

## Cosmological distortion and coherence in *Tsotsi* (2005): A perspective on the role of Miriam<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

In interpreting a film, the viewer actively participates in the construction of information. But whose perspective counts when doing so? Most people have such deep-seated frameworks of the universe that they do not even realise that far-reaching differences between interpreting totality do exist between people. As a result, they often project their own cosmological views onto the characters in a film. Without considering a relevant cosmological perspective in *Tsotsi*, an understanding of gender roles may be deprived of the necessary nuance and unjust conclusions could be reached. What should be noted here, is that concepts such as wisdom, the maintenance of harmonious social relationships and the measuring of the quality of experience through texture that are often linked to the female principle are also typical symbolic expressions of a coherent traditional African cosmology. This article explores the role of Miriam within such framework to conclude that her character overcomes gender stereotypes.

### WHOSE PERSPECTIVE COUNTS?

Today Western scholars of both religion and media increasingly recognise the role of film in actively shaping and changing interrelated aspects of meaning, belonging, worldviews and identity (cf. Deacy 2001; Johnston 2007; Warren 1997; White 2004). In fact, films “have become the practical marketplace where individuals ... gain information, communalize their concerns, and build meaning, identity and worldviews” (Horsfield, Hess and Medrano 2004: xix; cf. also Hoover 2006; Hoover and Park 2004; Marsh 2007).

Film can no longer be considered as merely entertainment, but rather as formative in the construction of culture and existential belonging. Such belonging and meaning are not simply created by the producers of messages, but rather through an interaction between the text or message, the context and the receiver of the message. The viewer, therefore, actively participates in the construction of information. As a result, spaces created by film necessitate pastoral reflection.

But whose perspective counts in such reflection? Is it appropriate to always use as one’s point of departure one’s own frame of reference when trying to understand existential meaning and belonging? What, for example, should inform scholarly comments on how a character’s religious positioning is being portrayed in a particular film? More specifically, on what grounds can one regard film characters as inspirational and embodied with existential value, or alternatively, as romanticised and, therefore, as not very convincing?

I shall argue here that most people have such deep-seated emotional conceptual frameworks of the universe that they do not even realise that far-reaching differences between people on the level of existential belonging do exist. It often happens, for example, that someone from

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a Western orientation incorrectly assumes that concepts such as redemption and a purpose-driven life are universal to all of humanity and thus also to all religious traditions. However, cosmological concepts (the nature of reality, the experience of one's immediate surroundings, how time is perceived, the role of chance versus determinism, the source of religious knowledge, the foundations of ethics, the modelling of survival, and so forth) may in fact all be symbolised differently and hence may portray different ways in which individuals perceive the totality of all that are both "here and out there".

### **Different paradigms**

In this essay a person's cosmology or view of reality is understood as referring to a paradigm that reflects a particular way of relating to totality. Each paradigm is embodied by a selection of symbols reflecting how a person chooses to find existential meaning and belongs to all of reality, including the ultimately-real. In other words, a person's cosmology or reality view informs his or her belonging to totality. This association and process of making sense is in essence an expression of "*the quest for, realization or maintenance of, a sense of belonging to the ultimately-real*" (Cumpsty 1991:161) and, therefore, as Cumpsty argues, a deeply religious task.<sup>2</sup>

Yet religion as a way of belonging to totality as well as the multiple forms in which it may be expressed in different religious traditions should not be reduced to mere justifications of certain worldviews or identities, as this would imply a simple cause-effect relationship between religion and/or religious traditions and the formation of identity. This would furthermore mean that one may label religion as a "cause" behind a specific position and thereby absolve those involved of responsibility. Religion and religious traditions cannot be reduced to self-contained entities with independent lives of their own. In my view, religion associated cosmological paradigms and religious traditions can mutually inform identity but cannot position it, for example, as destructive, constructive, resistant, legitimising or innovative. Views of reality are embedded – consciously or unconsciously – in religious convictions and vice versa. In short, none of these dimensions exists independent of human perspectives and intervention. Views of reality together with religious traditions, culture and worldviews serve as sources of reference for a chosen identity, but they do not determine the interpretation, attitudes and positioning thereof. Only people exercise choices that result in positions of exclusion, inclusion, respect, disrespect, stereotypes, and so forth.

