes to ‘the woman audience’. Gavin Hood explains in the DVD boni that the open ending was chosen because it created more debate.

42 Lindiwe DOVEY, *op. cit. supra*, p. 92.

film, the focus is driven away from race relations and onto class. The victims of crime are all black, whether it be the man on the train, the parents of the kidnapped child, or Morris, the cripple. Yet, so are the authors of crime. Moreover, unlike many post-1994 films which display a persisting opposition between well-off suburban spaces mostly inhabited by whites and black – or sometimes coloured – townships, in *Tsotsi* both spaces are inhabited by black people.

It is also the display of new race relations in South Africa that signifies post-apartheidness. This is clearest in one scene. After his wife has been shot by Tsotsi, John, the child's father, visits her at the hospital. Three policemen are present: a middle-aged white captain, (Ian Roberts), a black inspector in his forties (Percy Matsemela), and a young Coloured policeman (Craig Palm). One can only notice the quite politically correct post-apartheid racial diversity suggested by the choice of police characters. It is foregrounded in the framing, which includes all three characters on the same level.

The scene depicts the father's cold anger at the policemen's inability to find his baby. The point that comes across in this scene is mostly the hierarchy that is established between the father and the policemen. The father is the character who is invested with authority, whereas the policemen are accountable.

John: You said there were fingerprints?

Captain Smit: This bastard's a nobody.

John: But you said he went into the township?

Inspector Zuma: There's a million people in there. It's chaos.

Young cop: Sir, we can't even track stolen cars...

*John: Stop telling me what you can't do! I want my child found. When my wife wakes up... I want our son right here beside her. Is that clear?*⁴³

When the father gets angry at this last cue, both the white and Coloured policemen, now the only ones in the frame, lower their heads abashedly, while in reverse shot the father's indignant face occupies the centre of the frame, his gaze slightly above the camera eye, suggesting that he is addressing the white policeman, the tallest of the three. If one conceives of a scene including a white policeman and a black man in South African film, one readily imagines the apartheid interrogation scene, quite the opposite of what is shown here. Indeed the language used and the power relations would have been reversed. By presenting this image of a guilt-ridden, abashed white policeman who addresses the father in isiZulu, and by foregrounding the strong, proud and angry stance of the black father, the director chooses to reverse a trope, a typical image of South Africa on screen, to replace it with another one, thus signifying the break from the past.

Indeed, when asked what the film was about, main actor Presley Chweneyagae mentioned this scene as an example of what *Tsotsi* is about as a film.

*I think it's basically about South Africa, the new South Africa, and how people relate to each other. If you look at the white cop in the movie, how he communicates with other black guys... Because South Africa has really changed a lot from apartheid to what we are right now.*⁴⁴

Although it is quite an optimistic stance to screen out race from post-apartheid

43 This transcription is the one adopted in the English subtitles to the DVD.

44 Quoted from the making of in the DVD boni.

realities, and possibly a compromise with audience satisfaction and political correctness, it is still efficient to use a reversed topical scene to signify change from the old regime, especially to international audiences used to associating on-screen South Africa with apartheid

But it is not only the post-apartheid nature of today's South Africa that the film-makers underline. The film-makers also aim to authenticate the narrative by integrating elements in the aural and visual landscape that signify contemporary South Africa.

Tsotsitaal and kwaito: grounding *Tsotsi* through aural authenticity

The opening sequence establishes several elements that signify South African-ness in the film. The first scenes show the gang playing a game of dice, while Tsotsi stands by the window. They serve to introduce the characters and their characteristic features, Butcher the violent one with his blade, Aap the slow one, and Boston/Teacher Boy who displays knowledge and some moral values. Meanwhile, Tsotsi, the leader, is looking out onto the township. When called, he turns around to face the camera – and kwaito music⁴⁵ sounds at that exact time. We then follow the gang as they walk out of Tsotsi's shack down the street, mocked by Fela, a more established local gangster. The camera then rises up from within the township street to a bird's eye view of the street. The next shot is of the train going towards the city centre of Johannesburg which we see in the distance, before the camera cuts to a shot from the platform which shows the train approaching and passengers getting off, including the gang. They go up the stairs to end their journey in the hall of Park Station, the central station of Johannesburg, with a wide upward-panning shot which eventually includes the gang in the vast station dominated by an enormous billboard of the Khomamani Aids Campaign that reads 'We are all affected by HIV and AIDS.' Then, the kwaito music stops.

