
'Diseased Dystopias'?: HIV/AIDS and the South African City in *Yesterday* and *Tsotsi*.¹

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As arguably the two South African films that have garnered the widest media attention in the last decade, *Yesterday* (2004) and *Tsotsi* (2006), form the focus of this article. The protagonists of the films differ vastly: the former is a rural mother with little experience of the city, and the latter an urban gangster immersed in the criminal subculture of South Africa's foremost metropolis, Johannesburg. Moreover, the settings of the films are almost entirely distinct. *Yesterday* is situated in KwaZulu Natal's Valley of a Thousand Hills, with only a brief foray into an urban locale—presumably Johannesburg—due to the dual presence of skyscrapers and mines. *Tsotsi*, on the other hand, takes place largely in and around the informal settlement of Alexandra that, with a population of approximately 500 000 living in an area of eight square kilometres, is one of the most densely populated areas in Africa.

Despite their differences in character and setting, what ties the two films together as the foremost cinematic examples of the city as an AIDS dystopia are their representations of the South African megalopolis as a site and source of HIV infection. Both of the eponymous characters on *Yesterday* and *Tsotsi* must confront the disease in tragic circumstances beyond their control, and both of their experiences of HIV are representative of fundamental aspects of South Africa's epidemic.

Because *Tsotsi*'s mother dies of AIDS when he is a child, his character represents one of the approximately 1.4 million South African children to have lost either one or both of their parents from AIDS by 2007.² As it is *Tsotsi*'s mother rather than his father who is shown dying, *Tsotsi* also portrays the so-called 'feminisation' of HIV/AIDS in South Africa, in which HIV infection is more prevalent among women. In 2007, for example, approximately 2.8 million South African women were HIV-positive, compared to 2.3 million South African men.³ *Tsotsi*'s mother is also a victim of domestic violence, high rates of which are ineluctably connected to the high national incidence of HIV in South Africa. In circumstances of sexual violence and gender inequality, women are less able to control sexual encounters and are therefore more liable to infection with sexually transmitted diseases.⁴

Yesterday's protagonist also embodies numerous epidemiological realities of HIV in South Africa. KwaZulu Natal, in which the film is set, has the highest provincial rate of HIV infection. According to the South African National HIV and Syphilis Prevalence Survey in 2007, 37.4 percent of attendees at antenatal clinics in KwaZulu Natal tested positive for HIV in 2007.⁵

The character *Yesterday* is infected by her migrant-labourer husband. The

migrant labour system, accompanying high levels of transactional sex, and the movement of miners between compounds and their home communities, provided fertile conditions for the emergence and entrenchment of a national HIV epidemic.⁶ Moreover, as Yesterday is unable to access the treatment she needs from a rural clinic, she represents the inequitable distribution of healthcare resources that remains one of the most inescapable legacies of the apartheid era.⁷ This article now turns to a discussion of the South African city and the meaning of spatiality in film, followed by an analysis of the cinematic city as an HIV/AIDS dystopia in *Yesterday* and *Tsotsi*.

The South African city

During the 20th Century, the ‘march of urbanisation’ constituted the most fundamental change to the human environment.⁸ While in 1900 the world’s cities were mostly concentrated in North America and Europe, by the century’s close the most populous cities were located in the global south, and cities in general housed more than half of the world’s population. The rapid rise of the city as the primary form of human habitation, and the concurrent socio-cultural effects, has elicited vastly prolific and varied responses in the realm of cultural production. A brief historical appraisal of the ways in which the city and the effects of urbanisation have been imagined provides the context for this discussion of two cinematic representations of South Africa’s ‘diseased dystopias’, *Yesterday* and *Tsotsi*.

Much has been written about the class implications of land dispossession and urbanisation during the Industrial Revolution. Historians agree that social responses to the growth of the industrial city were widely enunciated through the cultural establishment of the ‘rural idyll’ versus the ‘urban nightmare’. The imagined contrast between meadow and metropolis, Raymond Williams argues, became a “key symbolic trope” in British historical consciousness. Urban sprawl came to represent the despoliation of England and ‘the scarring of the earth itself’, and was used as a means to voice working-class discontent with labour exploitation and metropolitan squalor.⁹ In the imperial context, John Comaroff notes that ‘utopian rhapsodising’ about the countryside was ingrained into early missionary discourses, which legitimised colonial conquest in light of the desired establishment of the ‘Kingdom of God’ in the supposedly Edenic African wilderness.¹⁰

The colonial perception of Africa as lacking in industry and civilisation was aligned with beliefs about Africans as the ‘children’ of humanity, just as apparent advances in technology and society were regarded as evidence of European enlightenment and superiority.¹¹ The emerging colonial city was often regarded as the locus for the purported of the African and the loss of innocence and simplicity that supposedly characterised the black population.

In South Africa, black dispossession of land and the imposition of taxes coincided broadly with the discovery of gold and diamonds in the late 19th Century. The result was the large-scale movement of Africans into wage labour on the mines of the Witwatersrand, and by the turn of the century over 200 000

black men were living in an ever-expanding Johannesburg.¹² Johannesburg therefore emerged as a metropolitan hub concurrent with the growth of the black labour force.

