



# DE ONTHULLING VAN HET SACRALE

De gevolgen van de film 'Broken Rainbow' en  
andere media-bemoeienis voor de strijd van de  
Navajo- en Hopi-Indianen bij Big Mountain

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Jan van Boeckel & Ceciel Verheij, Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam, 1989.

**Revealing the Sacred: The impacts of the film 'Broken Rainbow' and other media interference on the struggle of Navajo and Hopi Indians at Big Mountain**  
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## A B S T R A C T

The central theme of this thesis is the media interference with the struggle for Big Mountain. Big Mountain, located in the northeastern part of Arizona, is a sacred place to the Navajo and Hopi Indians. The traditional Indian community of Big Mountain is part of a group of approximately 10.000 Navajos that have been ordered to relocate. In 1974 the U.S. Congress ruled that an area, which was formerly jointly used by both tribes, should be divided in two equal parts – one for each tribe. The artificial new boundary implied that also one hundred Hopis were ordered to move. Until July 7, 1986, the Indians concerned were able to move 'voluntarily'; after this date the National Guard could be called to enforce the relocation. In 1979 the Big Mountain community declared itself independent of the United States and announced that it would fight with all means possible against the upcoming deportation.

The case drew substantial national and international attention, so that in 1986 no confrontation between these Indians and the National Guard broke out. In this, the documentary film 'Broken Rainbow' (which won an Academy Award) constituted an important factor. To a large extent due to this film, public opinion began to side with the Navajos of Big Mountain. It was certain that any bloodshed would cause a lot of commotion.

In this thesis the effects of the media-intervention in the lives and struggle of the traditional Navajo and Hopi Indians are discussed. The main body of the theoretical frame of reference of the authors is derived from the philosophical insights of Walter Benjamin and Jean Baudrillard.

Benjamin's notion that pieces of art and human beings lose their aura when their likeness is reproduced by means of photography or film, is applied to the context of the 'capturing' of Indian people on film. Baudrillard's view, that the modern media no longer mediate between ourselves and reality is also taken as a point of departure to look at the issue. In his opinion the media create a so-called 'hyperreality'; they present us some sort of mockery which hardly refers to 'the real' but rather gives the image of being 'more real than reality'. In this study, Benjamin's notion of the disappearance of aura and Baudrillard's idea of the predominance of a new type of 'obscenity' are brought together in a new perspective. In the age of technical reproduction, the meaningful object swallows into 'too much presence'. The obsession to reveal every secret and to show it to an ever-bigger audience seems to correlate to the phenomenon that, as Benjamin puts it, the criterion of 'authenticity' has disappeared.

The subject of this thesis is dealt with on two levels. First, by means of a historical analysis of the 'intertribal feud' between Navajos and Hopis and the initial attention that the media paid to the rise of the relocation issue, and, secondly, through the presentation and discussion of some fifty interviews with people, ranging from the Indians directly concerned to outsiders that reflect on the philosophical, anthropological, and political ramifications of the case.

One of the conclusions of this study is that the Big Mountain Navajos and their traditional Hopi allies made a 'Faustian bargain' by complying with the rules of the media. They made that choice without having any guarantee that media reporters would be respectful to their traditional culture, and that they wouldn't disturb the delicate relationships.

However, if they would have *refused* the journalists and filmmakers to come into their area, they would either remain unknown to the western public, or their case would – at best – be only presented in a one-sided fashion. With their backs against the wall and upset by rumors that the military equipment of the National Guard was already on its way to Flagstaff, these Indians hardly had any choice.

Looking back, it seems evident that the involvement of the media has had a definite impact on the people on the reservations.

The film *Broken Rainbow* sharpened the existing conflicts among the traditional people, although the film was purported to be a homage to traditional Indian culture and a 'tool against genocide'. The producers tried to hold the audience's attention by presenting close-ups of crying Navajo women and showing historical film recordings of the sacred Hopi Snake Dance. On the basis of this study, one is tempted to conclude that the 'overrepresentation' of the meaningful and the sacred in films like *Broken Rainbow* is more an accommodation to the unsatiable western desire to penetrate into the secrets of the exotic Other, than a part of the struggle to preserve his or her cultural and existential integrity.