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Tsotsi and Yesterday

an anthropological appraisal¹

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Anthropologists disclose a particular knowledge – normally inaccessible to their readers – of people and places with which they have had an intense everyday contact. The surprise elicited by an ethnographic text depends on numerous factors but we can assume that the emptier the symbolic space separating us from the Other presented by an academic colleague, the easier it is to be convinced by what we are told. As readers or producers of ethnographies, Charles Peirce would argue, we hold onto our own habits through huge exertion in order to stifle the threat of doubts. For the researcher, surprising an informed reader becomes an arduous task since it involves displacing existing bodies of knowledge and replacing them with new and hence still somewhat unstable concepts. Some of the philosopher's ideas enable us to reflect productively on this process. When successful, our texts provoke a contradictory feeling among our interlocutors. On one hand, we cause a degree of discomfort by bringing new concepts that challenge their habits and entrenched beliefs – an unease that understandably provokes resistance. On the other hand, our tales of the unexpected help germinate the seeds of doubt essential to the expansion or transformation of our knowledge.

A few years ago I began research in South Africa. Recounting experiences of fieldwork in this country is a different task to that faced by the

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ethnographer doing anthropology at home, especially when talking to a domestic audience (Peirano 2006). We all know something about South Africa – from the apartheid regime to Mandela’s journey. Most anthropologists will have a clear recollection of reading Max Gluckman on a ‘social situation’ that took place in somewhere named Zululand; or other processual analyses connecting the rural/traditional to the urban/modern realms – persistent issues still replicated today in some works written by the Comaroffs and their followers.

In order to deepen a dialogue with an Other who is relatively well-known to us, this text focuses its analysis on two recent South African films. My aim is to provide an interpretation of these works taking into account the fact that the reader probably already has some knowledge of the narrated stories: either from the films themselves – after all, both of them were nominated for Oscars, one of them winning one – or from a diffuse knowledge about the country itself on issues like racism, segregation, violence and HIV/AIDS-related illnesses. Presuming, therefore, that the reader possesses his or her own opinion concerning the situations described in the text, I propose to combine the two stories with my own analytic experience, based primarily on my fieldwork in South Africa. Rather than looking from outside inwards, I propose to approach these works of fiction along three different lines that were defined by the people I met as essential to any comprehension of their lives. The first are the names of the characters themselves. The second, their houses or where they live. And the third, the relatedness to the people with whom they interact. My aim is to establish a dialogue that takes into account what we know about South Africa without hindering our understanding of what lies beyond this domain (Ferguson 2006). All of us recognize that names manifest the first moment in a subject’s social inscription based on their descent relations. Their houses provide a solid extension of this inscription into other forms of belonging – membership to a web whose centre is supplemented by links of alliance and co-residence in the local district. At the opposite end of the spectrum to the relations prescribed in this form, we shall see that it is through distant people – beyond the circle of relatives and neighbours – that these personae put their beliefs (in the sense attributed by Peirce) to the test. Their suspicion cum suspension reveals a nexus of doubts that, when awoken, provokes changes and transformations in each subject’s habits.

Spaces and Transformations in *Tsotsi* and *Yesterday*

The films used as the raw material for my analysis are examples of the recent South African cinema. In 2004, *Yesterday* was the first national film to compete for the best foreign film Oscar. *Tsotsi*, meanwhile, was the first South African production to win this award in 2006. The two are emblematic of a new cinema born in post-apartheid South Africa, the outcome of a radical turnaround in the film industry, diverging from the earlier cinema tradition focused on “colonial and Afrikaner nationalist perspective,” “in which black identity is portrayed as either uncivilized, in the form of cruel and savage Zulu warriors, or servile in the face of white domination.” (Maingard 2007:511).

Tsotsi (2005), directed by Gavin Hood, is based on the book of the same name by Athol Fugard, and features Presley Chweneyagae as the protagonist. The original novel actually dates from the 1950s, where the author looked to portray the social desolation caused by apartheid. In the book, Tsotsi’s involvement with the baby begins and ends differently from the film version: he receives the child from a desperate mother, while in the film he steals a car unknowingly with the baby inside. The mothers in the book and film are diametrically opposed in terms of their desire to keep the child. The literary work culminates with the death of Tsotsi when he returns to the shack to feed the baby. The entire township is being destroyed – an allusion to government removal programs such as the clearance of Sophiatown. A wall falls on top of him and, probably, the baby. The film develops a plotline surrounding the crime perpetrated by Tsotsi and ends with the police circling the main character, weapons pointed, though he emerges unharmed. We also need to take note of the distance between the novel and the film, especially in relation to the lack of spaces shared by whites and blacks during the apartheid period. We could say that the racial and political subtleties of the book were reduced in the film to a binary opposition between whites and blacks, since the film gained notoriety for its absence of ‘coloureds’ (especially Indians), otherwise active characters in the written novel.²

Yesterday (2003), filmed entirely in Zulu, was written and directed by Darrell James Roodt, featuring the actress Leleti Khumalo in the title role.

