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Article *in* Historical Journal Of Film Radio and Television · June 1995

DOI: 10.1080/01439689500260181

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Sir Karl Popper (1902–94): essentialism and historicism in film methodology

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Sir Karl Popper, who died in September 1994 at the age of 92, bids fair to be considered the leading philosopher of this century, possibly eclipsing the achievement of his hero, Bertrand Russell. As one of his close pupils and intrepid advocates, I want in this brief piece to explain how I have found his work invaluable in my studies of the movies and to offer some arguments to the effect that his central ideas could generally benefit those in the field [1].

It is difficult to memorialize Popper in an organ of media studies because his work is scarcely known to practitioners in these fields. For example, despite his leading position as a methodologist of science and of history, Popper's name is entirely absent from Robert Allen and Douglas Gomery's ambitious *Film History, Theory and Practice* (1985) [2] as well as from the articles in the recent issue of *Film History* devoted to "Philosophy of Film History" (Vol. 6, No. 1, Spring 1994). But then again, the same could be said of R. G. Collingwood. Are philosophers alone in judging these among the two most important theorists of history of this century? Instead, Allen and Gomery hitch their wagon to the shooting star of Roy Bhaskar, an odd-ball Marxist Aristotelian; while the contributors to the *Film History* issue are philosophically all over the place, apparently unaware that E. H. Carr continued to peddle historicism long after Popper's criticisms had made that reprehensible [3]. In addition to what current fashion would suggest one refer to as the "structuring absence" of Popper from these places, there is the perhaps not unconnected fact that some of the leaders of our field blithely commit many of the intellectual sins which Popper had shown to be inimical to the growth of knowledge.

Primarily a philosopher of natural science, Popper also held to the idea of the unity of method, by which he meant that much the same intellectual standards and methodological strictures applied to our endeavors in both the natural sciences and the social sciences. The natural sciences advanced, he argued, because they had a clear orientation to problems and an institutionalized critical attitude to proposed solutions, especially towards those solutions one favored. Popper argued that knowledge grows not by vindicating our pet ideas but by others finding ways to test and refute them, thus enriching the problem-situation. Since we proceed by falsification, by conjecture and refutation, we are never in possession of secure, unchallengeable knowledge [4].

Our institutions have to guard us against our own natural tendency towards dogmatism, in the form of favoritism towards certain ideas, and ingenious means of protecting them from the cold blasts of refuting facts and argument. The ideas we are most

indulgent towards are those we do not know we presuppose, what Collingwood misleadingly called "absolute presuppositions".

Two particular dogmas that pervaded western thinking were, in Popper's view, essentialism, and its historical variant "historicism" (in a special meaning of the word that has never quite been accepted as standard). Essentialism is the idea that what makes things what they are, what persists through change to maintain identity, is the essences of things. Where, you may ask, will philosophy be without its essentialist questions "what is justice?", "what is truth?" Where will film studies be without its quest for the essence of the medium of film, or "cinema", or "movies"? Popper's answer: they will be more critical and more intellectually serious. Popper argued vigorously that science neither uses, nor aims to reach, essences; that scientific definitions are nominalist, forms of shorthand. Thus everything from discussions of the essence of man, the essence of nations or epochs or mentalities, to the essence of film, were relics of defunct Aristotelian metaphysics. Science was not the pursuit of will o' the wisp essences, it was the attempt to state and solve problems. Problems consisted in the discovery of a contradiction between ideas, or between the parts of an idea, or between the facts and one or more of the deductive consequences of an idea and the initial conditions. Such a discovery of a contradiction was itself a great intellectual achievement for, while we may not know which of the ideas in conflict is true, if they contradict each other we do know that both cannot be true together. This then gives us an incentive to devise ways to test between them, and sometimes we succeed.

"Historicism" was Popper's general name for an approach to the social sciences which assumes that historical prediction is their aim and which assumes further that this aim is attainable by discovering the "rhythms", or "patterns", or "laws", or "trends" (or, he could have added today, "mentalities" or "epistemes") that underlie the evolution of history [5]. Utterly rejecting both the aim and the method of historicism, Popper viewed history and the social sciences as part and parcel of the rational pursuit of knowledge epitomized by science. History and the other social sciences did not pose any special methodological problems that would vitiate his account of the logic of science: what he thought were necessary were some additions and specifications when the problems involved human agents. One obvious one was the human interference factor: that humans aware of a test prediction had some capacity to thwart or distort it, as well as the capacity to bring about what otherwise might not have been. This capacity of humans to affect events led Popper to propose his principle of methodological individualism which declares unsatisfactory any social explanation that treats social wholes as self-contained actors with aims; actions and aims are the province of individuals. Social entities are real enough and show their outlines mainly as they mediate the unintended consequences of goal-directed actions by agents. These are all salutary principles which the best historians implicitly follow.

