

Tsotsi (2005)

Rated R. Our ratings: V-6 ; L-5 ; S-1/N-1 . Running time: 1 hour 34 min.

*Do not enter the path of the wicked,
and do not walk in the way of evildoers.*

Avoid it; do not go on it;

turn away from it and pass on.

For they cannot sleep unless they have done wrong;

*they are robbed of sleep unless they have made someone
stumble.*

For they eat the bread of wickedness

and drink the wine of violence.

Proverbs 4:14-17

*For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the
light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who
do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly
seen that their deeds have been done in God.*

John 3:20-21

In Alan Paton's great novel set in the apartheid era South Africa, Absalom Kumala, the son of a black pastor, leaves his village to find work in Johannesburg. Unable to do so, Absalom falls in with a tough gang that leads him astray to commit robbery, and eventually murder. In director Gavin Hood's film his chief character Tsotsi could have been one of those heartless gang members, except for the fact that the story takes place in contemporary South Africa.

Mr. Hood, basing his screenplay on the novel by Athol Fugard (which was set during the days of apartheid), takes us on what amounts to a spiritual journey of a street gangster so depraved that for the first half of the film we know him only by his street name, which translates into "thug."

Actor Presley Chwenayagae perfectly portrays the street thug whose eyes and constant frown are so cold that they suggest that there is no warmth of decency within him. This is the charge that Boston (Mothusi Magano), one of his four-member gang, makes after they stalk, rob, and murder in the subway a man who had the misfortune of opening his wallet in the station to give some money to a woman, perhaps his wife. The scene in which the four thugs enter the station and look over the people coming and going, leads up to the even more chilling one on the subway train. Tsotsi's cold eyes flit back and forth, like those of a raptor looking for its prey. When he picks out his victim, the four enter the same subway car and quickly surround him. Before he can cry out they tell him not to speak, or Butcher (Zenzo Ngqobe) holding the long ice pick will stab him. The hapless man gives over his wallet, but when he says a word, Butcher stabs him anyway. The four hold up the man's body, leaving only after all the commuters have disembarked. The gang leaves, and the man's body slumps to the floor, left behind like a worthless parcel.

It is this senseless murder that leads Boston, upset by the violence, to confront Tsotsi, telling him that he has no decency. Tsotsi retaliates by attacking his former friend, beating his face bloody and leaving the bar with Boston sprawled on the ground. Tsotsi walks into the darkness of the night, pausing across the street from a gated housing complex.

It is raining, and a woman has stopped her car to buzz the gate intercom, explaining to her husband inside that her remote control is not working. Tsotsi quickly springs into her car and tries to drive off—he has not learned to drive, but he apparently thinks he can operate the automatic gearshift. The woman beside the gate cries out and opens the other door. Tsotsi shoots her and drives off erratically. A cry from the backseat explains why the woman had been so anxious—her baby was in a car seat in the back. So startled that he drives off the road, Tsotsi places the baby in a shopping bag along with some clothing and leaves the scene.

In his shack, he is unsure of what to do with the infant, resorting to using newspapers for a diaper. The next day when his somewhat dim-witted friend Aap (Kenneth Nkosi) comes by his shack asking his usual question, “What are we doing tonight?” Tsotsi does not reveal the baby’s presence. Telling Aap to leave, Tsotsi takes the baby in the shopping bag and follows a young woman carrying her own baby on her back. Forcing his way into her home, he orders her at gunpoint to feed the baby. Fearfully she obeys, and soon her motherly instincts lead her into talking with the infant. As he watches her, for the first time a slight softness comes over Tsotsi’s grim face. He thinks back to the time when a woman in bed asks him to come and hold her hand.

Thus begins the slow rebirth of the hardened street criminal. Upon a subsequent visit to the young mother, she reveals that her name is Miriam (Terry Pheto), whose husband was murdered on his way home from the factory where he worked, perhaps, we think, by someone very much like Tsotsi. We see more scenes from his life, showing that his own mother had been dying from AIDS, and that his father had ordered him not to touch her because of the then prevalent belief that the disease could be caught from touching a victim. The father had taken to drinking and become abusive, so Tsotsi had fled home and taken up residence in one of the sections of rain pipes stacked by

an unfinished construction site, along with so many other homeless children. It is during a subsequent visit when Miriam asks him the name of the baby that we learn of his own, when replies, "David."

The police obtain from the wounded mother of the baby (she will be paralyzed for the rest of her life) a description of the kidnapper, and soon a drawing with a strong resemblance to Tsotsi is circulated in the media. His gang members are sure it cannot be their leader because it is well known that Tsotsi cannot drive, nor have any of them seen him with a baby. A rival gang leader tries to lure them to join his gang, but they refuse, going instead to Tsotsi, who leads them into a robbery that will have a momentous outcome. The house they intend to rob is the very home of the parents of the baby he has kept. After watching this heart-wrenching story of loss and redemption there will be no doubt as to why the film was awarded the Best Foreign Film Oscar,

For Reflection/Discussion

There are necessary spoilers in this section, so wait until you see the film before reading further.

1) How did you feel about Tsotsi and his gang when you first meet them? How is Boston's assessment of his friend on target, and yet a bit too pessimistic? How is this often the case when we read or hear about a person guilty of a vicious crime? For instance, remember the man on death row, recently executed for the crime of rape and murder, and yet who had written a series of books directed to ghetto youth in an attempt to warn them of his fate, one that could await them if they followed in his way of crime and violence? Do you think that the state governor should have commuted his sentence, or was he right in allowing the man to die? How can capital punishment be seen as the ultimate in pessimism of a human being, a giving up of all hope for redemption?

2) How does the film differ from the usual one set in South Africa? How does leaving out racism help us to dwell more on poverty and class differences? How do you think poverty contributed to Tsotsi's turning to crime? And yet many people in similar situations do not: what do you think makes the difference? Did the boy have anyone to pass on the wisdom that the author of the Proverbs passage passes on to his son?

3) Why do you think Tsotsi kept the baby rather than abandoning it? Is it because of an at first dim recollection of the tenderness of his dying mother? How does Miriam affect him? Is there any tinge of a judgmental attitude in her relationship with him?

4) What do think the scene of his stalking the crippled beggar who had disrespected him contributes? What did Tsotsi probably intend to do to the man? When he learns the crippled man's story, why do you think he spares him? What do you think of the man's answer to Tsotsi's question, "Why do you go on?" "I like to feel the sun on the streets." What does Tsotsi's recollection of his father's kicking and breaking the back of their dog contribute to this scene of grace?

5) How is the scene a moment of grace in which Tsotsi disparagingly asks Miriam why she bothers to make such a worthless thing as a colored glass mobile? Remember her answer? "You see only broken glass," but she sees the beauty of the color cast upon him as he stands beneath it. How is this a parable of the way in which we see Tsotsi at first, and others like him? How can this be a reminder of the way in which Jesus regarded the dregs of his society, in comparison with the way in which his enemies regarded them?

6) How is Tsotsi's new relationship with Boston a moment of grace? He does not apologize for the beating in words (at first), but how is his act itself an apology?

7) What do you make of the suspenseful scene when Tsotsi and

his gang enter the house that is the home of the baby and its parents? Were you shocked by what Tsotsi did? Why do you think he did it?

8) How is Tsotsi's final return to the house an example of what John meant by coming to the light? What do you think will be the future of Tsotsi? A hopeful one? Although he might not yet know the source of his redemption, as shown in the third chapter of the Gospel of John, how can we describe his journey as a spiritual one?

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