The increasing numbers of Africans into wage labour elicited some colonial, particularly missionary, depictions that fused ‘abolitionist sympathies’ with ‘romantic naturalism’ to decry the supposedly pernicious and corrupting effects of urbanisation and wage labour on Africans.¹³ These perceptions were later remodelled by proponents of segregation to advance arguments for the consignment of Africans to rural ‘homelands’. The homelands were idealised as the natural and rightful place of Africans. They were depicted as reproductions of pre-colonial ruralities in which labour was subsistence rather than waged, and in which Africans could allegedly return to the primitive, pre-colonial lifestyle unencumbered by the educational and technological advances pioneered by Europeans.

By the beginning of the 20th Century, rising black populations in the urban areas became a matter of increasing concern to their white inhabitants as articulated in the emergence of the ‘sanitation syndrome’. This generalised moral panic often gathered ground after an outbreak of disease (such as cholera or plague), and notable historical parallels exist in the medical discourses that described the metropole/white suburb as a site of order, cleanliness, and morality, while the colony/black slum was often characterised as a contaminant, and its inhabitants as vectors of filth, degeneracy, and disease. South Africa has a history of oppressive responses to epidemics of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), including forced medical examinations and vaccinations of Africans.¹⁴

In the election of 1948, the National Party campaign capitalised on white fears of black encroachment. Elected on a platform of avowed *de facto* segregation, once in power the Nationalists pursued policies that greatly curtailed black mobility and settlement. The notion that black South Africans would only be allowed to enter urban areas temporarily in order to tend to the needs of white communities formed a cornerstone of apartheid ideology, but in reality black settlement in urban areas beyond the Bantustans was a permanent fixture. White dependence on black labour led to the settlement of millions of Africans in South Africa’s capitals, although their residence was mainly restricted to the cities’ peripheries with the exception of domestic workers who were often housed on the property of their employers.¹⁵

“Apartheid itself was a profoundly spatial practice”, and the cities was its “prime focal points”.¹⁶ South Africa’s urban areas were “distorted” by segregation. Man-made and natural barriers were used to separate white and black communities, and the cities’ transport systems constructed so as to restrict the mobility of black workers, who formed the core of the labour economy. The resistance struggle was waged largely on urban territory, with the call to make the townships ungovernable an obvious means of claiming ownership over the areas where most urban blacks were compelled to live. The struggle rhetoric of the Azanian People’s Liberation Army (APLA), for example, rallied against the

injustice of apartheid's spatial policies with a particular focus on white-owned farmlands. White farmers were cast as 'settlers' and 'aliens', and blacks as the original and true owners of the land.

One example, which illuminates the politicisation of popular culture, whereby black resistance to white colonisation was symbolically conveyed through a televisual reference, was the proliferation of the letter 'V', simply spraypainted onto many of the walls of informal urban settlements around Johannesburg and Cape Town. This graffiti was a direct reference to the American television series *V* ('The Visitors'), screened between 1984-5, in which extraterrestrial life forms attempt to take over the population of earth, whose heroic inhabitants struggle to free themselves from colonisation. As the anti-apartheid resistance struggle reached a head in the mid to late 1980s, the attempted military occupation of the township fuelled the urban uprising. It was to this occupation that the protest graffiti of *V* referred. Opposition to apartheid land and settlement policies were central to the anti-apartheid resistance, and part of the ANC's electoral campaign for 1994 focused on the just redistribution of land.

While apartheid's end ushered in greater freedom of urban movement and settlement for the lower classes, it has also seen the emergence of a 'hostile privatisation' among the elite.¹⁷ In post-apartheid Johannesburg, the mid 1990s saw the occupation of the city centre (the traditional seat of dominance) by the ranks of the previously excluded.¹⁸ But the result was not greater opportunity for the settlers. Capital fled to the suburban and 'exurban' zones, and Sandton was established as the new core of wealth, enterprise, and privilege. A special subsidiary organisation was established within the Gauteng police force in order to evict illegal inhabitants from buildings, many of which were situated in the heart of Johannesburg. The organisation became known as the 'red ants', a colloquialism which conveys the harmful, biting effects of their work.¹⁹ According to the Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions, the city of Johannesburg's plans by 2008 to evict the inhabitants of 235 'bad buildings', would leave approximately 67 000 residents homeless.²⁰ These residents have resorted to the appalling conditions of these buildings in the hope of a better livelihood offered by the urban locale.

In the suburbs of Johannesburg, the gating of suburban blocks and the restriction of entry points, often manned by private security guards, saw the large-scale emergence of 'privatopias'. These are defined by Steven Flusty and Michael Dear as "private [areas of] housing based in common interest developments and administered by homeowners associations". They are the quintessential form of the edge city, the metropolis whose wealthy classes have distanced and ensconced themselves in luxurious suburbs. Flusty and Dear argue that the growth of 'privatopias' is provoked by a culture of non-participation,²¹ its impenetrability and elitism fuelling the discontent of the underclass and resulting in increased violence and antagonism, a theme prominent in *Tsotsi*.