2 Two anthropological analyses, with distinct subject matter and scope, but which focus on the nationalist ideology that supported the establishment and maintenance of the apartheid regime, can be found in Rosa Ribeiro 1990 and Crapanzano 1985.

Tsotsi mixes other languages, such as Xhosa, Sotho and a smattering of English and Afrikaans, manifesting a social dynamic already described in the 1960s when anthropology examined the impact of the rural/urban migration for cultural traditions and their transformations, particularly in African and other colonial contexts. The fact that the protagonists in the two works speak only in languages other than English shows us that the very same established white South African filmmakers who had previously directed other films (supposedly catering for an international audience – partially in English with several well-known actors) have on this occasion chosen a different set of elements and objectives that distance them both from the nationalist film production under the apartheid government, as well from the Hollywood films portraying this regime (Botha 2006).

The African 'tsotsi' (Sesotho for 'something small', denoting the 12-inch-bottomed pipe trousers originally characteristic of the dress of these criminal delinquents) of Johannesburg urban areas – an almost completely detribalized, often illegitimate, usually teenage criminal delinquent, who neither understands nor respects the tribal customs and culture of his forefathers – has developed a language called 'Witty' or 'Wittisha' (from the English word 'wit') – a Tsotsi slang which is fully understandable only to gang members. This language serves not only to identify gangue members or to convey secret messages in public but it mirrors the ego-ideals of the 'tsotsi', namely, the American gangster and his way of life. (De Ridder 1961:6)

The titles of both films mention their main protagonists: Yesterday and Tsotsi, a woman and a man, respectively, both young black adults from post-apartheid South Africa. In the first case, the setting of Yesterday's tragedy is the Kwazulu-Natal region and the (mis)adventures that lead her to Johannesburg. In Tsotsi, the setting is the city itself, moving from the outlying townships to the middle-class suburbs, occasionally passing through the hub of the city.³

The dramatic events experienced by these two characters express a clash

3 The film was shot in Soweto, the most famous township in South Africa, notorious as the birthplace of the 1976 student uprising. Its nickname is an acronym of **south-west townships**. To draw a comparison with a Brazilian case, we can quote the town of **Ceilândia** in the Brazilian Federal District, which received its name due to a clearance program implemented by the local State, headed by the *Comissão de Erradicação de Invasões* (Invasion Eradication Commission), known as C.E.I.

between what we can roughly identify as two opposed domains: on one hand, the particularities of personal experiences; on the other, the more generic nature of the historical burden attached to an entire country. The fact that both are young adults also highlights the role of change and transformation at these two levels – personal and national, so to speak. Notably, both protagonists were born under the segregationist regime officially overthrown at the end of their childhoods. Beyond the incommensurability or potential analogy between one scale of experience and another, between the particular and the general, there is an additional contrast. Although apartheid ended as a State policy, the life of these two fictional characters allows us to debate the various possible ways in which a black person can live an ordinary life in South Africa as they experience in their own stories the transition from one situation (apartheid) to another (post-apartheid).

In the post-apartheid period, policies of historical reparation have allowed different attempts to combat racism involving legal measures that work to denaturalize the association between black people and poverty. Even so, the townships, the rural zones or the former homelands continue to haunt those proclaiming the advantages of modernity and democracy.

In the city outskirts and rural zones, this theme – exhaustively debated by contemporary anthropology – becomes evident through horrendous statistics and stories of the physical attacks perpetrated in places like the townships. As well as the physical violence ‘between peers,’ that is, from the white European viewpoint, ‘between blacks,’ there is another terrifying spectre for those who see community life as a source of social harmony anchored in a commitment to the Other: the HIV virus, responsible for the death of thousands of people nationwide.⁴ Within this theoretical and political scenario, these two films take the *topos* of barbarism as their main plot line. In this paper I wish to highlight the analogy made in these works between the rural world and the urban periphery as sources of danger, the dwelling place of irrational people trapped within nonsensical traditions whose practices of

4 A recent article, written for a chemotherapist audience, examines the inclusion of infectious diseases – especially HIV – as protagonists in late 20th century films. *Yesterday* is one of the films analyzed by the authors (García Sánchez, García Sánchez & Merino Marcos 2007). For an anthropological study of historical and ethnographical scope on the experience of HIV in South Africa, consult the work of Fassin (2007). For an example of the stigmatizing and nostalgic point of view on the ‘solidarity’ prevailing among the communities of the past, see Bähre (2007).

vendetta and polygamy place the entire country's health and morality at risk.