Without a relevant cosmological perspective in *Tsotsi* (2005), an understanding of gender roles may be deprived of necessary nuance. What should be noted is that concepts such as wisdom, the maintenance of harmonious social relationships and the measuring of the quality of experience through texture (as opposed to through goals) that are often linked to the female principle are also typical symbolic expressions of a coherent traditional African cosmology. Therefore: how can an understanding of the dynamics of gender roles in combination with cosmological views add meaning to an understanding of this film? Moreover, to what extent is there some interplay between gender stereotypes and the possible presence or absence of spiritual wholeness of specific characters?

In trying to answer these questions, I shall 1) explore how the cosmological paradigms of the young woman Miriam and *Tsotsi* (in the film with the same title), impact on the development of the character of the latter, and 2) reflect on some attributes typically associated with females. My focus will be on how each of the two characters symbolically expresses social coercion, the relation between individual and communal structures and their sources of ethics. I shall also acknowledge the broader socio-religious context of the two characters since all the symbols

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<sup>2</sup> I earlier used John Cumpsty's theory of religion to argue in favour of the relevance of different cosmological perspectives when analysing films. Cf. Momberg 2010.

in a person's cosmology impact on one another and thus influence the levels of distortion and coherency in a person's view of reality.

### **Diverse symbolic interpretations**

*Tsotsi* was produced in South Africa and received the 2006 Academy Award for Best Foreign Film. This production is a modern-day adaptation of an unpublished novel written by Athol Fugard in and around 1959.

The film is set in a township outside South Africa's financial metropolis (Johannesburg). The themes of poverty, crime and violence, juxtaposed with affluence and well-being as a reflection of the country's economic and social disparities, ring true. The narrative is concerned with mothers, fathers and children on the canvas of a country characterised by diversity (South Africa), including diverse views of reality or cosmologies.

One may distinguish two cosmological paradigms in the film that are quite distinct from one another. Neither should be regarded as better or worse, they merely represent different ways of approaching life. If undisturbed and hence fully coherent, these paradigms are:

1. The modern Western paradigm (cf. Cumpsty 1991; Tarnas 1993) where the immediate world out there is experienced as real, but not ultimate. Thus, this paradigm is informed by a linear concept of time where striving towards goals leads up to the end (or the above) and towards ultimate fulfilment. It employs belief patterns and an active and purpose-driven engagement with the world-out-there in order to mould and shape it in the attempt to find existential meaning. As religious knowledge is here gained through revelation, chance plays a role and new beginnings are possible.
2. In the contrasting concept – as, for example, in a traditional African view of reality (cf. Cumpsty 1991; Louw 1998; Ukpong 1999) – the immediate world is also experienced as real. However, all of life is characterised by a network of relations between God and everything else, with the human being at the centre and experiences in the here and now all impact on, and are part of, a pulsating, coherent whole. The test of the quality of the immediate experience lies in the texture of daily life. As there is no distinct beginning or end within this monistic universe, time is perceived to be cyclical. The existential value of time is not found in terms of historical events but in terms of nature, such as seasons, the human life cycle and significant local experiences. What happened in the past has bearing on the present and on the future.

In each of these paradigms, the same cosmological factor may, on a symbolic level, be interpreted differently by the respective adherents of these views of reality (Cumpsty 1991:204-206, 218). For example:

1. The relation between individual and communal structures is common to both the traditional African and the modern Western views. They do, however, differ with respect to their loci of control. In the former, this relation is symbolically expressed as centred in the communal, in other words, it flows from the individual (the known) and from there moves to everything else (the lesser known). As such, an individual belongs to the ultimately-real by way of belonging to his or her community and, therefore, being human through others has existential value in a traditional African view of reality. In a modern Western view of reality, being in solidarity with the communal carries existential value and this, in turn, requires organised group action by like-minded people.
2. Although all religious traditions subscribe to the notion of a future time when the actions

of humanity will be motivated by love, they differ in terms of what is regarded as the least desirable form of social coercion. In the traditional African context, social alienation is a threat and in this context fear represents the absence of being a human through others. In a modern Western paradigm, where freedom of choice and individual rewards are valued, the absence of love would tend to be portrayed by greed rather than by fear.

