

Halas and Batchelor: animation, propaganda and *Animal Farm* (1954)

ELIZABETH COULTER-SMITH

The cartoon film adaptation of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945) was produced by Halas and Batchelor Cartoon Films in 1954 and released in the United States later the same year and in the UK in early 1955. While both the British and the American governments had used the 'cartoon' during the First and Second World Wars to influence public opinion, the film remains an unusual example of an animated Cold War propaganda film. Made under controversial circumstances, the film exploited the public's association of the animated cartoon with childhood 'innocence' along with the cartoon's highly flexible visual language to express explicitly political ideas and attitudes. This article will examine John Halas and Joy Batchelor's partnership, identifying the husband-wife team's concern to combine animation with persuasion and how this led to their involvement in the production of *Animal Farm*.

BEGINNINGS

John Halas was born Janos Halasz in Budapest, 1912 and died in London, 1995. His training as an animator came from two apprenticeships served with major European figures in the fields of graphic design and animation. Halas' first apprenticeship was with the Hungarian-born director and special-effects expert George Pal who, from 1927 to 1930, taught Halas the art of cut-out animation, camera loading, and action timing. Halas's second apprenticeship was under Sandor Bortnyik at the Mühely Academy, nicknamed the 'Hungarian Bauhaus', where Halas learned typography and poster design. Halas subsequently moved to Paris where he worked as an assistant sign writer and graphic designer before starting to make animated films in Hungary in 1934. Two years later, he moved to London where he met Joy Batchelor.

Joy Batchelor was born 1914, Watford, Hertfordshire; she died in London, 1991. Batchelor completed her formal education at the Watford Technical School and School of Art and graduated with a number of awards in 1934. She was accomplished in all areas of graphic design and illustration. After graduating, Batchelor worked for one of the first British cartoon film studios in London, British Cartoons, where she assisted on a series about a talking horse *Come on*

Steve (1936) produced by Roland Davies. In 1936 she was recruited by Halas to work at British Animated Films on a film entitled *The Music Man* (1937) and this proved to be the start of a longstanding professional and personal relationship.

Halas and Batchelor's work in the period 1938 to 1940 mainly consisted of commercial freelance jobs in poster, newspaper, and fashion design and included posters for British Gas and the General Post Office. In 1940 the couple married and in the same year were introduced to the J. Walter Thompson advertizing agency (JWT) by George Pal, Halas' mentor and earlier teacher in Budapest. Halas and Batchelor began to work as a commercial cartoon advertizing partnership for JWT. Initially they produced shorts for Lux, Kellogg's (*Train Trouble*, 1940) and Rinso. They also worked extensively with Alexander MacKendrick at JWT where he was a scriptwriter and storyboard artist. It was also in 1940 that they were commandeered by the British government to start production on animated shorts for the war effort.

The wartime animation studio of Halas and Batchelor consisted of a small group of enthusiastic young colleagues from JWT. The work was normally divided as follows: scriptwriting, Joy Batchelor; storyboards, characters, and layout, Joy Batchelor and John Halas; animation, Wally Crook, Vera Linnecar, and Kathleen Murphy; trace and paint, shooting, editing, administration and management, John Halas. Halas recalls:

For the work load we would have needed 20 to 30 staff. We had only 7. It meant that it was work day and night. Scripts and storyboards at night and the physical execution of the film by day. We put the studio in motion in the middle of 1941, badly equipped with an old French stop-motion camera made by Eclair costing five pounds (eight dollars). Our staff was all our old colleagues who loyally waited for us until we were ready for them. It was some 15 kilometers from London. As the laboratories were in London, to bring in the rushes to be developed every day was very inconvenient'.¹

A government information cartoon had two major aims: firstly, it had to communicate effectively the benefits of complying with government directives; secondly, it had to do so in an entertaining and memorable way. Halas and Batchelor employed clever narrative structures and intelligent caricature as well as a subtle use of tone, images and sound that distinguished their work from less sophisticated forms of wartime propaganda. In this way, the animated cartoon had the potential to become a powerful political weapon because it offered 'soft propaganda', or propaganda with a 'sugar coating'. As the producer Sydney Box observed in 1937:

¹ John Halas, *The Story of Halas and Batchelor* (Unpublished, Halas and Batchelor Collection, Surrey Institute of Art, 1991), n.p.

The cartoon film offers the publicist far greater licence than any other type of propaganda picture because it is, by its very nature, divorced from reality. Over-emphasized advertising, which would not be tolerated in a natural photography film, can be presented in an amusing manner by cartoon without giving offence to anyone.²

In blending animation with social persuasion, Halas and Batchelor therefore contributed to the establishment of this new genre of animated propaganda (though, it should be remembered, that the term 'propaganda' did not possess the negative connotations in the 1930s that it was later to assume).