My desire to look beyond the superficial text of these films derives from my fieldwork experience and an intellectual confrontation with the literature (not just anthropological) describing contemporary life in the country. Contradicting many of the viewpoints currently in fashion in anthropology and even in literature, the racial discrimination, isolation and vulnerability experienced in post-apartheid South Africa are dramatized in these films through two personal stories, filled with paradoxes and – for precisely this reason – extremely sublime and human. Comparison between the two films leads us to the differences between the spaces and moments in which the characters become absorbed as they drift in their thoughts in the isolated anonymity of the city.

Their journeys through the areas surrounding Johannesburg (from the townships to rural villages) enable us to visit places of dreams and disillusion. Aesthetics and ethics in these films run hand-in-hand, telling us about the country's past and present in a way distinct from other forms of fictional testimony.⁵ Though the films unfold in different locations, *Tsotsi* and *Yesterday* in fact seem very close in terms of their aspirations and ways of overcoming the burden of the past. Their lives fill a landscape of hope, doubt and inventiveness far beyond the traditional dichotomy that separates subjects according to their location in the rural or urban world (Mamdani 1996). Following a violent blow of fate, each one sets off on a heroic journey, destined to culminate in a confrontation with the obscure and impenetrable world of rights, during which they need to evade the many traps lining their path, very often in the name of *citizenship*: a status held by those who inhabit the city, expressed in incomprehensible terms, such as 'decency' in *Tsotsi*'s case, or HIV and condoms in the *Yesterday*'s case. *Yesterday*'s pilgrimage begins in her home village with her frequent trips to the local clinic in the centre of the township to try to discover what was making her ill. Every day at the water tap where the women meet, her neighbours cajole her to visit the *Isangoma*, claiming that this kind of healer and religious figure will be able

5 Here we can mention the white view of the outbreaks of violence committed by black people 'for no reason' in Coetzee's *Disgrace* and Steinberg's *Midlands*, two novels that dwell on the insecurity experienced by white people in the post-apartheid era in response to the inevitable and awaited revenge of the black population. A specific discussion of Coetzee's work – centred on the relation between gender and racial classifications – can be found in Moutinho (2004).

to cure her coughing and weakness. Though sceptical, Yesterday goes to consult the Isangoma, but rejects her diagnosis as implausible: she suggests that Yesterday feels anger – thereby giving her the opportunity to explore the provocations made by her husband’s kin. Yesterday disputes this diagnosis saying she does not feel hate. From this scene sequence emerges a heroine who doesn’t follow what some anthropologists describe as “a predicament in which both those who would wield power and their putative subjects find it necessary to resort to drama and fantasy to conjure up visible means of governance.” (Comaroff & Comaroff 2006:292). Leaving behind the furious Isangoma, she continues stoically on her way.

After heavy pressure from her neighbours, she eventually learns that she is HIV-positive. She takes the doctor’s advice and journeys to Johannesburg to warn her husband. Overwhelmed by the size of the city, Yesterday meets her husband who, incredulous, beats her and sends her back to the village. Yesterday encounters only animosity from her neighbours and relatives in her husband’s homeland. As her father had foreseen when he named her Yesterday, her past seems to her immeasurably better than her present.

Tsotsi is a young man whose nickname means ‘rascal’ or ‘layabout,’ in contrast to a real/hard worker. Born in a township and raised among other boys living in pipes used to build sewers, the boy becomes an adult living off small robberies. Leaving his home turf one day, he sees a car entering a wealthy house and decides to steal it. He comes across the owner of the car – to his surprise, a black woman. Cornered, he shoots the woman. Unable to drive properly, he crashes the car, which is when he discovers that there is a baby in the car. He desperately takes refuge in the township with the small infant.

These brief summaries of the two films serve as the starting point for my argument. Rather than unravel the plot in linear fashion, I wish to turn first to the dialogues present in both films concerning the **names** of their respective protagonists. Next I discuss the **houses** inhabited in each case. And finally, I explore the **secondary characters** through which the main protagonists develop their questions and explore new possibilities for understanding and acting in the world. With this, I look to show that translating the reality of the cinema or fieldwork into ethnographic terms does not imply a simple synthesis but a gradually assembling narrative that emerges from theoretical questions capable of comparing distant and distinct situations. The points

of comparison are not their 'empirical' proximities and differences but the questions and the enthusiasm they provoke in us to think about innumerable other unknown 'realities.'