3. The source that inspires and governs the ethical relationship between people and their environment is yet another aspect whereby cosmologies differ and here too this factor acts in relation to the other in a particular cosmology. When a reality view is inspired by the end or by that which is above (as in a modern Western cosmology), a goal-oriented and a purpose-driven life is regarded as the ideal. But if the real is perceived as now as, for example, in a traditional African view of reality, the source of ethics is rooted in harmony and in individual purpose in the here and now.

These are but three examples of cosmological factors (the relation between individual and communal social features, social coercion and the source of ethics) that may all be interpreted differently. These subtle but important differences in the symbolic understandings of the same factors impact significantly on existential belonging. Taking them into account in one's understanding of a particular character may be useful if one wants to consciously refrain from projecting one's own paradigm onto those of others.<sup>3</sup>

#### MIRIAM'S INTERACTION WITH *TSOTSI*

My approach in this analysis will be fundamentally interpretive and thus hermeneutical. I shall try to maintain a self-critical perspective on my own existential understandings and also remain conscious of the fact that truth and reality can, as in postmodern scientific theories, be "radically ambiguous" (Tarnas 1993:397). Although none of my insights can be considered final, it nevertheless represents a point of view. My agenda here is to not only reflect on how existential meaning and belonging may be portrayed by a character in a film. It is also to consider how it might be projected onto the contents of, and characters in, a film and, in so doing, how one might miss an opportunity to increase one's own awareness of diversity and possibly also an opportunity to critically evaluate one's own place and position in the whole.

To understand gender in the context of Miriam's role and the interaction between Miriam and Tsotsi, it is necessary to give a summary of the events that lead to Tsotsi and Miriam's meeting. What, for example, happens to the cosmic belonging of a person in circumstances of neglect and disillusion? What position(s) is/are taken by Miriam and the main character (Tsotsi)? What informs the characters' concept(s) of existential belonging? These are some of the questions relevant for this discussion.

The film is set in post-apartheid South Africa. Despite the official abolition of apartheid, South

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3 The concepts *Western* and *African* here do not refer to race or ethnic groups and should not be regarded as exclusive or divisive. Louw argues that "Africa...does not denote so much a continent, race, ethnicity or merely culture." Africa, according to him, is both a philosophical concept and a spiritual category. *Louw 2008:147*. The sharing of a geographical area over a long period of time can generally be considered a significant factor in linking people together in philosophical, spiritual or other ways. Any person from any background and for any reason may associate with the symbols of any cosmology. Hence these terms are used in their descriptive sense and not as evaluative. The term *Western* here refers to the mainstream sense of belonging in the Western world, influenced predominantly by Christianity. By contextualising Christianity (albeit very generically) I recognise that not all forms of Christianity are embedded in the same reality view and that there is no uniform kind of Christianity that may serve as a basis.

African society is rife with examples of extreme polarities between the haves and the have-nots. Tsotsi (a local word for a thug or a villain) is a teenage gangster from a slum area in Kliptown near Johannesburg. As a child, Tsotsi fled his home and he grew up on the streets. As a young adult, he remains above the poverty line by leading a corrupt and violent life of intimidation and robbery, seemingly without any emotion.

The opening scenes introduce the audience to a township where most dwellings are informal make-do shanties constructed from corrugated iron sheets, wood and bricks. From here the camera moves to a pair of dice thrown onto worn cardboard in one of the shacks. The introductory scenes suggest that a range of socio-economic and political issues may be at stake in the film. Life seems to be a gamble. In other words, it suggests that one has to take what one can get, which could be interpreted as engaging with reality by fitting into it as is typical of a traditional African view of reality. The viewer's gaze is guided so that it is impossible to miss the poverty in the township juxtaposed to the profile of the city of Johannesburg, the hub of corporate business in South Africa.