With the collapse of apartheid and the onset of the democratic transition, the pursuit of new urban dynamics has become one of the ANC's most important yet

unattainable goals. This is conveyed through its massive expenditure on improvements in housing, electricity, and water access in many of the cities' informal settlements. It is also conveyed through the invocation of struggle history in the social construction of space, for example in the Mandela Museum project which is part of the Presidential Urban Renewal programme.

Fana Sihlongonyane has documented how an "official struggle memory" is being utilised in order to shape urban spaces in South Africa as a dual result of the state's developmental goals and its commemorative efforts centred on struggle heroes.²² However, using the construction of the Nelson Mandela Museum in Alexandra as a primary example, Sihlongonyane has argued that these goals have at times had a negative effect on marginalised communities. In the case of the Mandela Museum, Sihlongonyane has shown that the Museum's construction led to the displacement of 48 families. Because this development was meant to memorialise the ideals of justice and equality, the irony of this displacement is tremendous.

The meaning of spatiality in film

In the decades since Michel Foucault, increasing attention has been focused on the organisation of space as a social expression of dominance and resistance. Edward Soja has explained that "relations of power and discipline are inscribed into the apparently innocent spatial ordering of social life", and that "human geographies [have] become filled with politics and ideology".²³ The ways in which these human geographies have been represented in cinema is of particular importance because of the spatial quality of the medium. Cinema is arguably best understood "in terms of the organisation of space", the space of the shot and the setting, the geographical ordering of sequences, and the mapping of different lived environments and the human actions they incorporate. The spatiality of cinema imbues the medium with a special potential to illuminate the geopolitical significance of the human environment, especially with reference to its most intricate concentration, that of the city.

The city as AIDS dystopia in film

The American megalopoli of San Francisco, Los Angeles and New York were the first sites of HIV's emergence in the opening years of the 1980s. Because American society's initial understanding of AIDS linked the pandemic with metropolitan gay men, intravenous drug users, and prostitutes, responsibility for the disease's spread in the global north has long been attributed to the supposed deviance of certain urban communities. The establishment of risk categories for HIV served to locate the threat outside the individual, and to perpetuate self-spun illusions of safety.

The perceived spatial specificity of HIV was also invoked to expunge risk. Age-old beliefs about the city as a site of disease, alienation and anomie were revived, and representations of the city as an 'AIDS dystopia' proliferated. The dystopia is a negative utopia, an image of human society that is usually beset by disease, pollution, overpopulation, or violence, and terrorised by authoritarianism,

intractable bureaucracy, or their inverse, the anarchic absence of governmental control.

As an introduction to the more recent depictions of HIV and the city in South African films, this article discusses the signification of the city as an AIDS dystopia in the controversial Hollywood film, *Kids* (1995). In its archetypal portrayal of the city as a diseased dystopia, *Kids* has much in common with Gavin Hood's Oscar-winning *Tsotsi*. *Kids* and *Tsotsi* both follow gangs of anomic youngsters as they hurtle through their respective urban playgrounds: New York and Johannesburg. Both films feature scenes of explicit violence committed by their young characters in the forms of severe beatings of other youngsters and assaults on women.

The cities' transience and their atmosphere of anonymity are similarly underscored in *Kids* and *Tsotsi* in scenes that depict busy train stations and their hurried commuters. Both films also portray a disabled character at the train station, who embodies the hardships of urban existence and the callous attitude of the city's inhabitants. *Kids* and *Tsotsi* are accompanied by soundtracks that are auditory configurations of both the settings and the characters' personalities. *Kids* features the signature infusion of hardcore punk and hip-hop by the Beastie Boys, while *Tsotsi* is set to the pumping sound of Zola's Kwaito. But while there are numerous similarities in setting and action, there are great divergences in the characters' perceptions and experiences of AIDS.

Kids follows a group of hooliganistic adolescents as they move around the streets, parks and apartments of New York, participating in criminal acts and pursuing sex and intoxication with destructive abandon. Adult figures of authority are conspicuously absent, and those who are present, such as the mother of the male protagonist Telly, are of dubious moral standing.²⁴ *Kids* subverts notions of innocence and guilt regarding HIV infection, as the female protagonist, Jennie, contracts HIV from her first and only experience of sexual intercourse, whereas her friend Ruby, who has had unprotected sex with numerous partners, is pronounced "clean" from any infections.

The film conveys a pervasive sense of metropolitan moral corruption, partly perceptible in the grimy sheen that coats its characters as they trundle through the subways and parks of the city. A racy scene at a club shows three youngsters high on ecstasy publicly engaging in group sex, and Telly (the film's protagonist who has transmitted HIV to Jenny), deflowers two girls on a single day after lying to them about his feelings for them. He refuses to wear a condom on both occasions. Although Telly is HIV positive, he and his friends seem almost oblivious to the disease and the extent to which it affects them. This is demonstrated in a scene that takes place in an apartment sitting room in which a group of boys discuss sex. The dialogue is as follows:

TELLY: All I know is that condoms suck. They don't work. They break. They slip off. It's impossible to feel anything. They make your dick shrink.