Names

The two lead characters in these films, though speakers of different languages – which in South Africa raises issues that cannot be discussed here – belong to a universe in which the process of naming people is extremely important (Ramos 2008). Individuals receive names from their close kin, as Boston emphasizes to Tsotsi in a moment of rage: “What are you called?! What’s your real name, Tsotsi?! Didn’t you have a mother who chose your name? What kind of person are you? Even a dog has a name.”⁶

Names are important because they immediately tell us something concerning the specific participation of each person in the life of others. Names such as ‘Beloved,’ ‘Welcome,’ ‘Fortune’ or ‘Happiness’ populate everyday life in South Africa. When Yesterday introduces herself to the doctor who will deal with her case, the latter remarks: “I’ve met people called Tomorrow and even some people called Today, but I’ve never heard of anyone being named ‘Yesterday.’”

Yesterday’s name is obviously English in origin, not isiZulu: she is not called Izolo, for example (Koopman 2002). Yesterday’s daughter is Beauty and her husband also has an English name: John (Khumalo). Numerous times during my own fieldwork people I met presented themselves to me by an English name, though their ‘real’ name was a different one. One example was Sibongile Mbatha – a retired black female teacher living in Newcastle who leads a group of people evicted from their lands and resettled in townships during apartheid and who is now fighting to get back their farmlands. During our first encounter, she presented herself as Angeline. Later she explained to me that during apartheid black people received names in English,

6 In this film, Tsotsi decides to abandon his family because of a relation of empathy with a dog – kicked by his father to the point of making the animal lame, left to drag itself around the yard of their township house.

This beginning of his life in the streets – nameless, living worse than a dog – is revealed in his dialogue with a man in a wheelchair who begs for money in the railway station. Tsotsi asks him why he wants to carry on living now he is unable to walk. The man in the wheelchair replies: “Because I still like to feel the sun on my skin. I can feel the sun on my skin.”

which helped the whites – who knew nothing of the other languages – to exert bureaucratic control over their lives. These names were stamped in their documents next to their ‘house names.’ Her legal name was therefore Angeline, though she did not consider this her true name.

State practices like this cause many people today to feel ashamed of their English names – usually Christian names, a fact reflecting their past experience of religious (sub)missions and conversions. People rebelled against these associations, like, for example, the leader of the Landless Peoples Movement – Mangaliso Khubeka – who once referred to his ‘slave name’ in a conversation with Marcelo Rosa. Moreover, younger parents now insist on giving isiZulu names to their children born in the post-apartheid period, giving preference to names filled with ‘clicks,’ which provoke laughter when pronounced erroneously by non-speakers.

Surnames are also a source of ties with the group, connecting the individual to the family of birth. More specifically, they reveal each family’s links with a particular clan. In sum, any person has at least one proper name, a family name and, in the background, a clan name. Over the course of their lives, men of prestige also accumulate small poems or praise names, which are recited in honour of a person, narrating their memorable deeds and aspects of their personality (Erlman 1996).

Taking this ethnographic setting into consideration, I suggest that Yesterday – despite being an English name – evokes these ‘house names’ rather than the Christian names with which South Africans were registered for the purposes of colonial and/or state control during the apartheid regime. Undoubtedly the protagonists’ names in these fictional works evoke the painful dramas lived by the two subjects. Yesterday might refer to the HIV/AIDS epidemic, absent in the past. Tsotsi’s name certainly evokes his crime-filled life, escaping state control, committing violent acts, evading the traps set to capture him as a ‘decent’ worker. Given the depth of background to our analysis, what are the implications of being called Tsotsi or Yesterday? Who gave them these names? And why? What relations do they have with the world around them and what can be surmised from their personal names?

The cryptic nature of the protagonists’ names induces us to look for clues to these answers in the names of the secondary characters in the two films. The names of Tsotsi’s friends tell us something about their role as gang members: Boston is an intellectual type; Butcher is a cold-blooded gangster who

uses his dagger without compunction; Aap ('monkey' in Afrikaans) is a sort of trickster who worries about Tsotsi's safety even becoming afraid of his wild behaviour and his inscrutable personality; Fela is the Fellow, the most established gangster, head of the car theft and disassembly gang, who provides advice and explains scams to the less experienced youths.⁷

Tsotsi's true name – revealed in flashbacks in which he recalls his childhood, and transferred to the baby he inadvertently adopts – evokes, via Christian mythology, his warrior nature, his restless fight against giants who insist on annihilating him. Tsotsi used to be called David. Like Yesterday's husband, John, he possesses a Christian name.

Houses

Houses are taken to be places of refuge, protected by the presence of ancestors normally buried close to the residences. The protagonists of both films live in shacks – either in the rural zone or the township – from where they set out on their journey to places where nobody can understand their dwelling experience. Neither of the two lives in their birth place. As a married woman, Yesterday lives on the land of her husband's family. Tsotsi lives on the run, in places where he does not have to obey anyone and where he is not reminded of the time when he lived imprisoned by his father from whom he ran away as a boy. Tsotsi's house is a shack in a township where he lives alone without friends or any woman – that is, without a mother, sister or wife. This absence of bonds leads him to identify Miriam – an unknown resident of the township – as the ideal person to take in the baby that fate placed in his hands.

