



Tsotsi

Secondary Online Resource suitable for
KS4 Citizenship, GCSE Media Studies

INTRODUCTION

Tsotsi is an extraordinary film by director Gavin Hood that manages to map some of the huge contrasts in modern South Africa - its affluence and grinding poverty, its haves and have-nots, its energy and optimism alongside the disease, addiction and crime that blights so many lives. But as Hood has pointed out in interview, Tsotsi's story is far more than just a South African tale. There are, he says, millions of Tsotsis growing up all over the world haunted by the damage inflicted on them in childhood and acting out their resentments: the victims of chance but also the inflictors of impulsive life-changing violence on others.

Hood's film is an updated adaptation of a 1960s novella by eminent South African playwright Athol Fugard, in which the protagonist's first-person account gives the reader insights into the Tsotsi's origins and motivations. At a time when so many in South Africa live in fear of random-seeming violence inflicted by so called 'feral' young people, this film is a compelling attempt to delve beneath the statistics of modern-day crime – to put an unsentimental but human face on actions that otherwise might seem utterly inexplicable and monstrous.

Tsotsi is not a 'worthy' film – it is a compelling and exciting piece of movie making and as such is entirely deserving of study as a media/film text. It is also a story that goes to the heart of citizenship and PSHE lessons encouraging empathy and developing students' understanding of contemporary global issues – the disparities between wealth and poverty and the implications for society when so many are robbed of their childhoods. It is a film about chance, about opportunity and choice.

THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

What do you know of South Africa? The official news is that it ranks among the ten top tourist destinations in the world – and deservedly so. What draws people to this country? In groups research and share discoveries of the beaches, mountains and game reserves, the extraordinary natural beauty alongside luxurious accommodation and fantastic cuisine that attracts tens of thousands of visitors to the country each year.

With the collapse of the racist apartheid policies in the early 1990s and the successful transfer from white minority to black majority rule, these pleasures can now be enjoyed fairly guiltlessly.

But there is another South Africa.

TASK

- Over half the population lives below the poverty line – many on just a \$1 a day.
- A quarter of the population is unemployed.
- More than a fifth (21%) of the adult population is infected with HIV/Aids and thousands of children grow up orphaned due to the premature deaths of their parents.
- Despite a rapid house-building programme over the last decade it still has many of its people living in shantytowns and squatter camps in shelters constructed from scavenged scrap.
- Violent crime, though falling, still costs the lives of over 20,000 people a year - and armed-robbery, car-jacking, rape and aggravated burglary are the stuff of everyday anecdote.

Some or all of these are the painful legacies of 50 years of racism, discrimination and neglect and also of the miseries in many other parts of Africa - that make South Africa an economic magnet and its townships an incredible melting-pot of nationalities and cultures.

Research these statements about South Africa and discuss which might be true. Suggest what some consequences of each problem might be.

Perhaps start by consulting these websites:

<http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/sf.html>.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/southafrica/story/0,,1691481,00.html>

<http://www.southafrica.net/>

TASK

Imagine that the film Tsotsi was the only evidence of what life in modern-day South Africa is like – what impression of the country do you receive and what clues are there in it about the lives of ordinary people living there?

Consider the following:

- The evidence of poverty and affluence – consider the logo on Pumla Dube’s shopping bag that Tsotsi steals to carry the baby off in – ‘Expect More’.
- The evidence of pollution.
- The evidence that South Africa’s capital Johannesburg and its townships are lively, energetic, bustling places.
- The prominence of crime and violence and the response of the police to crime and criminals – however young.
- The evidence of disease – particularly HIV/Aids (clue: look out for posters and also Tsotsi’s flashback memories of his mother)
- Evidence of mixed communities or highly segregated communities (apart from the one white policeman – why is there so little evidence of white people in this film – crossing Tsotsi’s path?)
- The evidence of strong cultural/artistic forces at work in the townships (clue: consider the language, music and even the colourful fabrics and hanging glass and metal mobiles that Miriam produces in her home to help make ends meet.)

STORY AND NARRATIVE

The Agent of Change

In stories it is often suggested that something significant happens that changes things for the hero forever – initiating subsequent developments. The most obvious such ‘agent’ in Tsotsi’s story is the baby but perhaps there are some other more crucial moments in his story that were just as pivotal: as life-changing.

TASK

Consider the list of events below and decide which you feel might have been a major cause of later change. Can you suggest some other events in the film and why they are significant for the development of the story.