PAUL: That's the whole thing. You know if you look at it. I mean all you hear about is disease this and disease that. And everyone's dying. And you better wear a condom or else. But the truth is. I don't know any kids with AIDS. No one I know has ever died from that shit. It's like some weird make-believe story that the whole world believes.

TELLY: Yep.

CASPER: Yeah. It's a great big fraud.

The girls are more attuned to the dangers that sexually transmitted infections pose, but they still discuss and participate in numerous unsafe sexual encounters. And while Ruby's character does describe one such encounter as "a *mistake*", none of the many instances of sex that take place during the film includes a condom.

In contrast to this atmosphere of denialism and irresponsibility, the characters in *Tsotsi* are beset by ubiquitous messages about the disease. A leitmotif in the form of a billboard proclaims: "Everybody is affected by HIV and AIDS". Its repeated appearance in prime urban locales around Johannesburg echoes its stated message about the pervasiveness of the disease itself, as well as its portrayal of the notion of shared public responsibility for the pandemic. While the HIV positive characters in *Kids* are attractive and vital, both of them in the initial stage of the disease, the HIV positive character in *Tsotsi* is bed-ridden and plagued by facial lesions, signs that she reached an advanced stage of AIDS.

After the young Tsotsi flees the scene of domestic violence perpetrated by his drunken father against his dying mother, the older Tsotsi is shown sitting inside an abandoned cement pipe with his younger incarnation. This flashback scene conveys a strong sense of Johannesburg as a diseased dystopia. The viewer soon learns that the nine year-old Tsotsi has fled the sickness and brutality of his township home for good, and has lived the rest of his childhood in one of a cluster of pipes inhabited by other street children. In the following scene, we meet the current community of these children, Tsotsi's successors. The baby that Tsotsi has unwittingly kidnapped will not stop crying. As Tsotsi shakes the infant, he asks: "What? You want to go back to your big fancy home? I'll show you home." He puts the baby into a paper bag and walks over to the pipes, situated just outside of the township and across a rubbish-strewn river.

As Tsotsi approaches, some filthy, ragged children emerge, one of them wielding a stick for protection. This community of homeless children constitutes a searing portrayal of urban anomie, the disappearance of social and familial responsibility, and the incapacity of the South African state to structure the social realm. Tsotsi takes the infant from the shopping bag and offers it to the children, to which their leader responds: "Fuck off man, we can't feed it". This utterance conveys the lack of innocence and security that characterises the lives of these

street children, who, at the time of the film's production, were homeless in reality as well as in the film.

While *Tsotsi* is ultimately a story of redemption, and includes picturesque portrayals of the Johannesburg skyline at sunset, and of the leafy avenues of the wealthy suburbs, far more prominent are the depictions of urban decay. Lingering images of the Witbank township—a seething slum that extends as far as the eye can see—combines with closer depictions of Tsotsi's rusted, insect-infested shack, the sullied street corners and railway tracks, to portray the city as a nightmarish underworld, an urban dystopia in the truest sense.

The city's brutalisation is underscored by various scenes. After Tsotsi and his gang have stabbed and robbed an innocent commuter, they abandon his corpse. The attack takes place in a packed train compartment, but the fact that no-one witnesses it emphasises the blinded alienation of the crowd. The house belonging to the elite couple who Tsotsi robs is guarded by high walls and an electronic gate, a mini-privatopia. This edifice of privilege is another symbol of polarisation, as it stands on the opposite extremity of the crowded squalor of Tsotsi's township. The fact that the elite couple is black foregrounds South African inequality in its newest inception: the material enrichment of a minority while the majority of citizens remain poor, sick, and spatially apart.

The film's selective construction of the city conveys the fragmentation of its characters' identities. Images of dystopic decay (shacks, graffitied walls, a homeless cripple, and a poor black mother dying of AIDS) are juxtaposed with those of privilege (the mansion's opulent interior and its inhabitants' luxury cars) to promote a discourse of division.²⁵ Thus, the film's use of vastly different locational zones, navigated by an ever-anxious Tsotsi, emphasises the isolation of the protagonist and addresses the socio-economic issues at the heart of current cultural production in South Africa. In this context, the burglary scene in which Tsotsi enters the nursery bears further examination.

While the other members of his gang ransack the house, Tsotsi stands spellbound in the baby's room, looking around him at this child's paradise. Piled with hundreds of toys and stocked with baby supplies, a night-light casts shadows on the wall and lends the room a soothing ambience. Tsotsi's enrapture with the space and its paraphernalia of coddled infancy stems from his own experiential and material lack. His bereft state is brought to the fore by this perusal of its opposite – abundance. Covering the nursery walls is a mural of an enormous baobab tree at sunset. The image mirrors a later scene in which the same sunset colours provide the lingering backdrop of the Johannesburg skyline, the glass and cement forming a marked contrast to the quiet organic value of the tree. The message of the contrast is that of paradise lost, the replacement of the iconic rural state is represented by the tree, contrasted with the city's high-rises, indices of capital²⁶ and—in Tsotsi's case—exclusion.