DEVELOPING A DISTINCTIVE APPROACH TO ANIMATION

The Halas and Batchelor style was at least in part indebted to their admiration for Disney. Halas was happy to admit this when he recalled:

It was during 1934 when, with my colleague ... I took a round trip to attend the European premiere of Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* with the Disney cartoon *How to Play Polo*, with Goofy, in Vienna. We loved the films ... The experience of seeing the work of Chaplin and Disney was far reaching and inspired us for a long time.³

However, Halas and Batchelor's wartime 'social information' films stand in stark contrast to the more homogenized propaganda produced by the huge Disney machine during the war. Compared to the massive Disney apparatus, Halas and Batchelor were more like a cottage industry. However, this also invested their work with a much stronger individual sense than the output of Disney. It is also the case that after the war Disney ceased patriotic work to turn their factory-like operation towards lucrative childrens' entertainment such as *Cinderella* (1950), *Alice in Wonderland* (1951) and *Peter Pan* (1953) – all huge box-office hits. In contrast, Halas and Batchelor remained focused upon specialist propaganda and information film made for the Central Office of Information (COI), the successor to the Ministry of Information (MOI).

Initially this work was in support of the welfare reforms of the Attlee Labour government (1945–1951). These included animated films promoting public health (e.g. *Fly About the House*, 1950, *A Mortal Shock*, 1950, *Diphtheria Immunisation*, 1947) as well as a series of eight-minute shorts dealing with the Town and Country, and National Health and Insurance Acts. For the latter, Halas and Batchelor developed a cartoon character named 'Charley' who appeared in *Charley's Black Magic* (1948), *Charley's Junior School Days* (1949)

² Sydney Box, *Film publicity: a handbook on the production and distribution of propaganda films* (London, 1937), p. 47. ³ John Halas, *The story of Halas and Batchelor*.

and *Charley's March of Time* (1948). Charley was intended to enjoy mass appeal and the 'Charley' films were shown in Britain to over 30 million people a week. As Paul Rotha observed:

Though working in a wholly different medium, John Halas was among the first to show how the animated cartoon can be turned to documentary use. The Charley series which he and Joy Batchelor produced for the Central Office of Information in 1948-9 provided the best example.⁴

While there may have been cost factors involved, it seems that Halas and Batchelor's record as a specialist propaganda and public information unit was the main reason that Louis de Rochement approached them, rather than Disney, to produce the animated version of George Orwell's novel, *Animal Farm* (1945). Halas and Batchelor's propaganda filmmaking during World War Two was known to American officials in London administering the Marshall Plan funds designed to kick-start the European economy. Some of these funds were being used to make public information films that would stimulate the regeneration of Europe and Halas and Batchelor worked on one of these, *The Shoemaker and the Hatter* (1950). In this way, it can be seen that although *Animal Farm* – as a feature-length animated film – is unique within the context of Cold War film, it also links directly to Halas and Batchelor's work for the British government during the war and after.

Writing in 1972, Halas suggested that, historically, there have been four kinds of animation. The first of these, he argued, was the style of 'graphic realism' associated with Disney; the second was the abstract style associated with avant-garde filmmakers such as Len Lye and Oskar Fischinger; the third, he identified as a non-Disney form of stylized realism typical of Yugoslavia's Zagreb Studio or a film such as *Yellow Submarine* (1968). As for the fourth style, Halas clearly refers back to his own work and a film such as *Animal Farm*. 'It was developed in this country just after the war and it is likely that Joy Batchelor and I will be accused of establishing it', he argues. 'It is the creation of a new category of film animation appealing primarily to an adult audience and dealing with an adult subject, such as a social situation dramatized and simplified for a mass appeal'.⁵

Animal Farm is, in many ways, indebted to post-war Disney feature animation, employing the stylized graphic realism first developed in Disney's animated cel-based films, along with the Technicolor process (still a luxury in the 1950s) that was also typical of the Disney style. However, as in Halas and

4 P. Rotha, S. Road, and R. Griffith, *Documentary film* (London, 1952), pp 266-7. 5 John Halas, 'The emerging technique of computer animation', *British Kinematograph*, Sound and Television Society (London, 1972).

Batchelor's previous work, the film contains a serious political message that was aimed at adults as much as children. This leads to significant differences between the approach of the film and that of Disney. For example, *Animal Farm* avoids the careful emotional balancing evident in Disney cartoons, often permitting an unrelenting development of terrifying scenes. Thus, while there are painful scenes in *Bambi* (1942), such as the scene in which his mother is killed, the audience is spared the sight of this. In *Animal Farm*, on the other hand, there are several instances in which painful scenes are shown directly. These include the scene in which the fate of the animals is conjured up during the Old Major's speech; the slaughter of Snowball by Napoleon's dogs; the execution of the chickens and sheep for their crimes; and the scene near the end of the film when Boxer, the much loved and tireless worker, is sold for a crate of alcohol and taken to the knacker's yard. In order to communicate Orwell's dark vision, the film makes imaginative use of surreal yet visceral imagery that is not only highly potent but also potentially disturbing for a child.