Tsotsi, with his three hoodlum compatriots, Boston (the teacher), Aap (the even-tempered overweight) and Butcher (the murderer), "do jobs". The very first "job" the viewer encounters, is the robbery of a dignified older black man on a train that shockingly turns into silent murder when Butcher pushes a sharpened bicycle spoke into the man's heart whilst the train continues its journey. Minutes before the murdered man boarded the train he had bought himself a tie and a fine blue scarf, presumably for his wife, from a stall at the station. Standing in the train, he did not even suspect trouble when the bodies of Tsotsi and the other three pushed up against him. In fact, the man chuckled kindly as he looked down on them. This scene is significantly positioned right at the beginning of the story. The murdered man's attitude is one of trust, care, and mutual respect and expresses an existential connection with fellow human beings, starting from the self as portrayed in a traditional African-oriented centred communal belonging. The man's source of ethics is portrayed as harmonious, also something which is typical of a traditional African cosmology. From the man's perspective there is an absence of malevolence and fear. His character is contrasted with the group of thugs who is about to rob and murder him and who seems to be without unaware of ties that bind them with the rest of society.

The latter observation warrants a short pause in the analysis. What does the behaviour of Tsotsi and his friends signify? At this stage, one can suspect that their behaviour indicates a negative positioning of social coercion (love versus fear) in terms of traditional African cosmology. It also seems that their social behaviour is characterised neither by centred communal belonging, nor by harmonious social relations. Is this then a movie about the traditional African view that is positioned in its positive context by some characters and negatively by others? It is, however, not as simple as that. It is neither merely a tale of redemption, as has been suggested by so many commentators in Western-oriented publications (cf. Barnard 2008; Dargis 2006; Dovey 2007; White, 2006) nor is it simply the story of a criminal who encounters a kind-hearted woman who is able to see beyond his hard demeanour and soften him in some romanticised way. The evidence points in a different direction.

For Tsotsi and his friends the dice (as suggested by the film) decided where they fit into society. Feeling alienated due to their socio-economic circumstances, they are not part of the establishment, not even in the shanty town. But it is about more than not having enough money. After they committed the chilling murder on the train, Tsotsi and his friends are drinking beer in a shebeen. Boston asks Tsotsi for his real name. Instead of giving an answer, Tsotsi slowly swivels backwards and forwards on his chair whilst staring intently at Boston. The latter (who vomited on the steps on arrival at their home station after the robbery and murder) insists to know Tsotsi's name. They have been together for six months, Boston argues, so Tsotsi should tell

his name – everyone, after all, has been given a name by one’s mother. He proceeds: “Decency, Tsotsi. You know the word? Decency. I had a bit of it, so I was sick. *En daai groot man* [and that big man] with the tie ... he had a lot. And now? He’s dead.”<sup>4</sup>

The term “decency” used here by Boston, should, within the traditional African view, be understood as respect and harmony, thus as finding existential meaning through being with others as encapsulated by the concept of *Ubuntu* (cf. Louw 1998). Boston yearns after this source of meaning and he provokes his peers to affirm that their very basic belonging to all-that-is-out-there has been distorted to the extent that it cuts through their very own beings. When Tsotsi maintains his silence, he breaks his empty beer bottle on the table between the gang members to deliberately cut himself with the blunt glass so that a thick line of blood streams from his forearm. Whilst pointing with his finger to the streaming blood, he says that *this* is what he felt like on the inside when the old man on the train was killed earlier that afternoon. “Has anything ever made you feel like this?” he asks Tsotsi. Perhaps Tsotsi’s father or mother? “Jesus, Tsotsi, what about a dog?” At this stage the viewer does not know that it was precisely an encounter with his very ill mother (presumably suffering from AIDS), and his dog whose back was broken after two kicks by his angry and dominating father that led to the young David running away from home one night and ending up as Tsotsi, a child of the streets. What we do see, is how Tsotsi finally responds to Boston’s provocation by jumping up and attacking him.

