

Hoodlum and child

By [John Petrakis](#) in the [May 16, 2006](#) issue



The South African film *Tsotsi*, which won the Academy Award for Best Foreign-Language Film, is based on a novel by the celebrated South African playwright Athol Fugard. He wrote the novel in the 1960s but put it aside for many years; it was finally published in 1980. The movie differs from the novel in important ways. Writer-director Gavin Hood shifts the setting from the era of 1960s apartheid to contemporary South Africa. In doing so, he replaces the theme of racial tension with that of class struggle.

The term *tsotsi* has been used for decades in South Africa to describe young thugs and street toughs, especially those who thrive on random crime and violence. Nelson Mandela noted the term in his autobiography *A Long Walk to Freedom*: “As so often happens in desperately poor places, the worst elements come to the fore. Life was cheap. The gun and the knife ruled at night. Gangsters—known as *tsotsis*—carrying flick knives or switchblades were plentiful and prominent. In those days, they emulated American movie stars and wore fedoras and double-breasted suits and wide colorful ties.”

Tsotsi is also the moniker of the film’s main character, a 19-year-old hoodlum. The film begins with a long and brutal expository section that introduces us to *Tsotsi* and his running mates—the sadistic Butcher, the hesitant Boston and the dense but loyal Aap. (The gang is reminiscent of the droogies from *A Clockwork Orange*, sans

derbies.) The film also gives us a tour of a slum on the outskirts of Johannesburg.

The opening section includes a masterfully shot and edited sequence of the robbery and murder of a man on a crowded commuter train, along with a sudden burst of unprovoked violence: Tsotsi beats Boston's face to a bloody pulp for questioning him about his mysterious past.

Tsotsi's escape from his confrontation with Boston takes him to the privileged part of town, where wealthy black families live in large houses behind tall gates. The robbery of a well-dressed woman standing outside her car in the rain leads to a sudden shooting. Tsotsi is miles away in the stolen vehicle before he realizes that he has added kidnapping to his rap sheet: in the back seat of the car sits a three-month-old baby.

Everything we have seen of the crazed Tsotsi up to this point suggests that he will abandon or kill the infant. Instead, he takes him back to his run-down shack in the ghetto.

Most of the film deals with Tsotsi's attempts to keep the baby alive and hide him from his cohorts. Flashbacks reveals Tsotsi's own not-too-distant childhood, which featured a loving mother dying of AIDS and a brutal father who abandoned him.

Realizing he needs help with the infant, he turns to a young widow named Miriam who is raising a baby of her own. In a scene that perfectly illustrates the moral contradictions within the township, Tsotsi orders her at gunpoint to breastfeed his baby.

A less-assured film would have created a love story between Tsotsi and Miriam. The filmmakers are interested instead in Tsotsi's character, and they allow us to watch as elements of humanity and compassion crack his hardened exterior.

In the novel, Tsotsi becomes a victim of his decaying environment. The film, however, wraps things up in a way that emphasizes possibility over despair.

The performances are all first-rate, especially those of Presley Chweneyagae (a relative newcomer to acting) as Tsotsi and Terry Pheto as the earth mother Miriam, whose tiny house sparkles with the presence of art and the colors of hope.

Unlike many films on life in the slums, which tend to use hand-held cameras and grainy film stock to suggest gritty reality, *Tsotsi* is shot in lush 35mm widescreen

with many static shots of the people and the countryside. The camera pays special attention to characters' eyes in startling close-ups, perhaps suggesting that while South Africans are still looking at the past with anguish, they are capable of occasional glances toward a future marked by compassion.