

# H-Net Reviews

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*The Cow Jumped Over the Moon.* First Run/Icarus Films.

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For the first time in history humans are able to see the earth like any other object—such knowledge tempts you to dispose, to arrange, to control, to remake (intro.VO). <p> We feel that this planet belongs to all of us as human beings who care about the ecosystem—about conserving the environment—and our future (Yoram Kaufmann, NASA). <p> You get piles of data but no stories, you see mountain ranges, you see lakes, you see forests, but you don't see people, you don't see cultures, you don't see passion, you don't see political frontiers, you don't see governments—all those things that make human realities we live in and, that we are involved in, you don't see in these kinds of pictures“ (Wolfgang Sachs, Wuppertal Climate Institute). <p> The above quotes are some of the key discursive issues raised in Chris Walker's documentary <cite>The Cow Jumped Over the Moon</cite>. This film is an interesting but mind-boggling piece of work that opens up more topical questions than perhaps the filmmaker intended. <p> The film looks at the plight of Fulani Nomads of West Africa, whose migratory and traditional ways of life are as endangered as the climatic changes that have militated against them. The film showcases some of NASA's and the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Agency's (NOAA) satellite technologies which utilise Global Positioning Satellites to gather data on climatic changes with the aim of forewarning these nomads on weather patterns and changes. With such data they will also be advised on likely sources of pasture for their cows. The filmmaker cuts from NASA space stations to the arid savannah of the Fulani nomads and tells his story through interviews with NASA, NOAA and other climatic research scientists on the one hand and elders and cattle herders of the Mali/Senegalese desert on the other. The overall narrative is enhanced with the use of diegetic music in form of the goje (string instrument) which tells the story of the peoples' lives and ancestry. The entire mis-en-scene is interspersed with

commentaries on subtitle. <p> We are taken through an aerial view of the earth and then the rugged terrain of the cow herders. On the ground we are made to visualize the sufferings and joys of the men and their families as they struggle with nature, trying to maintain the tradition of their ancestors. These men, through their meetings and songs, tell us their stories of conquest and disappointments, mortification and celebration. We are also transported into the world of new technology controlled by multinationals, thousand of kilometers away in the orbit and watching each of our activities. We are also told of the interested parties to this whole environmental research. Finally we are made to see the need to succumb to this new way of life in order to prosper in the New World. <p> NARRATIVE IDEOLOGY <p> The issue treated in this film is topical. However, on face value one may be tempted to brush it aside as one of the many developmental projects that the United States and other western nations carry out in Africa. On a deeper level, though, that is not the case. The title of the film is the first clue to its complexity: <cite>The Cow Jumped over the Moon</cite>. The implication of the title is similar to that of the Nigerian Airways logo that used to be called The Flying Elephant, until management realised that the corporation was making an elephant attempt to keep afloat. <p> What the viewer sees from this documentary is a promotion of NASA and NOAA as the solution to the "antiquated" traditions of African nomads. The film fails to balance its narrative structure as represented by the interviewees. For example one would have expected interviews to be balanced between western and African academics when discussing the cultural and security implications of such a project to the African continent. What we have instead is the pitching of NASA scientists against drought affected illiterate nomads. This style makes a mockery of objective presentation of issues which documentaries are supposed to present. Wolfgang

Sachs of Wuppertal Climate Institute (one of the interviewees) was the only person with cultural sensitivity to people's identity, rights and freedom to make decisions about their environment. He said "we are flattening, culturally, the earth out in order to save the environment". According to him satellites see mountain ranges, lakes and forests, but not stories of people or their cultures and politics. The use of this silent data to change a people's lifestyle has many ethical and cultural implications, not addressed in the film. <p> The nomads see their suffering as mortifying. "Cows are our ways of life, in the desert we suffer, and in the delta we rejoice" says one of the Fulani interviewees. Nomads are by definition migratory, and thus face the associated difficulties and cycles of nature. The harsh realities of the desert and the eventual celebration of green pasture make them complete. Cows have cultural, economic and social significance to these people. By controlling their migratory freedom through satellite technology one is indirectly alienating and dis-empowering them from their survival instinct. These people have survived centuries of harsh weather prior to rice farming in the continent. To justify destroying their way of life because of rice farming is like taking a futuristic approach to life without any historical precedence. This is also one of the essentialist ideologies that American capitalism imposes on developing worlds in order to dominate their ways of life. <p> Through such ideological imbalance in cinematic representation of interviewees, one of the nomads said, "we don't want to go. We want to stay here with our cattle by our side. Without assistance we don't know how to survive". Like any ideologically contrived situation, whenever a piece of carrot is dangled before a hungry person their loyalty shifts. The big question is what type of assistance can the African nomad expect to get from the west without strings attached? The first eye opener is that Africa has no satellite in the orbit that can monitor and address these people's problems with proper understanding of their cultural sensitivity. The second point is that the security of African airspace is in the hands of such foreign nations which use such projects as guise to monitor the continent. The recent drama that erupted

when India conducted its own nuclear test in 1999 is a case in point when the US had to promise India technological support in exchange for a total ban on further tests. Similarly, Africans will be promised technical assistance as long as such projects afford the donor opportunity to monitor and control the activities of the continent. <p> Technically, the film has a lot of loose ends. The pace is rather slow. The pace referred to in this case is not the natural rhythm of the nomads but the cinematic time which stretched scenes for too long. There is a lot of picture noise which may be due to generation loss. There was also little synchronization between the footage from NASA archives and the activity shots of the nomads in their daily chores. The NASA and NOAA footage merely acted as techno-ambience in the overall narrative without actually letting the audience experience its operations in relation to the people it claims to help. The aerial stills used in educating the people towards the end of the film could effectively serve the same function as a printed text. In other words there was nothing in the whole documentary that could not possibly and perhaps more effectively be communicated via another cheaper media of communication such as print except that it was like a promotional video for Television Trust for the Environment. There was no direct thematic and structural link between the space station and the theme of the film except as a backdrop which, in comparison with the traditional life of the nomads, highlights the inadequacies of traditional life styles. This created an ideological imbalance between the two represented cultures (American and African) in the documentary. <p> The filmmaker needed to carry out further research on the migratory nature of the Fulani nomads. If the film was a commissioned work to trumpet the works carried out by NOAA and NASA in Dakar Senegal, then it was started without adequate cultural consideration. I would hesitate in recommending the work to any junior college for the above reasons because many young students are still very impressionable with matters of the African landscape and still see the continent as an exotic landscape. It is however useful material for those interested in understanding the lifestyle of the Fulani nomads of West Africa.

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