The film also immediately introduces dialogue in Tsotsitaal, which we have seen was regarded as a guarantee of authenticity by the film-makers. Tsotsitaal is consistent with the use of kwaito music in the film, as signifiers of the urban youth of today's townships. Most of the soundtrack is indeed songs by emblematic kwaito artist Zola⁴⁶ – generally sang in Tsotsitaal.. Regarding the choice of kwaito, Gavin Hood's claims are similar to the ones regarding the choice of Tsotsitaal. 'This *is* the music that is coming out of the streets, out of the townships of South Africa. So it's completely *authentic*' (emphasis mine).

Kwaito is exclusively heard when the action is situated in the township,

45 Kwaito is a South African music style that emerged in the 1990s. Its characteristic rhythm incorporates elements of hip hop into house music and is very popular in South Africa. Here the track is Mdlwembe, by Zola, which means 'problem child'. For a detailed analysis of kwaito music, see Simon STEVENS, 'Kwaito' in Sarah NUTTALL and Cheryl A. MICHAEL, *Senses of Culture: South Africa Cultural Studies*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 2000.

46 Zola (Bonginkosi Dlamini) is a Soweto-born South African kwaito artist, actor, presenter and entrepreneur. He is famous in South Africa for his music career and his role in the television series *Yizo Yizo*. His persona is that of a former gangster who renounced crime to devote his life to music.

whether diegetically as background music in the shebeen scene or in Tsotsi's shack, or extradiegetically. In the latter case, the music is heard when the gang goes out to commit some mischief, and it stops when they reach another space, whether it be the station or the suburbs. In this case, one can interpret Hood's comment literally: in the film, kwaito physically comes out of the township as it follows the characters.

AIDS as the new villain

Visually, it is AIDS, a very sombre reality of today's South Africa, which pervades the film. At the end of the opening sequence, and when the gang returns without Tsotsi, similar shots to the one described above show the station hall with the gigantic Khomamani Aids Campaign billboard looming over it. The station hall appears as a sample of the South African society, as underlined by the pronoun 'we' and the adverb 'all'. After the murder, the billboard is present in the frame when Boston is throwing up outside the station, possibly in a crude reminder of the physical pains associated with the syndrome. Referred to as 'the new apartheid' by archbishop Desmond Tutu, the disease is the villain chosen by Hood in the film. Tsotsi has lost his mother to AIDS, which replaces apartheid as the origin of tragedy. AIDS has become a predominant narrative in South African film,⁴⁷ both in fiction and documentary, and indeed it is a tragically authentic feature of present-day South Africa, with almost one in five adults being HIV positive.⁴⁸

It is used here as a pervasive ominous presence, much less explicit than was the systemic oppression of apartheid in Fugard's book. Indeed the spectre of AIDS that looms over the city disappears from the film at about one third of the story. Significantly, the last time Tsotsi crosses the station, in his white shirt, to go and return the baby, the camera focuses on him to follow his trajectory as an individual, rather than placing him in the context of the station hall. Therefore the billboard is not included in the shot, and the story seems to lose its villain – and some of its sociological relevance – to focus on Tsotsi's redemption.

The verisimilitude of the visual and aural background to the story actually does grant a specific contemporary South African character to the film. Ian Rijdsdijk and Adam Haupt thus underline that faithful use of the background as cultural signifier:

*The film contains three key elements that signify its position as a contemporary South African film: the use of kwaito in the film's soundtrack (both diegetically and non-diegetically), the portrayal of a black upper-middle-class family as the victims of violent crime; and Hood's reference to the quietly pervasive presence of Aids on the post-apartheid landscape.*⁴⁹

Yet when it comes to the main setting of the film: the township space, and how it is articulated with crime, the faithfulness of the representation has to be

47 In terms of feature films exclusively, films such as *Yesterday* (Darrell Roodt, 2004) or the recent *Life, above All* (Oliver Schmitz, 2010) are crucial in terms of representing AIDS in South Africa and the stigma attached to it.