In an article on sexual socialisation in South Africa, Peter Delius and Clive Glaser document the history of black perceptions of cities as “dens of iniquity

and epicentres of oppression”, known, for example, to Pedi migrants as ‘Makgoweng’ (the place of whites) or ‘Leshokeng’ (a wilderness).²⁷ The rapid urbanisation, labour migration, social disruption, and high levels of transactional sex that have characterised black South African urban existence for decades has long been implicated in the dissemination of the HIV/AIDS pandemic.²⁸

Moreover, because the first diagnosed cases of HIV were among the gay community, closely followed by instances on the mines and among the inhabitants of Soweto, the perception endures that the disease came from overseas, from the gay meccas of the United States and Europe, and that it found a nesting ground among promiscuous black urban youth.²⁹ The result is that cities have generally been regarded as hotbeds of HIV infection, their inhabitants vectors of the virus, while rural areas are perceived as havens from unsafe practices. While recent research has proved this to be a fallacy, and that HIV infection rates in rural areas are often higher than the rates of cities,³⁰ the perception is grounded in age-old beliefs that have been expressed through various channels of cultural production. For instance, in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, Phaswane Mpe wrote:

This AIDS, according to popular understandings, was caused by foreign germs that travelled down from the central and western parts of Africa... Migrants... deduced from such media reports that AIDS’s travel route into Johannesburg was through *Makwerekwere*; and Hillbrow was the sanctuary in which *Makwerekwere* basked.

There were others who went even further, saying that AIDS was caused by the bizarre sexual behaviour of the Hillbrowans.

How could any man have sex with another man? they demanded to know.³¹

The use of the city as a metaphor for the decay of modern society is also a long-established trope in South African cinema.³² In numerous seminal films³³ the city is portrayed as fostering disease, prostitution, criminality, and the collapse of traditional African society.³⁴ These include the classics *Jim Comes to Jo’burg* (1949) and *Cry the Beloved Country* (1951). Director Darrell James Roodt, in the commentary on his film, *Yesterday*, discusses the “sub-genre of film in South Africa... about rural people going to the city”, counting *Yesterday* among these. It is to the rural/urban divide that the film represents that the discussion will now turn.

Yesterday is primarily set in a village called Rooihoek, an archetypal South African rurality located in KwaZulu’s Valley of a Thousand Hills. The protagonist, after whom the film is named, is a young, illiterate mother whose life is devoted to the quiet rhythms of rural life: collecting water from the communal pump, washing clothes in a mountain stream, gathering firewood, tending her vegetable patch, and caring for her small daughter (Beauty). While the village is poor and lacks electricity and running water, there is a sense of

communal conviviality among its female inhabitants. They gather around the water pump and engage spiritedly with each other, while the proximity of their matchbox houses reinforces the intimacy of their ties.

Men are absent from village life, although they are eluded to with mocking derision in a scene at the water pump in which the excesses of masculine libido are bemoaned. The absence of men is attributed to the migrant labour system, the salaries of which ensure the village's survival. The iniquities of the system that engenders the prolonged separation of husbands and wives is articulated through the following exchange between Yesterday and the village teacher:

TEACHER: Where is your husband?

YESTERDAY: He works in Johannesburg.

TEACHER: How often do you see him?

YESTERDAY: Uh, sometimes once a month. Sometimes not for many months. [She sighs sadly.]

TEACHER: It is hard.

YESTERDAY: Yes. It is hard.

Yesterday's life is thrown into disarray by an HIV-positive diagnosis at an understaffed rural clinic, and she is urged by the doctor to find her mining husband so that he too may be tested. The following dialogue takes place in the doctor's consulting room:

DOCTOR: And where is he, your husband?

YESTERDAY: He works in Johannesburg, under the ground.

DOCTOR: Under the ground?

YESTERDAY: In the mines.

DOCTOR: When last did you see him?

YESTERDAY: On New Year's Day. Then he had to go back.

DOCTOR: I see. And do you enjoy a normal, healthy sex life? [Yesterday looks down embarrassedly.] Do you have sex [with a smile]?

YESTERDAY [bashfully]: Yebo. You know what men are like after they have been away for a long time.

DOCTOR [laughing]: I know. It is important that I test him as soon as possible.

YESTERDAY: Test him? But he's in Johannesburg.

DOCTOR: Which mine?

YESTERDAY: I don't know.

DOCTOR: Can you find out?

YESTERDAY: I will try.

The dialogue expresses Yesterday's sense of the city's bewildering enormity. Her ignorance of her husband John's specific site of employment emphasises her unfamiliarity with the sprawling mine complex of the Rand, and situates her even more firmly within the realm of her rurality. The dialogue also establishes a peripheral sense of the diseased dystopia, conveyed earlier on in the scene when Yesterday learns that she is HIV positive despite the fact that John has been her only sexual partner. As the predominant mode of HIV transmission in South Africa is via heterosexual intercourse, the implicit meaning is that Yesterday has contracted the disease from her husband, who was himself infected while working in Johannesburg. That Roodt intended to express this to the viewer is evinced in his commentary on the mine's setting:

Men are forced to live in these terrible things called hostels. It's just a breeding ground for things like AIDS because all go to the local prostitutes... These men are away from their wives and away from home. So, you know, men being men they are naturally attracted to the underworld. So they go in search of whores and prostitutes. And I guess that's where it starts, and that's where it starts to spread. And the men take it back with them to the rural areas and pass it on like that.