The style of the film also departs from that of Disney feature films of the same period that aspire to 'realism' and three-dimensionality. In *Animal Farm*, by contrast, characters are drawn in a flat two-dimensional style and there is a lack of integration between characters and backgrounds. *Animal Farm*, in this respect, is more stylized than similar Disney productions and, while this may partly be the result of economic factors, it also befits the film's gloomy vision.

'ANIMAL FARM' AND IDEOLOGY

As Roger Fowler indicates, Orwell's novel was anti-Stalinist rather than simply anti-communist and his concern was to attack the 'Soviet Myth' that permeated the British intelligentsia and which, for Orwell, was harming the Socialist movement⁶. However, with the onset of the Cold War, such subtleties were lost. As Michael Shelden notes, Orwell's text 'caught the popular imagination just when the Cold War was beginning to make itself felt and, for many years 'anti-communists enjoyed it as a propaganda weapon in that war'.⁷ It was certainly in this spirit that the novel was perceived by the CIA who were so impressed with it that they bought the rights to the book shortly after Orwell's death in 1950.⁸ Cold War battles were fought by the British and American intelligence agencies primarily through the media, which included internationally serialized comic strips, novels, plays, newspaper serializations, drawings and posters as well as film. Thus, the contract with Halas and Batchelor not only involved the production of an animated film but also the illustrations for the republished

6 Roger Fowler, *The language of George Orwell* (Basingstoke, 1995) p. 163. 7 Michael Shelden, *Orwell: the authorised biography* (London, 1991), p. 404. 8 F.S. Saunders, *Who paid the piper? The CIA and the cultural Cold War* (London, 1999) p. 509.

version of the book and a syndicated comic strip version. What is also evident is that Orwell's original text is significantly altered throughout these adaptations suggesting how outside political influences were being exerted.

For instance if we look at the old Major's speech and the main differences between the film and the book, we see a number of changes taking place at the very outset of the film. In the film, the old Major dies at the end of his speech. In the book, however, old Major dies three days later. While this change may partly be explained by the need for dramatic effect, it also heightens the sense of fear, both in the audience and in the animals themselves. The cultivation of fear in propaganda is, of course, a powerful persuasive tool. The next obvious change occurs in the song that the animals sing at the end of Major's rousing speech. In the book, Orwell describes the melody as 'something between "Clementine" and "La Cucaracha"'⁹ and has detailed lyrics to go with it. In the film you hear the animals singing along to what appears to be a modified version of a Russian anthem, which is quite a contrast to 'La Cucaracha'. Orwell's lyrics start out

Beasts of England, beasts of Ireland,
Beasts of every land and clime,
Hearken to my joyful tidings
Of the golden future time'.¹⁰

All of these are omitted from the film version.

Major's speech also shows signs of manipulation and the use of the word 'evil' is a prime instance of this. It appears in the first paragraph of the first scene in the film, yet in the book both its frequency and context are quite different. In Orwell's book the use of the word 'evil' is used twice in Major's speech, and is used in a very different way. To quote its first use in Orwell's book: 'Is it not crystal clear, then, comrades, that all the evils of this life of ours spring from the tyranny of human beings?'¹¹ Contrast this with the film: 'Overthrow this evil tyrant!' Thus, while it is quite clear that Orwell is suggesting that evil is not within any one thing or person, the film version encourages us to believe that 'evil' is, indeed, embodied in a particular person or animal – someone to identify and something to fear.

CONCLUSION

Halas and Batchelor's animated film adaptation of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* played a crucial role in the Cold War propaganda campaign and can be

⁹ George Orwell, *Animal Farm: a fairy story* (London, 1945), pp 12–13. ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 13. ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

considered as a masterwork in the genre of the animated propaganda film. According to the analysis offered here the principal contribution of Halas and Batchelor to the medium of animation lies in their abilities to use cartoon animation as a means of persuasion. This began with their work in advertizing during the 1930s when they became influenced by the sophisticated techniques employed by American advertizers. This was a valuable preparation for their important contribution on the 'home front' during World War Two. Although their contribution to the Cold War seems less unquestionably praiseworthy, there is no doubt that at the time they believed that they were working in the interests of democracy and freedom. Having played such a key role in the British government's war effort, it probably seemed quite natural for Halas and Batchelor to accept another 'wartime' brief. Certainly there was no doubting the horrors perpetrated by Stalin and although these may have dissipated after his death in 1953 the regime remained aggressively imperialist as was evident in 1956 when Russia invaded Halas' original homeland, Hungary.