48 The UNICEF estimated the adult HIV prevalence rate in 2009 to be 17,8%.
<http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/southafrica_statistics.html#76>.

49 Ian RIJSDIJK and Adam HAUPT, 'Redemption to a Kwaito Beat: Gavin Hood's *Tsotsi*', *Journal of the Musical Arts in Africa*, 4(1), August 2007, p. 30.

questioned.

Township, gangster, South Africa: problematic equations

Township space

In terms of cinematic construction, the story of *Tsotsi* stems from the township. The film begins in the township, and the first time we see Johannesburg it is when the characters go to the central station. The camera follows the gang as they leave Soweto on foot, then on the train, before panning up from the train to reveal Johannesburg. The city stands in the distance – as alien territory. Through such a sequence, and the use of language and music described above, Hood seems to aim at anchoring his film in the township, while the city and the suburbs would be ‘other’.

Yet as soon as an outsider – here, the baby – is introduced in the plot, that perspective is reversed. When the three policemen find the empty car and realise the baby is somewhere in Soweto, the township space is presented as a place of unintelligible otherness. The three policemen stand with their back to the camera, facing a wide part of the township, which appears as an undifferentiated mass to them – and through the camera eye, to the viewer. The police swear at the mere thought of looking for something there. The film’s perspective on the township is therefore quite paradoxical – it is both constructed as central and other.

Furthermore, I argue that one cluster of images and sounds problematically associates township, crime and a threat to the South African society. *Tsotsi* has indeed been reproached with showing the townships as a locus of crime and violence. This representation is the major reason for the problematic reception of the film in South Africa thus evoked by Rijdsdijk and Haupt: ‘While national success on the global stage was celebrated, a muted debate developed around how the film represented South Africa abroad’.⁵⁰

The focus on young black male criminals is a recurring trope of South African cinema even in the post-apartheid context.⁵¹ The gangster film formula is not restricted to South Africa and has been widely used in different forms in Hollywood. Yet in the South African context the film has been reproached with endorsing crime as ‘cool’, considering that very popular kwaito songs accompany the gang when they go on their missions of theft and potential murder. Indeed, the opening sequence of the film resembles a music video, following slick-looking young characters with attitude around the streets of their neighbourhood.

What is more, we have seen that kwaito is directly used as background to criminal acts committed in the film. That articulation between kwaito and crime is clearest in two scenes. In the opening sequence, we start from within Tsotsi’s house and we follow the gang to the sound of kwaito beats, through public transport and the station – in search of a victim. Secondly, when the gang goes out to rob the parents’ house, the camera, situated at the level of the street, pictures them coming into the shot, into the suburban space, accompanied by kwaito music.

50 RISJDIJK & HAUPT, *op. cit. supra*, p. 29.

51 On the question of stereotyped young black masculinity and its relation to kwaito music read PETERSON, 2003.

Both shots link together kwaito, township, and criminal intrusions from the township into other public and private spaces.

The film therefore problematically establishes an aural continuity between the township and township youth on the one hand, and crimes committed both inside and outside the township on the other. Hood's quote on kwaito as 'the music that is coming out of the streets, out of the townships of South Africa' then suggests images of a township that is the source of crime, of an overflowing township which constitutes a threat to the racially reconciled South Africa portrayed in the film. Keeping in mind the historical significance of the township as a means to physically contain and control black populations, this visual and aural construction of an overflow becomes extremely disturbing. It equates both kwaito and intrusive crime as 'coming out of the township', and would seem to establish that if you can take the gangster out of the township, you cannot take the township out of the gangster. Regardless of where it is committed, crime inherently would be and remain a product of the township.