7 The role of Fela is played by Zola, a South African popstar who sings kwaito (a kind of funk and/or hip-hop) and presents a TV program famous for its debates on fervent social issues touching on racism and social inequalities for which he tries to find community solutions.

This relation between the actor Zola and the fictional character Fela evokes another South African film, made in 2000, which anticipated many of the topics and perspectives adopted in *Tsotsi*. In *Hijack Stories* by Oliver Schmitz, there is a blurring between fiction and reality in the life of a popstar who returns to Soweto to “ground one of his characters,” based on the experience of an old colleague, whose life now revolves around stealing cars.

Continuing this interweaving between the real and the fictional in the lives of actors and characters, we can make a final observation concerning Tsotsi, relentlessly teased by Fela (and the others) for being unable to drive – to the point that this inability helps him as an alibi in the township when he is suspected of having kidnapped the baby. In February 2007 the newspapers were filled with headlines reporting a story that echoed the film's plot. The actor Presley Chweneyagae (who plays Tsotsi) was detained by the police, accused of carrying a fake driving license.

Tsotsi lives in a non-existent place – at least in terms of the sociological morphology of dwelling spaces in South Africa.⁸ Single men, or those without domestic female company, must occupy a bed or a room in a hostel used as shelter by migrant workers whose own houses are situated in the rural zones. Notably, under apartheid the population officially had to obey the rule of racial segregation, which allowed residence in one zone only – the townships, rural zones or homelands – with a restricted right of transit between one place and another following government approval, stamped in the person's internal passport. Yesterday's husband lives in one of these hostels along with other men who have left their wives back in the rural areas. We learn about this place indirectly through her husband's allusions to the increasing difficulty he has in containing his urine and faeces, the problems in going to the bathroom in the hostel and the lack of a toilet inside the mine.

For women, though, the housing situation is even more complex. Married women like Yesterday traditionally live in their father-in-law's property, effectively repaying the bridewealth (*lobola*) customarily received by parents when their daughters marry, a kind of dowry symbolizing the establishment of closer ties between two different families (Kuper 1982). Some of the adversities confronted by Yesterday with her relatives and neighbours in the village can be explained by the fact that she is not 'among her own.' Daughters-in-law and sisters-in-law are a constant target of witchcraft suspicions. The accusations levelled at these women are a kind of declaration of difference between those belonging to the family and those who do not. Returning to the topic of naming, we can also note that the surname a woman inherited from her father dies with her, since her own children will be named after the paternal line.

Miriam, the woman who receives the baby mistakenly kidnapped by Tsotsi, also inhabits an atypical house – the shack in which she lives alone

8 Though it would be reckless to define what 'theoretically' adequate housing would be, we can describe, at least in relation to the townships, a classificatory system that was related to us various times as we walked through places like Madadeni – a township close to Newcastle in Kwazulu-Natal. Townships are divided into sections. Each section was built during a particular period of apartheid and, depending on government interests, provided a greater or lesser degree of facilities for the residents of the new houses. We could perceive a pattern of construction that changed regularly: either houses with various rooms, or the much hated matchboxes. All the houses are given numbers and letters and none of the streets has a name. In these accounts, this form of habitation was associated with the government plan to not only uproot people but to make them live in a place without any 'compass.'

with her newborn son. My fieldwork experience in South Africa, combined with the analyses contained in the literature, show how unlikely it would be for a young woman like her to keep possession of her house without the daily presence of other family members in her home (Oldfield & Boulton 2005).⁹ Seen from the outside, Miriam's house is just one more home in the sea of shacks that sprawl out to the horizon of the township. Inside it expands like a palace in which its owner – carrying herself like a princess – imbues everything with the beauty of her art of dressmaking and fashioning mobiles from coloured shards. At one point, she tells Tsotsi about the tragic end of her dead husband on his way home from work in the factory. The details of this narrative refer to a space and moment of vast emptiness and anguish experienced everyday by workers living in the townships. Interspersed with shantytowns or squatter camps, these towns were built in peripheral belts surrounding the central cities occupied by whites. Located beyond the centre and the peripheral factories where the black workforce were employed, every township was surrounded by a large open field, normally situated on a slope, which served as an easy area for the police to control the workers' movements as they commuted between home and work. Today these fields are crossed daily by thousands of people who face difficulties in commuting without much money, reliant on expensive and badly maintained public transportation. During these daily journeys, people are assaulted and sometimes killed – as happened to Miriam's husband, Zacharias.