It is therefore the director's explicit purpose to express to the viewer that infected city-dwellers are the source of the disease, and that the promiscuous habits supposedly rife among Johannesburg's mining communities are to blame for the spread of HIV to the country.

Yesterday is compelled by her doctor to journey to the city, the ground zero of her infection, in order to find her husband and disclose her status. Her journey is in keeping with the South African cinematic tradition of the country bumpkin's 'epic voyage', as mentioned above, where Yesterday must confront what Roodt describes as the "big evils" (as faced by her cinematic predecessors in films such as *Jim Comes to Joburg* and *Cry, the Beloved Country*). While Yesterday's stay in the city is too brief to result in the moral corruption that conventionally accompanies the urbanisation of rural characters in South African films, she is subjected to the violence and alienation that affirms the dystopic nature of Johannesburg.

On arrival in the city, footage of the dizzying heights and sharp angles of the buildings, combined with the cacophony of urban noises that combine on the soundtrack, are in pointed contrast to the calm, quiet slowness of Yesterday's village. While her village home is a haven of familiarity and communal concern, the city is inhabited solely by strangers, whose ephemerality and indifference are conveyed by their depiction as fleeting shadows on the street. Yesterday's excitement at being in the big city is soon overcome by fear (registered in her facial expression) as she journeys to the mine to see her husband on a bus stocked solely with male passengers. Once again, this underscores the difference of the city in comparison to the village, and Yesterday is shown clutching her bag to her chest, looking worriedly at her surroundings.

On arrival at the mine, images of whirring machines towering above her further emphasise Yesterday's alienation and anxiety, as well as the dehumanising nature of the mine's mechanics. Her position as a vulnerable outsider, a result of her combined femininity and rurality, is further conveyed as she walks towards the mine office past a group of labourers who whistle and jeer at her. Their dirty overalls, hard-hats and swaggering steps are the converse of her modest church dress, soft *doek* and timid movements. These labourers are representatives of the urban workforce, Yesterday of rural domesticity.

Yesterday's reunion with her husband takes place in a darkened thoroughfare between the shaft entrance and the living compound, a marked contrast to the light-saturated, colourful setting of the village. As John Khumalo sees his wife, he stops in his tracks, feet apart in a stance of masculine defiance, and without greeting or touching her gruffly asks: "What do you want?" Yesterday approaches him cautiously and sets her case down on the floor. Still, he makes no move towards her and is turned to face the exit rather than his wife. He asks her if something has happened to their daughter, Beauty, to which Yesterday replies that she is fine. He then asks, "If it's money...?", the offence of which is not lost on the viewer who has witnessed Yesterday's extreme frugality in household matters. The next scene in which she discloses her HIV status to John is shot from the inside of the mine manager's office, a symbolic site of masculine authority.

The viewer watches the ensuing action from a window behind the mine manager's head, and the inaudibility of the dialogue allows for personal interpretation. There is no ambiguity, however, in the extreme brutality of John's reaction. He shouts at Yesterday as she implores him, and a second later begins to beat her. Inside the mine office the manager turns around to look at the scene of terror, shakes his head, and then returns to reading his newspaper. This gesture of insidious collusion conveys the callousness and brutality of urbanised men who work on the mines. The frightening, sinister notes that accompanied the opening few seconds of the beating fade out to a silence that echoes Yesterday's supposed loss of consciousness. The ferocity of John's reaction to his wife's disclosure amounts to a searing vilification of metropolitan, masculine brutality, and its avowal through the manager's complicity.

The theme of male responsibility for the spread of the HIV/AIDS pandemic is a recurrent theme in filmic representations of HIV/AIDS. Men are portrayed as the 'drivers' of the epidemic, whose sexual promiscuity and domination is implicated in the HIV infection of their female partners.³⁵ High rates of sexual violence, and a culture of endemic coerced and transactional sex are implicated in South Africa's high prevalence of HIV.³⁶ The South African National Sexual Assault Policy attests to the magnitude of the problem, and cites the statistical discrepancy between the numbers of rapes reported to the police and those that were documented by a representative community-based survey.³⁷ The apparent difficulty in achieving convictions for the perpetrators of sexual assault discourages women from reporting the crimes, and fosters a culture of impunity around the crimes.³⁸

Due to their inferior social status, women are more vulnerable to HIV infection than men and disproportionately account for approximately 60 percent of HIV infections in South Africa. In Yesterday's later role as caregiver to her recalcitrant husband as he dies of AIDS, and in the sacrifices she makes to nurse him, she represents the South African 'everywoman'.

