The Blind Side (2009)

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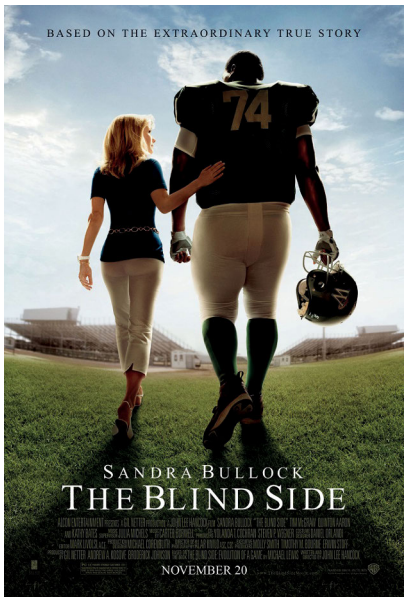
dir. John Lee Hancock; prod. Andrew A. Kosove, Broderick Johnson, Gil Netter; screenplay John Lee Hancock; photography Alar Kivilo; music Carter Burwell. 35mm, color, 129 mins. Alcon Entertainment, distrib. Warner Bros.



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The Blind Side is a film adaptation of Michael Lewis' 2006 book *The Blind Side: Evolution of a Game*, in part a biography of NFL star Michael Oher. A sports drama, social problem film, and melodrama, it became a major success and was nominated for Best Picture, grossing more than $309 million. The film resonates with a repertoire of ideologies prominent throughout American cultural history: heroism, exceptionalism, rugged individualism, and upward mobility. It evokes multiple trajectories of American cultural expression, including didactic life narratives like those of Benjamin Franklin and Barack Obama; 19th century women's sentimental fiction and social critique, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*; or mid-20th century social problem films, such as → *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967). The most pertinent criticism aimed at *The Blind Side* is its catering to White sensibilities—that is, White discomfort when confronted with White privilege and systemic racism (see DiAngelo). The film resounds with problematic dimensions—overwhelmingly negative and stereotypical portrayal of Black communities and identity, White saviorism, and trivialized discussion of racism—manifest in a range of contemporary popular productions, notably *Akeelah and the Bee* (2006), → *Invictus* (2009), *The Help* (2011), *Twelve Years A Slave* (2013), and *Green Book* (2018) (Pimentel and Santillanes; Burris). *The Blind Side* thereby constitutes a »post-9/11 Hollywood race drama« (Burris), exploiting claims of authenticity and superficially presenting anti-racist viewpoints, while in fact rather reaffirming racial divides and ignoring institutional responsibilities.

Set in Memphis, Tennessee, *The Blind Side* portrays the story of Michael Oher (played by Quinton Aaron), a Black teenage boy who is accepted into the all-White Wingate Christian School because of his promising athletic skills and the teachers' paternalistic

benevolence. The wealthy Tuohy family then offers him educational guidance and a new home in an affluent suburban neighborhood. They supposedly rescue him from Hurt Village, a stereotypical Black »ghetto.« In the end, Michael graduates from high school, and, after being heavily recruited, he accepts a football scholarship at Ole Miss, the alma mater of his adoptive parents and center of their sports enthusiasm. A sequence of images of the »real« Tuohy family and Michael Oher concludes the film.

This claim to presenting a »true story« disguises the market-oriented formatting and almost uncanny absorption of Oher's »real« life into a White-savior narrative (see Ash). In his book, *I Beat the Odds: From Homelessness, to the Blind Side, and Beyond* (2012), as well as in public statements, Oher has challenged the film's depiction of his younger self as lacking intellectual abilities and football skills. The movie also significantly digresses from Oher's life by establishing the Tuohy family as his sole supporters (Pimentel and Santillanes).

Such alterations produce an unambiguous attribution of melodramatic roles. The White heroine, Leigh Anne Tuohy, saves the Black boy, Michael. The White-savior theme (see Ash; DiAngelo 89-98) is exacerbated, on the one hand, by the capacity of Sandra Bullock (who won an Academy Award and Golden Globe for her performance) to draw public attention as the star cast as Leigh Anne, and, on the other hand, by additional White saviors like the teachers and football coach at Wingate. Creating a feel-good opportunity for identification with the positively presented White characters, the movie renders any confrontation with white privilege dismissible. As »nice« religious, patriotic, Southern Republicans—in the year of President Obama's first inauguration—the Tuohy family, *pars pro toto*, suggests that White America is constituted by »good people« to be acquitted on all accounts.