Yesterday's house, depicted in bucolic fashion at the start of the film, proves to be an unsuitable place to care for her sick husband when the latter returns from Johannesburg, extremely ill and regretting his failure to listen to his wife when she went to the mine to tell him the result of her medical examinations. Yesterday looks for a hospital for him but there are no beds available. The nurse explains to Yesterday that there is a lengthy waiting list, longer than both her arms. Yesterday replies that her neighbours and relatives do not want her husband near them. Though the school teacher – her best friend, an outsider like herself – had gathered the village's women to explain to them that HIV is spread only by blood, her explanation fails to have much effect. One of the women present at the meeting suggests another means of

9 For an analysis of the aesthetic employed by the cinema in portraying the South African townships, see Ellapen (2007). Continuing the point about Miriam's house, it would be extremely unlikely for a woman without a husband to live in a house without the threat of invasion by relatives or strangers.

contagion: what if his blood spills everywhere?! While John lies sick, the fear among the neighbours prompts the Isangoma to the shade of Yesterday's house where she burns some herbs to dispel her anger – as she had diagnosed, the cause of the disease.¹⁰

Yesterday decides not to succumb to the retaliations of the community – whose members begin to shun them on learning that both have become sick. She musters her remaining strength and starts collecting sheets of metal and other elements to serve as construction material for a shack where she can shelter her husband until he dies. One memorable scene from the film shows Yesterday trying to remove the hood from an abandoned car. Just then, she is approached by a group of women who we have already met earlier: other 'Mamas' who work in teams repairing the highways, part of a well-known local policy named Zibambele. These unknown women take pity on her and help smash up the car from which various parts of her house will be made, in particular the window that will provide light for the infirmary-house sheltering her ailing husband.

In *Tsotsi*, the return to his childhood home is equally painful, helping us to comprehend the significance represented by the house in defining subjects. Driven mad by the newborn's constant crying, Tsotsi angrily asks the child whether he is homesick for the mansion he used to live in. He tells the baby that he will take him to a real house. The boys living in the sewer pipes – a group of street kids – approach Tsotsi and ask him what he is carrying in the paper bag, printed with the words 'expect more.'¹¹ He shows them the bag's contents: a baby. The boys refuse to shelter the infant, saying they cannot feed another mouth. What happened to his mother? Where does Tsotsi live? In a shack? And why doesn't he keep the baby? Tsotsi points to one of the pipes and says that he too lived there as a child. One of the boys jokes that he brought the baby to see his old home. Tsotsi turns into a laughing stock in

10 Ngubane (1977) in his classic book on Zulu medicine and the body mentions that witchcraft accusations were usually expressed in an idiom that combined terms such as envy, anger, rage and fury.

11 Here we can mention the importance of such bags in day-to-day life in South Africa in a wide variety of contexts. Fake bags are made – with top brand names or even those of department stores and supermarkets considered to be posh – and sold by street vendors. On the other hand, a policy of warning people about the use of disposable bags (for which the consumer must pay) explains the omnipresence of a Pick'nPay supermarket bag in the hand of many South Africans. Jokes across the country remark that Pick'nPay's green bag is the only object capable of circulating among everyone in the country without obeying class and race prejudices and differences.

his endeavour to take 'his' baby to see the concrete pipes in which he lived as a child. Once again, the film demonstrates that South Africa's past is incomprehensible to those who have not lived through it. The boys sheltering in the pipes had not, perhaps, suffered the same loss as Tsotsi; perhaps they had never had a mother with HIV who had left them orphans or an alcoholic and abusive father from whom they had fled. Very probably – in an ambiguous allusion to the end of apartheid – these boys were 'born free.'

Obviously we know that being 'born free' means that the younger boys did not witness – as Tsotsi did – the country's transition. The boys living today in those pipes are not expected to pertain to any 'tribe,' a form of belonging that to the racist mind of the nationalist State connects and inter-relates all blacks. These boys were born unchained, outside the colonial and nationalist classificatory ties.

Who is the enemy?

The boys' paradoxical freedom is diametrically opposed to the obligation to maintain relations with family, neighbours and friends. To discuss the pernicious nature of the ambiguities highlighted in the two films, in the final part of the text I turn to the secondary characters whose paths cross with *Yesterday* and *Tsotsi*. The voice of these characters raises doubts and questions in the minds of the protagonists as they are increasingly forced to 'open their eyes:' that is, yield to the law of the State. Indeed *Tsotsi* eventually hands himself over to the police, while *Yesterday's* final wish before dying is to ensure her daughter goes to school, which she herself, illiterate, never attended.

Among the numerous interlocutors of *Yesterday* and *Tsotsi*, we can pick out four characters, divided into two groups based on their closeness to the lead characters. In the first circle of relations we can group unknown, recently arrived people who befriended the two main characters. The second set is formed by subjects whose lives become entwined with those of *Yesterday* and *Tsotsi* because of a critical event, namely: illness and a burglary.