These two issues, that Tsotsi is not acknowledging or affirming his own name, and the lack of decency (read as a lack of spiritual interconnectedness with all that exists), position the main character as a person who has lost his own humanity. In traditional African terms, this implies losing the essence of one’s spirituality. As both Barnard in her literary critique (Barnard 2008:541-572) and Dovey (2007:143-164) in his cultural study argue, this story (and hence also Tsotsi’s identity) portrays the result of systemic damage to the social fabric of black South Africans over many years that are aggravated by contemporary issues such as the HIV/AIDS pandemic, violence against women and children as well as the increasing gap between rich and poor in the world.

After beating Boston to the floor, the nineteen-year-old Tsotsi runs away into the rainy night. This behaviour is similar to his response to the emotional confrontation, years ago, when the young David ran away from his parents’ house. As Tsotsi runs in the pouring rain across a field between the township and a neighbouring suburb and crosses a stream, the visuals show flashbacks in his mind without using any fading or sepia effects to show any time difference. This technique integrates time; what happened then has bearing on what happens now and the latter is connected to what happened back then. Time becomes cyclical and even biological as in a traditional African cosmology. In these flashbacks, the audience meets the young David’s dying mother who wants to touch him and who tells him to not be afraid. Her love and concern for him is contrasted with the uncontrolled anger, domination and emotional distance of his father who instructs his ill wife to not touch her son.

The directness of this technique effectively links the David of then with the Tsotsi of now. The pouring rain, the young David’s tears and Tsotsi’s crossing of a stream may symbolise the unconscious. Fluids have multiple symbolic meanings, such as, as being a symbol for the beginning and end of all things on earth, of intuitive wisdom, the mother-*imago*, the universal congress of potentialities and it can also be linked with the female principle (cf. Cirlot 2001).

Immersion in water signifies a return to the pre-formal state, with a sense of death and annihilation on the one hand, but of rebirth and regeneration on the other, since immersion intensifies the life-force (365).

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4 The language used in this film includes *tsotsi-taal* (tsotsi language), a hybrid mix of Zulu, Xhosa, the Sotho languages, Afrikaans and English, which is spoken in the townships and mines near Johannesburg.

Here the fluid becomes a medium through which Tsotsi reconnects with his emotions. He also reconnects with what has been suppressed as a result of his childhood trauma and hurt when the texture of the quality of his immediate experience became unbearable to the point where he could no longer affirm it as being part of reality. As a consequence, he had to run away.

All events in the film lead up to this moment of crisis. The distorted and unhappy positioning of Tsotsi's existential belonging is brought to the surface under severe pressure and makes Tsotsi run. He runs just as when he ran from home as a child after being confronted with disharmony and the unbearable behaviour of his father that made the young David's understanding of reality unbearable. Boston's insistence that there is not enough decency in their lives now reminds Tsotsi of his loss of cosmic belonging. Therefore, not only in a literal sense but also figuratively, he "runs from home" – from the place where he felt safe and thought he belonged.

When he reaches the affluent suburb, the drenched Tsotsi takes shelter under a tree and from here that spots an opportunity to hijack a car. In a shocking scene he shoots the driver of the car, a young, upper class, black mother. Thus class differences and violence against women are introduced. Tsotsi drives off but brings the stolen luxury vehicle to an abrupt stop when he realises that he has not only stolen a car but that there is also a baby on its back seat. At first he walks away from the damaged car and its passenger. However, because he remembers his previous existence as David, he returns to the baby. He carries the baby off in a shopping bag, one with a logo that reads "Expect More". These words may be understood as irony, yet Tsotsi's turn to the baby also initiates a turn towards taking others into account and, therefore, it is also a turn towards himself. The words on the shopping bag provide hope and suggest a shift towards something better – perhaps care? It is this potential, this association with the mother-*imago*, wisdom and the female principle that introduces the start of Tsotsi's healing on a religious-cosmological, and hence on an existential, level. It is also this theme that will develop through Tsotsi's encounter with Miriam.