In the film, Michael is fashioned as a naïve *tabula rasa* to be shaped by Whites, thus justifying notions of White superiority and supremacy. Reflecting anti-Black stereotypes of the animalistic brute, the film constructs Michael as unintelligent but excelling at »protective instinct,« which enables him to safeguard others' (read: Whites') blind side (DiAngelo 96-98). White characters like Leigh Anne, schoolteachers, and his adoptive little brother S. J. (played by Jae Head) run both his intellectual and football lives, all while Michael remains silent. The visually grotesque apposition of the tiny S. J. and the gentle giant »Big Mike«—their friendship may remind viewers of Huck Finn and Jim—provides comic relief to the serious bipolarity within the film's simplistic dichotomies. Yet the humor comes at the Black character's expense and solidifies the racial divide—given that the »grotesque« in American literature is defined as the juxtaposition of *incongruous* parts. Michael's construction resembles the clichéd roles of Uncle Tom, the »black saint« (Anthony Appiah), and, to some extent, the »magical negro« (Glenn and Cunningham; see Hughey on »cinethetic racism« and »magical negro« films). Michael is reduced to a catalyst for Leigh Anne's personal development from distrusting him to defending him against the racism of her White elite friends.

In essence, *The Blind Side* is a film about Leigh Anne, the plot-driving melodramatic heroine. Her voiceover frames the story, and the camera frequently traces her (and other White people's) views of Michael (see Pimentel and Santillanes' concept of »the white cinematic lens«). While Michael now has his first-ever bed, he has neither a past nor a voice. He is constructed as assimilated into the White family and its internal hierarchy and is supposedly thankful for Leigh Anne's leadership and care. Adoptive father Sean Tuohy (played by Tim McGraw) suggests that Michael wants to and can

forget his traumatic past. The audience learns hardly anything about Michael that is temporally or spatially situated outside his new life with the Tuohy family (see Burris). Instead of advocating for shared humanity by portraying complex Black characters, *The Blind Side* implies that Black identities are only acceptable for White saviors (and audiences) when they are flawless and malleable.

Within the film's array of »good« vs. »evil« binaries, Michael is the solitary—and hence exceptional—»good« Black character. Black people in Hurt Village are characterized as criminal, poor, sexually transgressive drug dealers, and, in the logics of »colorblind« racism (see Bonilla-Silva), as themselves responsible for their situations. The Black social worker and lawyer also lack any positive traits (see DiAngelo 96-98). Despite a brief sentimental moment of connection between Michael's mother Denise (played by Adriane Lenox) and Leigh Anne, the character constellation positions the two women as opposites: Leigh Anne ostensibly succeeds in caring for Michael, who eventually addresses her as mother. Denise remains the poor drug addict who can hardly identify her children's fathers, thereby reasserting stereotypes of dysfunctional Black motherhood. Pulling the core drawstrings of sentimentality, the movie presents Michael as the quasi-orphan (his father is dead) in need of Leigh Anne's motherly affection. *The Blind Side* perpetuates prototypical values of American melodrama like family and social harmony, as illustrated by the Thanksgiving scene, a core cultural performance of (White) American history and identity. Norman Rockwell's *Freedom from Want* (1943), an iconic painting in American culture inspired by Roosevelt's 1941 State of the Union Address, appears as a coffee table book and is reenacted in the Thanksgiving dinner scene, in which Leigh Anne takes on the role of *pater/mater familias*. United, the family holds hands—including Michael.

The Blind Side employs major assets of melodrama such as sentimentality, a definite dichotomy of »good« and »bad,« a strong sense of victims and saviors, an appropriation of collective ideologies, and the evocation and steering of the audience's sympathy. Not unlike the tradition of American 19th century women's popular fiction or slave narratives, the film attempts to utilize these structures of feeling to initiate reform yet avoids disturbing the audiences it wishes to teach. However, it is precisely this rigorous adherence to melodramatic conventions that causes the cementation of racial divides. At the Thanksgiving table, Michael's Blackness remains a signifier of difference. The spatial and social boundary between the Black »ghetto« and the Tuohy's White suburban neighborhood remains intact. The film's stable contrast between »good« and »bad« neighborhoods (DiAngelo) attributes Michael's problems to the Black community. Sustaining notions of individualism, *The Blind Side*'s strict distinction between »good (White) people« and »bad (White) people« (DiAngelo) explains racism as the sum of singular acts, for example by a redneck at a football game or Leigh Anne's suburban friends, and defines social justice as created by individual White acts of charity. Similarly, Leigh Anne's role as an empowered woman is an individual privilege based on class and wealth within a reproductive, heteronormative context. *The Blind Side*'s melodramatic focus on collective American narratives of individualism, compassion, and charity (see Burris) and its clinging to bipolar and flat character construction hinders it from, for example, portraying the Tuohy family as benevolent people who *nevertheless* benefit from White privilege. American melodrama prototypically advocates reform from within and avoids radical systemic disruption. Following this convention, *The Blind Side* remains informed by colorblind racism and a disregard of systemic ra-

cism. Echoing the American jeremiad, it laments the situation but promises a solution from *within* unchallenged, inherited structures—a supposition the film yet again affirms with its happy ending.

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