The film's next scene offers a juxtaposition between John's personality when at home in the village, and his brutal demeanour on the mine. In a poignant montage, Yesterday's memories of John's last return to the village are shot with a haze filter that expresses their romanticised retrospection. Footage shows their tender reunion, the couple kissing, and John presenting Yesterday with a gift that she adores. These images are spliced with footage of Yesterday's battered face, the result of John's attack. The last images of the city are viewed from the bus window behind Yesterday, while she cries quietly on her journey back home. The images form a blurred backdrop to her grief, and thereby conclude the city's presentation as a place of destabilisation and despair.

John is eventually forced to return to the village. He is fired from his job on the mines because of a humiliating inability to control his bowels, the result of his illness from AIDS. John is dying, but the rural hospital is unable to offer him a bed. Instead of a treatment centre, it has become a deathly AIDS infirmary. Because of the lack of a rural male presence in the rest of the film, the footage of the hospital ward whose patients are solely young black men like John conveys a sense that they too were migrants, who, as in his case, have returned home to die. John's wasting disease reveals his AIDS illness to the women villagers, who grow increasingly paranoid about their proximity to the disease.³⁹ The following discussion takes place between some of the local women at the communal water pump:

Woman 1 (a widow): Your husbands are bringing it to you.

Woman 2: Yes, we get it from them.

Woman 3: You must see how she coughs. There she is. [Yesterday approaches the pump, and the women scramble away from her as though her mere presence were contaminating.]

The message is once again conveyed that the city is the source of the disease, and that migrating husbands are the vectors. While the village becomes another site of exclusion, the diseased dystopia of Johannesburg is the geographical source of John's (and therefore Yesterday's) infection. John's migration back from the city has conveyed the epidemic⁴⁰ to the rural and domestic spheres. Johannesburg, as both the geographical source and the site of infection, is therefore implicated in the death that ensues.

Conclusion

The theme of the city as an HIV/AIDS dystopia has characterised films about the disease since its emergence. Seminal Hollywood productions such as *Kids*⁴¹ have, in varying degrees, represented the city as a site of proliferating HIV infections, anomie, violence, and ultimately death. *Kids* portrays New York as a place of potent nihilism and the corruption of innocence. In its concentration of brutality, disease and despair, the city's portrayal has much in common with the depictions of Johannesburg in *Yesterday* and *Tsotsi*. Nevertheless it would be untrue to claim that these two South African films subscribe to the closed representational categories of a 'rural paradise' versus a 'diseased dystopia'. *Yesterday*'s rurality is also a site of exclusion and suffering, while *Tsotsi*'s city forms the backdrop to the protagonist's redemption.

The perpetual mobility and ephemerality that characterises the postcolonial city subverts forms of stable representation, offering instead ambivalent images of the environment. Although *Yesterday* leaves the city in a state of battered misery, her expression on arrival registers excitement and anticipation that conveys a new sense of opportunity. And while *Tsotsi*'s Johannesburg often appears as a 'nightmare-scape', teeming with poverty and crime (partly of his own making), there is a sense of urban serenity and empathy in the quieter moments of the film. The tranquil cityscape and pastel colours of skyline in one sunset scene, for example, are accompanied by the soothing, drawn out notes of Vusi Mahlasela. But despite these small contradictions, the city of these two South African films is primarily a place of violence and inequality, class and gender oppression, and a source of immorality and disease. It is an urban dystopia that offers only the slimmest chance of escape and upliftment.

Notes

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² WHO, UNAIDS and UNICEF, *Epidemiological Fact Sheet on HIV/AIDS: core data on epidemiology and response: South Africa, 2008 Update* (Geneva: UNAIDS, 2008), p. 7.

³ The National Department of Health, South Africa, *National HIV and Syphilis Prevalence Survey* (Pretoria: Department of Health, 2007), p. 24.