However, Tsotsi's remembering and, as a consequence of that, his turn towards cosmological belonging is not an easy or even process. There are many examples in the film of his struggle to find a place where he, with his awakened emotions, can again feel spiritually safe and at home once more. One such example is his encounter with an old, crippled and half-blind man who was injured in an accident on a gold mine but who still likes the feel of the street heated by the rays of the sun. Tsotsi harasses the man and asks him: "Why do you go on if you live like a dog?" Upon this the man answers: "I like to feel the sun on the street. Even with these hands ... I can still feel the heat." This is the old miner's way of saying that, despite his circumstances, he still experiences existential belonging in the texture of his daily experiences (in line with how the quality of experience is measured in the traditional African cosmology) and that he still fits into reality.

Which of the following makes sense? The crippled man who still enjoys feeling the sun; the injured dog that was in all likelihood left to starve after Tsotsi's father brutally kicked it; or what about Tsotsi's own mother's death due to AIDS; or the young, affluent, but now crippled, mother who survived the hijacking but does not want to continue living without her child? The answer to how life can still be worthwhile when one's back is broken or when one does not have a home is not clear to Tsotsi. In his current experience and sense of reality there is no viable alternative to confirm reality as being real. He returns to the township as the day breaks. It is a new day and the visuals imply that there may be another opportunity (in line with a modern Western view) to connect with intuitive wisdom (the source of religious knowledge in the African paradigm), the mother-*imago* and the universal congress of potentialities (Cirlot 2001:364-365).

In a long shot, highlighting the dirt streets of the shanty town, the camera, now focuses

on women queuing for water at a public tap at daybreak, thus also highlighting the gender stereotype of black women taking care of household chores. In the warm colours of dawn, Tsotsi spots a young woman with a baby strapped to her back. It is the same woman he almost knocked over the previous day when he and his hoodlum companions took possession of the road by their mere presence. He now walks up to her, holds her at gunpoint and forces her to her home. The woman is carrying her own baby on her back and a bucket of water in her hand, taking care to not spill it. Thus the notion of rebirth or regeneration is again raised here by way of the symbol of water.

The audience knows that Tsotsi had already injured the mother of the baby and at this stage does not know how the gangster will treat Miriam. The suggestion that she may be abused is clear as the water tap scene portrays her as subordinate in a patriarchal society. All of this happens at daybreak that also denotes the start of a new cycle in time. At her small but spotless shack, the armed Tsotsi abruptly forces the frightened woman to breastfeed the abducted baby.

Miriam is only a few years older than Tsotsi and a single mother – her husband had recently been killed on his way home from work. Despite her fear, Miriam is able to remain focused and consciously controls her behaviour to gradually calm the agitated gangster. This is her first step towards directing the interaction between them. Even though the circumstances demand submission to the armed Tsotsi, Miriam acts from a position of empowerment. Her graceful and wise attitude does not threaten him and he does not even realise that she is starting to take control of the situation. She has an inner strength that allows her to carry water, clean her house, earn a living and eventually to positively influence the behaviour of a gangster. Hence she is not restricted by societal stereotype gender roles. Miriam is her own, integrated person.

What perspective would be appropriate for understanding the impact of Miriam's character on Tsotsi? From a Western perspective, the woman, dressed in a contemporary and beautiful adaptation of traditional attire, can be viewed as a romanticised role model of how one can make a fresh start after trauma. Such a view, after all, incorporates the Western symbols of chance and new beginnings. Miriam seemingly takes charge of her own adverse circumstances and perseveres as she finds solace in striving towards a better tomorrow. Yet such interpretations of respectively chance versus determinism, the mode of engagement with the world-out-there and the source of ethics – that may sound perfectly plausible to someone from a modern Western perspective – may not be the only possibility applicable here.