1. Totsi stealing the baby.
2. The killing of the old man.
3. Boston's self-disgust and his needling of Tsotsi leading to the fight.
4. The sight of Boston's swollen, infected face.
5. The conversation with Morris – the crippled beggar, underneath the fly-over.
6. The first rejection of Aap.
7. The second rejection of Aap – when they are in the hijacked car chop-shop.
8. The dream of his mother.
9. Miriam and her home in the township. Her tale of her husband's death teaches Tsotsi something about his own crimes.
10. The memory of his father's brutality triggered when visiting Miriam.
11. The burglary of the baby's home and in particular time spent in the baby's bedroom.
12. Butcher's discovery of the gun and threatening of John Dube – the father.

The Lost Child

Tsotsi's decision to steal the baby has momentous consequences for him. It is a highly irrational action and yet his story pivots on the moment he decides to go back to Pumla Dube's car and take the child. Not only does the kidnapping have 'storyline' implications but it is also a highly symbolic action, with the baby taking on a number of important functions within the plot.

Task

The following list suggests some of the consequences for Tsotsi of bringing the baby into his life. Your task is to judge which of them you feel is the most important and also explain what evidence there is in the film of each statement. Can you think of any other consequences that the incident has?

1. It helps him recover an identity beyond that of being a 'totsi' – the slang for a young criminal. Consider the importance of Tsotsi giving the boy his own name – David.
2. Tsotsi makes himself infinitely more vulnerable by stealing the baby – it transforms him from being a 'nobody' (to quote Captain Smit).

3. It puts him apart from his community – he has over-stepped a limit.
4. It emphasises that Tsotsi is little more than a child himself.
5. It opens him to ridicule.
6. It isolates him from his gang - forcing him to keep secrets from them and even leading them to take unnecessary risks – distracting him when he needs to be most alert.
7. It gives him a chance to provide care in a way that he never received from his father.
8. It forces him to trust others, and ask rather than demand or terrorise them into giving him help.
9. It ups an audience's interest in Tsotsi – suggesting he has hidden depths.
10. It ups an audience's interest by introducing an added level of anxiety to the story.

CHARACTERS AND RELATIONSHIPS

Plotting Tsotsi's Relationships

(Note to editors - ideally include a still from 9.26 mins in when we see Tsotsi in long-shot in the rain – his head hooded – a creature of nightmare – a real blot on the suburban road onto which he has strayed.)

Of course, there is a second 'lost child' in the film – Tsotsi. The character changes hugely in this film and one of the aspects of this is the transformations of his relationships with his crew.

TASK

In this exercise take responsibility for one or more of the following relationships:

Tsotsi and Butcher | Tsotsi and Aap | Tsotsi and Boston

and answer the following questions:

1. What is the relationship like at the start of the film?
2. What does this character add to the gang's composition in terms of emotion, strength or outlook? Could any aspects of these characters be said to represent aspects of Tsotsi?
3. At what moment do you feel Tsotsi's relationship changes with this character and why?
4. What is the next most significant moment with this character? Does the change that's underway shift direction, does the relationship improve or deteriorate?
5. How does this relationship end up and does this end point seem positive, negative or neutral?

Mothers and Fathers

Tsotsi is a film that is very concerned about mothers and fathers. When a car almost runs into Morris as he leaves the train station, he shouts out: 'Did your mother teach you to drive?' This sets up an echo with the detail at the very start of the film that the township gangster Fela has tried (unsuccessfully) to teach Tsotsi to drive. Two tiny moments, but significant not only because of the importance of cars and driving at other points in the movie, but also because of the ideas of education, and of parental care that is hinted at in both fleeting bits of dialogue and which have been so lacking in Tsotsi's life.

In certain communities in South Africa life is 'highly traditional' and in many ways male and female roles are rigidly defined – hence Morris' insult above and also the fact that it is the women who we see largely performing domestic duties in Kliptown, the township – endlessly queuing for water, for example. Do you think this statement is echoed in the film Tsotsi? Having watched the film, catalogue the different activities we see male and female characters performing and the contribution they make to the story – which gender is more active or more passive?

TASK

Tsotsi is a film that features a number of characters that one way or another represent aspects of THE MOTHER figure. As you watch the film consider the ways in which Motherhood is represented. What is your reaction to each of these representations and at the end of the film do you feel you have a strong sense of what the film is suggesting is important about mothers?

1. Tsotsi's mother – slowly revealed in flashback. We see her by candlelight telling the young Tsotsi not to be afraid. She is sick – probably dying from HIV/Aids.
2. Soekie – she is the owner of the shabeen (the bar/dance hall). We witness her refusing to bring drinks when called by the gang – 'I'll come when I'm ready', but she also has a motherly side and finally takes a stand against Tsotsi, though her motives for reporting him are complicated. Is her 'care' for Boston entirely positive?
3. Miriam – the young widow. Her care for the stolen baby is a crucial element of the film, breaking down Tsotsi's resistance to emotion.
4. Pumla Dube – another seemingly selfless mum. What aspects of motherhood does she demonstrate both to Tsotsi and also the police?
5. Tsotsi himself – surprisingly, he has an instinct for nurturing others – though it is severely limited.

