CHAPTER 12

“Savior,” Good Mother, Jezebel, Tom, Trickster

The Blind Side Myth

Pearlie Strother-Adams

Introduction

Singer Madonna and actress Angelina Jolie, two of Hollywood’s “bad girls” known in the past for their shockingly kinky sexual exploits, are now, ironically, hailed as America’s “good mothers,” modern-day Mother Theresas, and real-life symbols of Hollywood’s new mammy: the protector and the savior of children, especially black children. Sandra Bullock won an Oscar for best actress for her performance in The Blind Side (2009), cast as Leigh Anne Tuohy, a real-life rich white woman who, with her husband, Sean Tuohy, takes in a homeless black teenage boy, Michael Oher, who goes on to become one of the National Football League’s most prominent stars.

This chapter explores the representation of African Americans in the film The Blind Side. The film, directed by John Lee Hancock, appears simplistic on the surface; however, to the contrary, character representation and positioning are ideologically complex and methodical, seemingly by design. In order to study Hollywood’s representation of African Americans in The Blind Side in roles that deliberately play to white mainstream audiences, it is necessary to give attention to the representation of the principal white protagonist, Tuohy (Bullock), because what emerges in her character represents Hollywood’s true objective more specifically: the ideological meaning they seek to achieve and “fix” in the minds of viewers as reality, or the “norm” (Hall, Representation: Cultural 249). The purpose of this chapter is twofold. First, it argues that African Americans continue to be
overwhelmingly framed as the “Other,” defined as “dark, primitive, different” (hooks, *Black Looks* 21), a tradition that is maintained in *The Blind Side*; thus we will explore how Hollywood uses various techniques to maintain and manipulate age-old stereotypes of the African American male as the *victim, tom, savage,* and *trickster.* Second, the chapter looks at the major ideological shift in the roles of the white and black female: the white female’s progression from “needy and incapable”—requiring constant “help” with caring for herself, her family, and especially her children—to “savior” (particularly for black children), a mythological *good mother,* a Christian saint, and an archetypal *mammy,* a role traditionally and historically devised to suit black women. To the contrary, the black female in *The Blind Side* is “cast out” as *mammy* to become the archetypal, stereotypical *sapphire/jezebel.* These mythological archetypes will be discussed in greater detail later in the chapter.

Hopefully, this chapter contributes to the literature in this area and seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) Is Hollywood’s objective to establish the white female as a superwoman, the perfect wife and mother, and a savior of black children, while representing the black female as unfit as a mate and particularly as a mother and therefore detrimental to the survival of the black family and community? (2) Does Hollywood represent the black male in *The Blind Side* as alien, other, and criminal when he exists outside of and is therefore uncontained by white society?

American society presents itself as a melting pot of ethnic and racial difference; however, contemporary popular cinema gives little screen consideration to the nonwhite experience, and when it does, representations are often problematic (Gates 1). All too often, in what has proven to be suitable for mainstream consumption, African Americans are cast as a subcultural group, social outcasts, and “Others” (Campbell 15, 37, 59, 69; hooks, *Black Looks* 21–39) inhabiting and existing in a small, controlled, dingy, inner-city environment that is contained and structured to fit the context of contrived ideological themes, plots, and characterizations represented as the norm. These stereotypical representations (Hall, *Representation: Cultural* 258–89; Lipmann 81) are thus framed in such a way to show consensus and acceptance within the victimized group (African Americans) and also among others (mainstream white Americans) in Hollywood’s myopic representation of this group, which is overwhelmingly presented as existing on the peripheral, on the outskirts of guarded politically and socially correct white society: the American norm. Too often African Americans are featured in Hollywood films in shadowy, crime-ridden, drug-infested settings where crack-addicted mothers rely on welfare with their illegitimate children who rarely know their fathers and where black men are represented either as missing in action or solely as frightening, dangerous, symbolically dark, shady, gritty, one-dimensional, hard-core criminals—“thugs in the hood” who are depleted of a proper home base, void of family and a respectable station in life, without a legitimate job or formal education, and lacking in ethical and moral codes that are needed to sustain themselves, family, and community. Such portrayals have become a dominant representation of African Americans (Strother-Adams 70–91).