Is the contact between Tsotsi and Miriam simply a “sentimental, highly unrealistic suggestion ... of a love affair” as Dovey (2007:156) suggests? It is quite possible to draw such a conclusion and typify Miriam in such a stereotypical role as is evident from a comment by one film critic – that is, if one is not sensitised to recognise the spiritual dimension of the film. Allan Peach remarks that, when Miriam convinces Tsotsi to return the baby to its parents,

the actors are so restrained that it seems as if the screen will explode if they don't at least touch. They do not, and their repressed feelings infuse the moment with a flood of emotions from simple hope to an unsettling fear of what is to come (Peach 2006).

In my opinion one should take into account that the film is based on a *Bildungsroman* where the aim is to investigate all dimensions in the coming-of-age of a character and subsequently from the perspective of the latter. The unfolding story and its juxtapositions also suggest cosmological diversity. My own Western-oriented cosmology can, therefore, not suffice. One cannot ignore the possible presence of an African cosmological perspective.

When viewed from a traditional African perspective, any veneer of inappropriate romanticism, submission or other stereotypical behaviour is stripped away to unveil Miriam's

spiritual wholeness. Although she experienced trauma in her life due to violence, she still has the capacity to take care of herself, her baby and others by working as a seamstress and selling mobiles. Miriam's behaviour is not motivated by greed, fear and violence. Moreover, her source of ethics has nothing to do with future goals or the pursuit of a better tomorrow as one would typically find in a Western cosmology. Her source of ethics rather seems to lie in finding individual purpose and in maintaining harmonious relationships with others – even with someone like Tsotsi. Miriam's colourful dress is no sentimental interpretation of her African identity; it is a symbol of the quality of her existence and hence of the texture of her life. In short, her manner and clothes represent the positive richness of her African heritage.

It is in Miriam's house that Tsotsi encounters the mobiles made of bits and pieces of everyday material – strands of wire, pieces of broken glass, scraps of rusted tins and reels of cotton. These odds and ends sparkle as they catch the light. The parts of the assembled pieces can be interpreted as symbols of ordinary moments of life that become worthwhile only when grouped together. The texture of an experience can, for example, be rusted and sad, or colourful and filled with light, or playful and filled with joy, as is portrayed in this film. If viewed from a Western perspective the mobiles could suggest that the very texture of everyday experiences (as in the traditional African cosmology) can be woven together in such a way that they offer something more. They offer something new, another chance (as typically in the modern Western view of reality) and thus something that is meaningful despite sadness, neglect, brokenness and distortion. From my own Western perspective, I would very much like to say that the aesthetic rearrangement of everyday objects in this scene results in symbols of transcendence. However, the closing of the film suggests a monistic nature of reality and thus transcendence in this film needs to be connected with the here and now.

What is so remarkable about this young woman is that in the midst of her personal suffering she resembles wholeness and is able to maintain an integrated and coherent view of reality. It is by watching her feeding the baby, that Tsotsi's journey to reconnect with his inner self and with a positive positioning of a traditional African view of reality is given momentum. He is slowly, very slowly, starting to realise his own hunger for a nurturing and meaningful existence. This inner awakening by identifying with the newborn, the nurturing by a wise woman who refuses money for looking after the baby and her eventual prompting of him to return the baby to its parents eventually leads to his yearning for the restoration of decency in his own life. "Decency", as Boston in the earlier scene explained to the more sophisticated criminal Fela, is about "(r)espect for yourself, it's got fuck all to do with your standard of living."