TASK

As well as mother figures there are a number of representations of THE FATHER in the film. Consider what you feel the film is saying about fathers and how you would categorise the following characters. To what extent does each of the following deserve to be described as ‘father figures’ and what characteristics of THE FATHER do they illustrate?

1. Tsotsi’s actual father
2. John Dube
3. Morris
4. Boston
5. Fela
6. Captain Smit

MOTIFS AND THEMES

On one level Tsotsi is a simple detective story. It is a compelling story. It is worth seeing through to the end because there are key questions that need answering. What will Tsotsi do with the child? What will happen to him? But alongside these sorts of simple plot stories, the film also raises some important bigger questions. Some of these questions involve important themes and some of these themes are suggested by the repetition of certain motifs – words, objects, incidents that taken together set up patterns in the film.

What do you feel is the significance of the following motifs and themes?

1. Hands are frequently shown in close-up or referred to in the movie. Collect the references and consider what the film might be implying about human being’s capacity for good and evil, for restraint or impulse, for pleasure and pain, by focusing on hands?
2. Dogs are an important motif too. What do you feel they might symbolise? It is a reference to a dog that drives Tsotsi to attack Boston. A dog features prominently in one of Tsotsi’s flashbacks and in his meeting with Morris, Tsotsi refers to him as a dog.
3. The mobiles in Miriam’s home – one that is rusted made when she was sad and one that is colourful made when she was happy. What might these suggest about emotions, maturity and self-containment and how might they contain important lessons for Tsotsi?
4. Fate and fortune – suggested by the dice that open the film.
5. Hope. This theme runs through the film. There is the hope of the baby’s parents. There is the hope suggested by Morris’ gambling on horses. And there is hope even in Tsotsi’s desire to fund Boston’s return to college in

pursuit of a teacher qualification. There are also lots of example of the opposite of hope – of cynicism, of materialism and of fatalism – can you spot where these are represented in the film? What do these different hope ‘moments’ suggest to you and are they enough to offset these more negative forces?

6. Decency. It is a word that is introduced by Boston. Is it, as he suggests, something that is derived from education? He also suggests that ‘decency’, or what remains of it in him, caused him to be sick after the killing of the big man. What do you understand by this? And what other examples of decency can you spot in the film? Consider the following: the man trying on his tie at the station and dressed smartly for work; the way Miriam copes with life without a husband and makes a home for her child; the way Morris decorates his make-shift wheelchair; the Dube’s house and possessions; John Dube’s attitude to his possessions when confronted by Tsotsi and his gang when they stage a raid on his house; and Boston’s drinking. Does Tsotsi’s reconciliation with Boston represent decency – remember it puts Boston at some risk. Also is Tsotsi’s killing of Butcher an aspect of decency? And finally how does the final scene represent decency triumphing?

WRITING A REVIEW

If you have worked through these resources and thought about Tsotsi carefully, you should be in a good position to write a review of the film. Remember, a film review is designed to give other people a good sense of whether or not this is a good movie to choose to go to see.

TASK

Visit the official Tsotsi website <http://www.tsotsi.com/> to research some of the background for your review including the story, stills, clips, character profiles, a synopsis, biographies of the cast and crew, music, plus other reviews and information about awards that the film has won, amongst other things.

Here are some crucial questions that you may want to answer as you write.

1. Is the film entertaining? Why? How?
2. Is it thought provoking? What issues does it raise? Does it offer simple answers or does it leave lots unanswered and therefore up for discussion?
3. In the original novella from which this film is adapted, Tsotsi was in his thirties. Do you think it was a sensible idea to make the lead character much younger in this screen version?
4. In interviews the director Gavin Hood stresses the importance of allowing the actors to speak in the township dialect they know. This means the film may be less commercially successful as the presence of subtitles can be

challenging for audiences, but Hood argues, it means the actor's performances feel more authentic and energetic – what do you feel? Also note how little dialogue the film actually contains really.

5. Discuss the importance of the music – how is it like a character in the film.
6. The film is beautifully shot by director of photographer Lance Dewer – are there any moments from the film which seemed especially beautiful – consider for example, the way the challenge of filming at night is overcome or the way certain shots are lit for example the ones in Tsotsi's room when he is with the child.
7. What about the actor's performances? Do you think any particularly need singling out for praise? In some ways the characters they play are distinct types, but do they manage to invest real humanity or depth into them? Are there any key scenes that stand out for you?
8. In the end would you recommend it to others? What did you get from seeing it?
9. Remember to refer to the people involved in the film by name.