Yesterday befriends a teacher who arrives at the village in search of a job, begins to work at the school and gives her the money to take a taxi van and arrive at the clinic, enabling her to discover the cause of her illness. The person closest to *Tsotsi* is Boston, a young man who arrived in the township with some money, drank it all and became destitute, only to be rescued

by Tsotsi. He joins the latter's gang in acknowledgment of the help received from this stranger. After an assault in which they kill a man in a train, the young man accuses Tsotsi of not knowing what 'decency' means¹². Both characters, like Cassandra, provoke doubts in their friends' minds – that unleash both a tragedy and the beginning of a concomitant reflection on the meaning of their lives. With the teacher's money and attention, Yesterday is able to take the taxi van and attend the consultation with the doctor, who informs her of her condition. After punching Boston and being expelled from the Shebeen (a type of bar found in the townships), Tsotsi decides to act without his companions and goes alone to assault the woman who he shoots and whose baby son he inadvertently takes.

The other set of characters who stir doubts in the protagonists comprises subjects who have very different lives but whose existences strongly influence the thoughts of Tsotsi and Yesterday. The woman shot by Tsotsi and her husband and the doctor who treats Yesterday synthesize a series of dilemmas faced by South African society in the years following the end of apartheid. On one side there is a black upper middle class family with a Mercedes Benz to drive and a mansion to live in. The common sense in this country makes explicit recalcitrant forms of racial hatred, transformed into questions concerning social justice. Frequently white people ask themselves whether it is fair that (i) blacks are exploiting other blacks or (ii) black people are rich like whites. Even people who include themselves among those who rebelled against apartheid ask whether this is the world for which 'they' fought (Besteman 2008). On the other hand, a white female doctor appears in Yesterday's life. She speaks isiZulu and works in a rural zone, treating her doomed patients almost like a good Samaritan. She talks with Yesterday in a way no one else would dare. More than this: she shows compassion when Yesterday pronounces that she will remain alive until the day Beauty begins to study. Commiseration also shapes the relationship between Tsotsi and the baby's father. When Tsotsi returns to his house, he persuades his companions to help him with the raid. The pretext conceals his real interest: to fill a suitcase with toys and powdered milk for the baby. In the child's room he falls into a daydream. Meanwhile, his friend Butcher threatens the child's father.

¹² Boston reminds us the "infiltration" strategy that was allegedly adopted by student's organizations during the 1990's, in order "to politicize" the violence perpetrated by Tsotsi and their gangues (cf. Glaser 1998)

Sympathizing with the father's suffering, Tsotsi shoots and kills his friend, saving the life of the unknown man. At the end of the film, when Tsotsi surrenders in front of the mansion belonging to the baby's parents, the father convinces the police to lower their weapons. In a paternal tone he says that Tsotsi is just a boy.

These two types of character express a deviation from the rule that guides common sense attitudes to blacks and whites in South Africa (Besteman 2008). The first group, despite being fairly close to the main protagonists, manages to retain a degree of distance typical to educated people – Boston and the teacher open the eyes of Tsotsi and Yesterday to the problems affecting their lives. At the same time, through a kind of upside-down metonymy, the cases of the rich black family and the selfless white female doctor serve as exceptions who prove the rule by revealing the barely concealed wounds afflicting the entire country.

The subject's agency

If Tsotsi and Yesterday were not given a welcoming name, a tranquil household or a clear enemy beyond their private lives how can they be defined in this new South Africa, embodied in the figures of the girl Beauty and the baby David?

In abyss between personal experience and the master narrative that undermines everyone, the city emerges as an actor with whom the characters enter into a relationship, awakening a chorus that expresses their doubts concerning the present amid the recollections of the past. Johannesburg provides the setting to be challenged by the characters of these two South African films, since their relations with the city reveal the constraints to people's hopes after the apartheid. It seems that in the anonymity of the city, the absence of ties frees individuals since there is no need to express their feelings in a compulsory form to anyone. These characters only appear out of place when seen from the angle of canonical, traditional and stereotyped social belongings.

Tsotsi, feeling pity for the baby rather than seeing it as a simple object of his crime, gradually distances himself from amoral subjects like Butcher, whom he kills to save the life of the kidnapped child's father. Yesterday, taking pity on her husband, looks for a medical cure rather than the treatment

proposed by the Isangoma. She likewise shows her indifference to the compulsory public performance between relatives and other neighbour women from the village who accuse her of witchcraft.

In their travels, they search for an understanding of their worlds peculiar to themselves, distinct from what the ordinary subjects around them usually do and think. This search for understanding is something new and deserves our attention, since – as I claimed at the outset – it points to the chasm separating subjective experience (a kind of inner experience) from collective histories, expressed in general terms.

