

“ORWELL” AS POLITICAL INSTRUMENT

Daniel Leab: *Orwell Subverted: The CIA and the Filming of “Animal Farm”* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007. Pp. xxiv, 195. \$55.00.)

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For years, scholars and George Orwell aficionados have spread the story that the price demanded by Sonia Brownell, the widow of the author, for the film rights to *Animal Farm*, was an introduction to Clark Gable. Allegedly, U.S. intelligence services, the secret backers of the initiative, duly obliged. Sadly for those who like the surprising convergence of the cultural and the political in the Cold War, the tale is untrue.

It is a credit to Dan Leab that he is able to make such corrections while fulfilling his goal of “construct[ing] the full story, including the influence of the [CIA] on how Orwell’s ideas were to be presented on the screen” (p. xiii). From the sale of the rights through the making and distribution of the film, Leab patiently chronicles and evaluates the dynamics between U.S. agencies, the producer Louis de Rochemont, and the Halas and Batchelor studio. The outcome is a fine example of how film history can illuminate the complexity of the political and aesthetic exchanges between the state and “private” cultural actors.

The book, however, is an addendum rather than a chapter in the rich and fast-evolving body of work critiquing the cultural production and prosecution of the Cold War. If Leab makes useful amendments to the detail of work by authors such as Francis Stonor Saunders and Richard Aldrich, he fails to engage with their wider argument that the Cold War was neither a wholly virtuous stand of “free” individuals versus Moscow nor a devious, orchestrated campaign of the U.S. government. In part, this is because Leab is on uncertain terrain when he moves beyond the specifics of *Animal Farm*, misinterpreting (and thus missing the significance of) agencies such as the Psychological Strategy Board and Britain’s Information Research Department. In part, it is because Leab ultimately wants a teleological vindication for all his protagonists: “The world they saw in 1949 was far different from how many now see them. . . . Happily their view has proved prescient, regarding the Soviets and their erstwhile client states.”

Leab, concisely and often incisively, has tried to lock down Orwell or, at least, Orwell of *Animal Farm* and the start of the Cold War. The problem is that “Orwell” could not and still cannot be secured. He is a political device to be deployed against one’s enemies, whether by the CIA against the Communists or, more recently, by those advocating war in Iraq against the “appeasers” of Saddam. In the end, it is not simply—although one can applaud the sentiment—that “hiding the sponsorship of an idea or a product is wrong” (140). It is that, once “Orwell” has become a political or cultural product, there is no secure moral high ground in the invocation of his name.

—Scott Lucas