MEDIA TASKS - THE IDEA OF THE FILM

THE POSTER AND ARTWORK

The poster campaign is the primary medium for advertising the film and will generally start in the early stages of a film's production and continue during the weeks building up to the release.

The poster image is the basis of the whole publicity campaign and out of this 'Key Art' or central image comes the cinema trailers, standees, ranges of posters and television adverts.

The designer of a film poster has one of the hardest jobs in the whole marketing team - they have to sum up two hours of exciting film in just one image. They have to decide what is the unique selling point of the film and then convey that image so that it will attract people's attention as they pass by.

Artwork for a film poster can either be an original painting based on a key idea in the film, or it can be produced from the colour transparencies which are taken during the shoot. The aim in both cases is to find a 'narrative image' that sums up the film and gives audiences an idea as to the genre of the film and perhaps the storyline.

TASK

Look at poster one below.



This is the basic artwork for the poster for Tsotsi.

Firstly state what is in the poster and then try to decide why these images were selected for the poster image. What ideas of the story of the film are given in this poster?

Why should the design feature both the township and the city?

Why show the trains?

Considering the importance of Tsotsi's friends, why do you think that they do not appear in the poster?

THE COPY

As well as a visual image, posters carry a certain amount of copy (writing), depending on the stage in the campaign at which they appear. Tag lines, or catchphrases are used to underline the key elements of the film on the poster copy. The copy might also feature details of awards that the film has won or been nominated for. Including quotations from critics on the poster can also help to reinforce the image and make the poster more effective.

The poster will need to show various elements from the film which might include the title, tag line, star's name, director's name and any additional information which might attract an audience.

TASK

Now look at the second poster for TSOTSI. This now contains the copy to go with the image.



Break the copy down into different elements :

- Awards, quotations, taglines, information.
- How do each of these persuade us to see the film?
- How does the tag line for the film sum up what happens in the film?
- How does the tag line relate to the image given on the poster?
- Why do you think that so much emphasis is placed on the number of awards and nominations the film has won?
- Why do you think the poster does not stress the stars of the film?
- Why do you think the designer chose the font for the title? What does it suggest to you?

THE IDEA OF THE FILM – TRAILERS

MARKETING A FILM

When a new film is made it has to be advertised like any other new product to let people know it exists and to encourage them to go to the cinema to see it. The advertising of a film is known as film promotion or film marketing and the people who are responsible for this are the distribution company, so-called because they distribute (give out) the films to the cinemas and distribute the promotional material around the UK.

PLANNING A PROMOTIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR A FILM

When the distributors agree to market a new film, they will watch it several months before it is released into the cinema and plan a marketing campaign. This includes deciding what should go into the posters, trailers, websites and other material that will market the film. There are several important points to consider:

- Who will be the most likely audience to want to see this film?
- What type of film is this?
- What is different about this film?

THE TRAILER

The trailer must encourage us to want to see the film.

Moving images, whatever they are, have a far better chance of catching our attention than something that is still. The trailer holds our attention because the images change really quickly and we must concentrate all the time or we may miss something. Added to this, a trailer uses sound to get its message across. Music, sound effects, speech from the film and the voice-over all join together to create an exciting adventure for our ears. The combination of sound and moving images is a very effective way of attracting us to see a film.

NARRATIVES

When we watch a trailer we know from experience that we are seeing the most exciting, funny, significant or dramatic parts of a film and that we must interact with these to create a whole story from the parts we are given. A trailer is designed to create a 'want-to-see' reaction in an audience. To this end the trailer will give the audience some amount of information about a film in terms of narrative and character but equally will aim to raise questions that can only be answered by seeing the whole film.

TSOTSI TRAILER

- a) Before seeing the trailer, what does the title of the film, TSOTSI , suggest to you? What sort of film might you be expecting?

You should now view the TSOTSI trailer to see what sort of idea of the film is created.

<http://www.tsotsi.com/index.php?m1=trailer>

- b) What information are we actually given about the film?

Could you predict the film's story from what you have seen in the trailer?

- c) In what genre would you place this film?

- d) What images are we shown from the film? How do these images help us to define what type of film this will be?

- e) How is text used within the trailer? What information does it give and how does it relate to the message of the trailer?
- f) Is it possible to construct the narrative of the film from what we are told in the trailer?
- g) In narrative terms, what conflicts are set up by the trailer?
- h) The voice-over in the trailer gives us information and creates a mood about the story. What information is given about the film and what mood is created?
- i) From the point of view of characters, who is introduced in the trailer?
- j) What do the sounds and music in the background of the trailer suggest?
- k) Who do you think the audience is for this film?