In addition to this, Ian Rijdsdijk and Adam Haupt wrote on the role of kwaito in the film's representation of South Africa to the world: 'The image of actor Presley Chweneyegae leading his posse down the street accompanied by Zola's grinding tune, 'Mdlwembe', typified a film that represented township youth to the world'.⁵² We have seen that kwaito is associated with the township space and with South African authenticity. Associating it directly with crime thus also brings township, crime and South Africa too close together in the world's perception of South Africa.⁵³

The problematic trope of the gangster

The political significance of choosing a tsotsi as main character is also problematic in the film. A political stance on social circumstances could help move the film away from an essentialist approach to township youth as criminals. The suppression of the apartheid context blurs the political lines of the story. Furthermore, the film's gradual focus on individual destiny and away from context makes the story more apolitical than it was in the book. Rolling dice are used as a motif, notably in the very first image of the movie. We can wonder whether this makes Tsotsi's path to gangsterdom seem a consequence of chance rather than of a socio-economic context.

Nonetheless, the very fabric of the film, i.e. the format of the film stock it is shot on, indicate a different intention. Hood chose film that constantly enabled him

52 RIJSDIJK & HAUPT, *op. cit. supra.*, p. 29.

53 The film does balance that association of the township and criminal masculinity with the character of Miriam and her house (as opposed to Tsotsi's more precarious shack), in which she raises her child alone, sewing and recycling day-to-day materials into artistic creations. Jordache Ellapen describes this peaceful, nurturing and creative space as marked by 'hybridity, re-cycleability and contradiction' and explains that the filmmakers 'emphasize and claim a 'South African-ness' based on the assimilation and fusion of tastes', in Jordache ELLAPEN, 'The Cinematic Township: Cinematic Representations of the "Township Space" and who can Claim the Rights to Representation in Post-apartheid South African Cinema', *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 19 (1), June 2007, pp. 131-132. Miriam is used as a counterpoint to Tsotsi, in what appears as a quite stereotypically gendered framework, opposing a young criminal to a young mother.

to place characters in a visual and social context. Lindiwe Dovey claims that the wide angle, including ‘an individual’s face *and* a landscape in the same frame’ integrates the characters in their environment, visually integrating social causes in the character’s trajectory. More strikingly, she goes as far as asserting that it integrates the violent South African past in the character’s present:

*In fact, Hood goes so far as to find a visual symbolism for revealing the fact that the violent South African past has been integrated into, and is largely responsible for, South Africa’s violent present. He does this by finding a way of simultaneously focusing on individual characters and the environment in which they exist: through using widescreen Super35 film stock.*⁵⁴

In my opinion, this contextualizing technique does establish a link between the characters and their environment. By doing so, Hood produces a visual discourse on what present-day South Africa is, and attempts to present both the terrible socio-economic conditions that affect a wide part of the South African population, and their tragic consequences in terms of crime.

Yet, by resolutely detaching the plot from apartheid, and eliminating race as an issue, I believe that it is specifically the consequences of apartheid on contemporary South Africa that the film screens out. This post-apartheid setting de-racialises social conflicts, even proposing a somewhat cathartic reversal of racial tropes. Lindiwe Dovey underlines, however, that this move away from conflict into fully accepted reconciliation amounts to redeeming the white section of the South African population.⁵⁵ Indeed she analyses that this focus on idealised post-apartheid race relations is recurrent in South African films made by white directors: ‘White film-makers, on the other hand, have tended to be more easily seduced by the lure of reconciliation and redemption – unsurprisingly, when one considers that such an ideology is necessary to sustain white presence in South Africa.’⁵⁶ One can indeed think that projecting an image of racial harmony within the country fits the post-apartheid objectives of reconciliation.

Regarding the projection of an image of South Africa abroad, I believe the film fails to be faithful to local realities in two ways. On the one hand it eludes the inheritance of apartheid to showcase the racially New South Africa. Yet on the other hand, *Tsotsi*, as *City of God* for Brazil, reiterates the gangster as the preferred signifier for South Africa. Although Hood insists on the universal dimension of his protagonist’s redemption, by his name alone – used as the title of the film – the main character is related to a type – the tsotsi, or South African gangster. The term is the first element to anchor the story in a specifically South African context, and establishes the gangster as the film’s primary signifier of South Africa both inside and outside the country.