Tsotsi reconnects with the past by allowing the emotions of his childhood and his unfortunate parting from his parents to surface. He also recreates the possibilities of the present and the future by projecting the potential of new life, a fresh start, onto the baby. The latter is expressed, for example, by his naming of the baby "David" – after himself – and taking the baby (still in the shopping bag from the stolen car) to the sewer pipes where he used to live after he ran away from home as a child. In this scene there are brief, harrowing scenes of other inhabitants of the sewer pipes – real AIDS orphans who were recruited as actors. The possibilities of then, now and tomorrow merge. What happened in the past has bearing on the present and on the future. Time is again presented as cyclical, as typical in the traditional African view of reality and no longer as a (linear) flight from events that are best left behind in favour of a search for a better tomorrow. Therefore, although the concept of a new beginning is introduced, it is done within a monistic view of life and not dualistically where reality cannot be affirmed as the ultimate, as in a modern Western paradigm.

Tsotsi's life is in crisis and he realises that carrying on the way he has up till now brought no him fulfilment. He discovers that by changing his own position from resistance to something more

positive he can yet again affirm the immediate world out there as the real. With the impression left in the viewers' minds that he will return the baby in light of Miriam's firm insistence and his implied agreement, Tsotsi leaves her house for the last time. Then one sees a lightly coloured dog appearing on all fours (not a dark one like the one of his childhood that was left crippled by his father's kicks) from the alley in the same direction in which Tsotsi departs.

At the end of the film, when Tsotsi is arrested, one does not know how events and Tsotsi's life will turn out. It seems, however, as if Tsotsi's identity moved from a sense of disillusionment and distorted cosmic belonging within the traditional African reality view to a positive positioning of that same cosmology. He, for example, recognises the cyclical nature of time and reconnects with others after reconnecting with himself in three instances: by apologising to Boston and to the crippled man and by returning the baby. However, it also seems as if his symbolic interpretation of chance and determinism now shifts from a situation where chance is excluded to one where new beginnings are possible as in the Western paradigm. In this moment there may be an element of Tsotsi redeeming himself, yet this act remains within the overall context of the traditional African paradigm as it allows him to affirm his reality and thus his experience of his immediate world out there. If one wishes to talk about transcendence in this film, then such transcendence is not one towards a different kind of reality, but rather one where the quality of experience and social coercion is improved as one may expect in a coherent traditional African view of reality.

What we do know is that after his contact with Miriam, Tsotsi has rediscovered a source of ethics whereby he was able to restore harmony and find individual purpose within a community. Miriam is, however, not the only one who instigated this change. The baby who needed to be fed and to have its basic needs met, Boston who talks about feelings and the old man who is grateful for life despite his pitiful circumstances, also evoked responses and instigated change in Tsotsi's awareness. All these characters sensitised Tsotsi to the destructive force of fear as opposed to love; the existential value he can derive from harmonious social relations and individual purpose; and the relevance of a connection between the individual and communal structures whereby the former is affirmed by the latter. All these symbols can be linked to a traditional African view of reality. Thus the context of the film itself suggests that a consideration of an African view seems relevant for a nuanced understanding of the film. Hence these attributes should not be limited to the female principle, but should also be valued for their religious and existential perspective.

Tsotsi's existential repositioning is rooted in the restoration of his belonging to a monistic reality; his affirmation of the here and now as the constituting part of the real; his acceptance of fitting into this realness governed by a cyclical view of the nature of time; and by recognising his individual sense of purpose whilst being interconnected with his community. From an African perspective this repositioning, in the first instance, brings about healing.

## CONCLUSION

May one conclude that Miriam's character inspires Tsotsi's character? If one is able not to be restricted by a modern Western cosmology but is willing to probe into an African view of reality, one may draw this conclusion. The portrayal of Miriam's character overcomes gender stereotypes and introduces a rounded, healthy personality with a positive view of reality. Tsotsi, or David, responds to her nurturing decisiveness and the film suggests that he eventually sets out on a more fulfilling path of existential belonging.

When religion is regarded as a way of belonging to totality, religious meaning need not be expressed in terms of or with reference to any specific religious tradition. By applying religion in

its cosmological sense in the analysis of film, the viewer has the opportunity to be sensitised to different ways of existence, belonging and meaning-making. This becomes easier if the viewer also enjoys the inner space to risk gaining a sense of an (sometimes) unsettling enrichment.

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**KEY WORDS**

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