
In a move that might have come right out of a novel by George Orwell, the CIA in the early 1950s worked to fund and ultimately influence the creation of a film version of Animal Farm in order to propagate its own anti-Stalinist message, then secreted away the evidence of its activity in a labyrinth of government bureaucracy. It is this story that Daniel Leab tells in his Orwell Subverted: The CIA and the Filming of Animal Farm. In addition to being an excellent narrative, clean, well-written, and engaging, Leab's book, like so many studies of Orwell these days, shows how Orwell, his ideas, and his own analyses of struggles for power and hegemony throughout the twentieth century continue to be relevant.

Anyone familiar with Orwell's works, particularly 1984--itself inspired in part by Orwell's work for the Ministry of Information during the Second World War--will recognize the irony inherent in Leab's story. Here is the foremost advocate for a free and transparent politics dedicated to preserving the humanity of the individual appropriated for use by the American CIA. Here is our most intelligent and passionate critic of propaganda made a tool for Cold War dirty tricks. Here is a thinker devoted to exposing the evils of all totalitarian systems whatever their disguise rendered a yes-man for American hegemony. Orwell Subverted carries with it implications for anyone interested in the complex nexus of art, politics, and propaganda, important not only to Orwell scholars but also to those interested in Cold War cultural politics as well as British and American film and animation history.

The strength of Leab's book lies not only in the compelling nature of his story and the lucidity of his prose. He has had access to documents that up to now have been unavailable: namely, the papers of Louis de Rochemont, the American producer of the film version of Animal Farm. In addition to this major discovery, he has been able to draw on hitherto untapped CIA documents and the archives of the British animation studio that made the film, Halas and Batchelor. Thus his well-researched and groundbreaking work at least supplements and perhaps even supersedes previous studies of Orwell's place in Cold War cultural history (particularly Tony Shaw's British Cinema and the Cold War).

De Rochemont had a long-standing and symbiotic relationship with key American officials during the Cold War, including J. Edgar Hoover. His background in quasi-documentary productions, such as the reenactment-based newsreel series The March of Time, gave him a solid background in the kind of propaganda that the proponents of psychological warfare in the US government would find valuable. After beginning his career under Darryl Zanuck at Twentieth-Century Fox, de Rochemont created his own production companies to make industrial, educational, and governmental films; he was in an ideal position, both logistically and ideologically, to make Animal Farm. Papers from
the newly-uncovered de Rochemont files reveal that the CIA provided a necessary infusion of cash for the film, facilitated the acquisition of rights (including smoothing things over with Sonia Orwell), and brought the producer and the animators Halas and Batchelor together for the project.

Interference and influence from Cold Warriors was not limited to funding and facilitation, however. From the start of work on the adaptation, from the earliest synopses and proposals, these forces behind the promotion and funding of the film--referred to as "the investors"--began tampering with Orwell's work in order to more fully articulate their anti-Soviet agenda. Once production of the animated feature began, those involved had to negotiate the demands of both artistic creation and political agendas. Each in its own way was challenging. This intersection of the aesthetic and the political in Leab's telling makes the story of the Animal Farm film particularly compelling. Not only is it a crucial piece of Cold War cultural history, but it is also a fascinating chapter in the history of film and animation. Readers interested in animation will value Leab's discussion of the making of the film, with its arduous creation of hundreds upon hundreds of individual cells just to capture the movement of a hoof or a wing. As Leab points out, nothing quite like it had ever been done--a full-length animated feature of incredible technical and narrative complexity.

At least seven different versions of the film script for Animal Farm are extant, all of which demand alteration to Orwell's original ending. The psywar parties involved in the making of the adaptation called for something more upbeat than the novel's conclusion, wherein the animals resign themselves to their fate, realizing that there is no longer any difference between the pigs who have established authoritarian rule over the farm and the men who were the original oppressors. Thus, Orwell makes the argument that corrupt capitalism and corrupt socialism are the same animal, and power and mendacity are the true enemies to social, economic, and political flourishing. This stance did not hold sufficiently to the party line of Cold War liberation ideology as far as the Americans were concerned; they wanted an ending that would unequivocally advocate a vision of the liberation of Animal Farm with the animals rising up and overthrowing Soviet-style pig-rule. Leab writes,

The transformation of the end of the book, of the animals being mutated from depressed and docile to rebellious and aware, was the most obvious manifestation of the changes inflicted upon Orwell's text in order to achieve the kind of propaganda that de Rochemont's sponsors required. (89)

Leab never entirely answers the question of whether the film Animal Farm is a true subversion of Orwell's original text (this reader believes it to be so), whether the film (or the novel, for that matter) transgresses the boundary between art and propaganda, or whether such distinctions are even valid or useful. Orwell himself noted that the lines between art and propaganda were blurry, and that art, his own included, could easily be turned to the purpose of politics; he is still our foremost critic and creator of such moments. Leab's book offers another facet to Orwell's work and the resonance and relevance that remains in it for us today.

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