When *Tsotsi* is redeemed, his gangster persona is de-constructed. Yet the gangster image presented in the first part of the film needs to be questioned. Indeed the film’s positioning as authentic and faithful to a local setting could, considering the success of *Tsotsi* abroad, fix South African identity onto the gangster figure. As Rijdsdijk and Haupt point out, ‘the somewhat ahistorical

54 Lindiwe DOVEY, *op. cit. supra*, p. 100.

55 Lindiwe DOVEY, ‘Redeeming Features: From “Tsotsi” (1980) to “Tsotsi” (2006)’, *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 19(2), December 2007, p. 158.

56 *Ibid.*, p. 147.

treatment of key social problems that feature in the film could largely confirm racial stereotypes, particularly to foreign audiences who are often exposed to news about crime in South Africa'.⁵⁷ It is indeed often through the lens of criminal violence that South African realities are perceived abroad.

This statement clarifies what Rijsdijk and Haupt recall: how Members of Parliament voiced concern at how *Tsotsi's* representation of South Africa would play out on the global stage.⁵⁸ It is interesting in that respect to compare the South African and American trailers for the film. The South African trailer reads:

From the streets of the city to the suburbs beyond, life can change. We do not choose our beginning, we do not choose our end, but in the moments between, we choose who we are.

The focus is apolitical and optimistic, clearly on individual destiny and responsibility, in agreement with the ideology of the film – and the book – that people's choices can redeem them.

On the other hand, the American trailer presents the South African setting in an extremely negative light:

He lives in a place without hope, where life has no meaning, and survival is the only thing that matters'. But in one moment his life will be changed forever.

Not only is the township space associated with crime in the American trailer, it is also presented as quasi-hell. Regarding the very few alternative cinematic images that have been widely seen of South Africa overseas, especially indigenous post-apartheid images, one can indeed with South African politicians question the influence that *Tsotsi* can have. Considering this negative representation in overseas marketing, one is tempted to question the effect produced by the film-makers' insistence on authenticity in the paratext of the film, which against that backdrop might only serve to reinforce a discourse that equates the township – and South Africa – with a hellish environment.

Conclusion

Tsotsi displays many features that led it to be considered as a suitable candidate to become the South African *breakout film*. Besides reaching its national goals, the film has pinned the local film industry on the global map, obtaining an international recognition that has created much 'local is lekker'⁵⁹ pride. Quite unlike the local productions that had until then managed commercial success nationally, such as Leon Schuster's comedies for instance, *Tsotsi* is not a South African film tailored for South Africans. Because of its rather serious tone and as a film of international appeal, it has been invested with a heavier mission by its makers: that of authentically representing South Africa at home and abroad.

This drive for authenticity that we recognize in the last – but not least

57 RISJDIJK & HAUPT, *op. cit. supra*, p. 43.

58 *Ibid.*, p. 44.

59 'Lekker' is an Afrikaans word which means 'great, enjoyable'. 'Local is lekker' is a South African catchphrase used to underline the qualities of South African products, initiatives, or even people.

ambitious – of the National Film and Video Foundation objectives needs further analysis. Is it a consequence of past distorted truths, is it an instrument for the continuance of reconciliation, is it a disavowal of co-productions that have proposed foreign representations of South Africa? In any case, as a consequence of this focus, the film has been granted a special status as more than a mere individual, fictional vision of the country : an ambassador and a signifier of South Africa.

As such, the hopes invested in it are paradoxical. How indeed to promote a positive, faithful image of the new South Africa abroad and at home, while the film – as many post-apartheid features – has chosen to focus on a gangster? One could argue, crime *is* a reality in South Africa. But what is truly problematic is the cluster of images – here, the association of township and crime – that is used to represent it.

Investing a feature film with a mission of ‘authenticity’ is both a blessing and a curse. Supported by state institutions, co-production funding and international festivals, ‘ambassador’ films can reach a wide audience. Yet, it is a trap for any film to try and fit into the obsession of the ‘messiah film’. To compensate for the univocal film-making of apartheid, it seems that the only representative way of filming South Africa would be to allow films their status of individual fictional stories, to reflect South Africa in a kaleidoscope rather than a mirror.

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