Both the protagonists seek to comprehend the unusual events that fate hurls their way: in *Tsotsi*'s case, an unwanted baby and in *Yesterday*'s case, a cunning virus. The process of comprehension takes them on a journey through previously unknown spaces and situations. As though challenged by an enigma, both must enter a hostile territory which they believe contains the solution to their dilemma. This territory is the city. Not the city in the narrow sense of an urban space, but the city as a place inhabited by citizens: people possessing rights and education – like Boston, the teacher, the doctor and the baby's parents.

For the two characters, this world of rights proves to be as ethereal and nebulous as a baby or a virus. Trapped and unable to understand fully why their lives have been shaken in such tragic fashion, both discover within themselves an unsuspected array of feelings. When we see *Tsotsi* gazing at Johannesburg's horizon of buildings at dusk, alone, nameless and homeless, we suddenly realize that we cannot judge, classify or comprehend him knowing so little of his inner world. *Yesterday* awakens the same doubt when she travels by bus through the streets of Johannesburg. With her lips cut by the beating from her husband, we could imagine that now she must finally be filled with anger. *Yesterday*'s thoughts are elsewhere, though. She recalls John's love and affection when he visited her the previous Christmas. She remembers the fabulous present he gave her – a plastic vegetable peeler. The lyricism of these two moments – when *Tsotsi* and *Yesterday* find themselves freed, wandering through their own thoughts, evokes the question with which I began this text.

Like the heroes of these films, many of the people I met in South Africa knew that their experiences went far beyond the terms they possessed to make sense of their personal histories. When speaking about themselves,

they are afraid of merely adding 'one more case' to a 'wider category.' In all these situations, the dilemma goes beyond language's limited capacity to describe experience. It amounts to another battle doomed to defeat, an attempt to silence a particular history vis-à-vis a country whose tale has been told thousands of times, so often that the harsh richness of this narrative has waned and lost its impact, as in the Hollywood films on the horrors narrated in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Ndebele 2007).

The problems confronted by my hosts obviously affect my own reflections on anthropology and the validity of our theoretical approaches born amid the known incommensurability between the particular and general. The language of names, houses and non-prescribed alliances involves interconnected categories assembled from experience. It requires the anthropologist and his or her reader to become and remain aware of the constructed nature of the analysis: in other words, it implies a conscious refusal of the naturalizing narrative that supposedly restores the integrity of fieldwork experience to those who have no direct knowledge of the context. Fortunately, the evidence of the South African case neither authorizes nor requires us to follow this path. By establishing a relation of mutual knowledge, frequently identified today as south-south, we are not producing an absolutely symmetric dialogue in which Brazil and South Africa, for instance, become equivalent. The comparison in this case involves establishing a cognitive process that is not oriented towards supposed similarities or differences in 'empirical characteristics.' Ethnographic approaches – like the one proposed here – enables us to reflect not on the verisimilitude of what is filmed in relation to reality, but on the creative process that ethnography can perform in exploring the distances and proximities between the history of a country and the individual biographies of their citizens.

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Resumo

O presente artigo coteja duas histórias narradas no cinema – *Tsotsi* e *Yesterday* – com minha experiência analítica particular, conformada em grande medida a partir de meu trabalho de campo na África do Sul. Ao invés de propor um exame de fora para dentro, faço uma leitura dessas obras de ficção orientada por três eixos distintos, entendidos, pelas pessoas que conheci pessoalmente, como fundamentais para a compreensão de suas vidas. O primeiro são os *nomes* próprios dos sujeitos. O segundo, suas *casas* ou locais de moradia. E o terceiro, a maior ou menor proximidade em relação à *relevância das pessoas* com as quais se relacionam. Aqui a fabulação dá margem para pensarmos não na verossimilhança do que é filmado em relação à realidade, mas no processo criativo que a etnografia pode desempenhar em uma reflexão sobre as distâncias e proximidades entre a história de um país e as biografias individuais de seus cidadãos.

Palavras-Chave: Etnografia, África do Sul, Cinema, Linguagem

Abstract

This article compares two stories told in the cinema – *Tsotsi* and *Yesterday* – with my own analytic experience, shaped in large part by my fieldwork in South Africa. Rather than propose an examination from the outside inwards, I propose a reading of these works of fiction guided by three different lines, taken, by the people I knew personally, to be essential to comprehending their lives. The first are the proper *names* of the subjects. The second, their *houses* or dwelling places. And the third, their degree of *proximity and importance* to the people with whom they interact. Here fiction enables us to reflect not on the verisimilitude of what is filmed in relation to reality, but on the creative process that ethnography can perform in exploring the distances and proximities between the history of a country and the individual biographies of their citizens.

Keywords: Ethnography, South Africa, Cinema, Language