- ⁴ The National Department of Health, *South Africa National Sexual Assault Policy* (Pretoria: Department of Health, 2005), pp. 4–5.
- ⁵ The National Department of Health, South Africa, *National HIV and Syphilis Prevalence Survey for South Africa* (Pretoria: Department of Health, 2008), p. 11.
- ⁶ Tony Barnett and Alan Whiteside, *AIDS in the Twenty-First Century: Disease and Globalization* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp. 151–152.
- ⁷ Saul Benatar, “Health care reform and the crisis of HIV and AIDS in South Africa”, *New England Journal of Medicine*, 351.1 (2004), pp. 81–92.
- ⁸ Jeremy Black, *The World in the Twentieth Century* (London: Longman, 2000), p. 52.
- ⁹ John Comaroff, “Images of Empire, Contests of Conscience: Models of Colonial Domination in South Africa” eds. Frederick Cooper and Anne Laura Stoler, *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (California: University of California Press, 1997), p. 173.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid* p. 175.
- ¹¹ Jennifer Beinart, “Darkly Through a Lens: Changing perceptions of the African child in sickness and health, 1900–1945”, ed. Roger Cooter, *In the Name of the Child: Health and Welfare, 1880–1940* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 220–43; p. 236.
- ¹² Johannesburg is the world’s largest city that is not built or near to a great body of water. The profitability of the mines substituted for the great impracticality of massive settlement in the face of a lack of water resources.
- ¹³ Comaroff, 1997, p. 221.
- ¹⁴ Karen Jochelson, “Sexually transmitted diseases in nineteenth and twentieth-century South Africa”, eds. Philip Setel, Milton Lewis and Maryinez Lyons, *Histories of Sexually Transmitted Diseases and HIV/AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa* (London: Greenwood Press, 1999), p. 228.
- ¹⁵ Gary Baines, “Representing the Apartheid City: South African Cinema in the 1950s and Jamie Uys’s *The Urgent Queue*”, eds. Mark Shiel and Tony Fitzmaurice, *Cinema and the City: Film and Urban Societies in a Global Context* (London: Blackwell, 1999), p. 186.
- ¹⁶ Sophie Body-Gendrot and Robert Beauregard, eds., *The Urban Moment: Cosmopolitan Essays on the Late-20th Century City* (London: Sage, 1999), p. 11.
- ¹⁷ Steven Flusty and Michael Dear, “Invitation to a Postmodern Urbanism”, eds. Sophie Body-Gendrot and Robert Beauregard, *The Urban Moment*, p. 30.
- ¹⁸ Alan Mabin, “The Urban World Through a South African Prism”, Sophie Body-Gendrot and Robert Beauregard (eds) *The Urban Moment*, p. 144.
- ¹⁹ Alex Eliseev, “Red ants evicted us like animals, says family”, *The Star*, 27 October 2006: 2; Lee Rondganger, “Commotion as Red Ants evict squatters”, *The Star*, 31 May 2006: 2.
- ²⁰ Author not known, “South Africa: Johannesburg.” *Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions*. Online. Internet. 6 December 2008. Available: <http://www.cohre.org/southafrica>
- ²¹ Flusty and Dear, p. 30.
- ²² Fana Sihlongonyane, *The Nelson Mandela Museum and the Tyranny of Political Symbol* (Forthcoming, 2009).
- ²³ As cited in Shiel, “Cinema and the City”, Shiel and Fitzmaurice. (eds) *Cinema and the City* (Oxford, Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 5.
- ²⁴ This is demonstrated, for example, by the scene in which Telly’s mother smokes a cigarette while breastfeeding her newborn baby.
- ²⁵ See Kgafela Oa Magogodi, “Sexuality, Power, and the Black Body in *Mapantsula* and *Fools*”, eds. Isabel Balseiro and Ntongela Masilela, *To Change Reels: Film and Film Culture in South Africa* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003), p. 188, for a discussion of similar split in poor/opulent visual worlds in two other seminal South African films.
- ²⁶ Mike Mason, “*Naked*: Social Realism and the Urban Wasteland”, eds. Shiel and Fitzmaurice, *Cinema and the City*, p. 244.
- ²⁷ Peter Delius and Clive Glaser, “Sexual Socialisation in South Africa: A Historical Perspective”, *African Studies*, 61(1), 2002, p. 35.
- ²⁸ Shula Marks, “An Epidemic Waiting to Happen? The Spread of HIV/AIDS in South Africa in Social and Historical Perspective”, *African Studies*, 61(1) 2002, p. 17.
- ²⁹ See Rob Durrant, *Future Imperfect: Episode Twelve (AIDS)*. (Johannesburg: Wartenweiler Library, Multimedia Centre, 1995) for an example of a televised panel discussion regarding the emergence of HIV in South Africa. The panel is especially illuminating in terms of the racist conceptions some of the panellists hold towards black promiscuity.

³⁰ Nicoli Nicoli, "Poverty, sex and the international response to AIDS", poster presented at the 2008 International AIDS Conference (Mexico City, 3–8 August 2008).

³¹ Phaswane Mpe, *Welcome To Our Hillbrow* (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu Natal Press, 2001), p. 3–4.

³² Baines, p. 186.

³³ *Jim Comes to Jo'burg, Cry the Beloved Country* and *Come Back Africa* among them.

³⁴ Peter Davis, *In Darkest Hollywood: Exploring the jungles of cinema's South Africa* (Randburg: Ravan Press, 1996), p. 40.

³⁵ R. Hodes, "HIV/AIDS in South African Documentary Film, c. 1990 – 2000", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 33 (1) 2007, pp. 153–171.

³⁶ Liz Walker, Graeme Reid and Morna Cornell, *Waiting to Happen: HIV/AIDS in South Africa* (Cape Town: Double Storey Books, 2004), pp. 38–51.

³⁷ Rachel Jewkes and Naeema Abrahams, "The epidemiology of rape and sexual coercion in South Africa: an overview", *Social Science and Medicine*, 55, 2002, pp. 153–166.

³⁸ The National Department of Health, *South Africa National Sexual Assault Polic*, p. 24.

³⁹ See Jonny Steinberg *The Three-Lettered Plague* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2008) for a study of the perceptions of the HIV epidemic and its treatment in rural Lusikisiki.

⁴⁰ It is interesting to note that epidemic comes from the Latin 'epidēmos', meaning 'foreigner'.

⁴¹ Other seminal movies from the early 1990s include *And the Band Played On* and *Philadelphia*.