In light of current preoccupations, his most prescient special provision for the social sciences might seem to be his differentiating between historical *problems*—such matters as just what the basic facts of Leni Riefenstahl's career and opinions actually were—and historical interpretations, what are now often called narratives, namely the frame the facts are fitted to when they are written up. Popper's main thrust was that interpretations were not amenable to the same kinds of decisive criticism and testing as were historical problems. But they were still open to rational dispute [6]. Popper had, he thought, been able to find a decisive argument to refute the idea that there was an inevitable course to historical events. But this left much room for other interpretations of the trend of history, optimistic or pessimistic. His own preference was for H. A. L.

Fisher's view that history was one damn thing after another, combined with a moral and intellectual duty towards optimism.

In the philosophy of science Popper had been stimulated to pay particular negative attention to the scientific claims of Marxism and psycho-analysis. Marx was treated critically, as a fellow social scientist, one some of whose ideas were shown to be scientific in the very act of their refutation: they were refuted, hence they were refutable, hence they were scientific. The school (or schools) of Marxism, by contrast, was a tradition that refused to treat Marx's ideas as the excellent but false scientific ideas they were; refused to see that their refutation created a new and exciting problem situation; instead recommended an irrationalist or semi-religious attitude to Marx as a great sage, whose ideas were to be preserved and enshrined much as Lenin's corpse is in Moscow. Prophetic passages in Marx's scientific work gave encouragement to this development. Popper's verdict on psycho-analysis was all of a piece with that on Marxism: it was a case of pre-science, where neither the problems nor the ideas were very well-developed, in particular there was apparently no conceivable refuting evidence, so it consisted of an untestable and hence non-explanatory metaphysical system, beguiling, perhaps, but far from being scientific, from constituting a body of knowledge [7].

It can well be seen how these positions might undercut a great body of writing on the mass media, aesthetic, political and historical. From the conspiracy theories of Herbert Schiller and Noam Chomsky to the Althusserian and Lacanian excesses of film "theory" [8], all are cut off at the knees by Popper's critique of Marxism and psycho-analysis. A defense of the use of Marxism or psycho-analysis one often hears is that all intellectual activity requires a framework and that the choice of framework is something that cannot be discussed, since frameworks are what makes rational discussion possible. This was a view Popper subjected to much critical scrutiny, for he held that critical and rational discussion of frameworks, of underlying assumptions and presuppositions, was precisely what the Socratic rationalism that underlay science was all about. Popper's fallibilist view of knowledge is that critical openness is the mark of rationality and seriousness, and that frameworks above all should not be held uncritically. After all, an argument is no stronger than its premisses, and if these are false, vague, metaphysical ... [9].

Avoiding essentialism and historicism, proceeding from problems and being critical in a fallibilist sense, taking the *via negativa* to knowledge, embracing the unity of method and methodological individualism, these are the great guides that we can take from Popper's philosophy. He also had many brilliant ideas about society, and its need for reform, and he was as fallible on these matters as his own philosophy would lead one to expect. The mass media are a good example. Popper wrote very little on mass communication, and what he wrote was negative and not wholly consistent. In his address to the Salzburg Festival he took the opportunity to bewail the influence of the media as compared to the culture represented by the festival.

Of course I must agree with the pessimists when they point out that we almost deliberately educate our children to become accustomed to cruelty and violence by exposing them to cruel and violent films and television. Unfortunately almost the same holds for modern literature. [10]

The danger that the mass media corrupt the youth was predated by the claim 30 years earlier that the mass media corrupt the electoral process:

it is my firm conviction that we could easily overcome the technological difficulties which may stand in the way of achieving such ends as the conduct

of election campaigns largely by appeal to reason instead of passion. I do not see why we should not, for instance, standardize the size, type, etc., of the electioneering pamphlets, and eliminate placards. (This need not endanger freedom, just as reasonable limitations imposed on those who plead before a court of justice protect freedom rather than endanger it.) The present methods of propaganda are an insult to the public as well as to the candidate. Propaganda of the kind which may be good enough for selling soap should not be used in matters of such consequence. [11]

Writing of the Zinoviev letter he toys with the idea that laws could be drafted that nullify elections won by improper means. The problems Popper perceives here are genuine enough; the wisdom of his solutions is questionable. After the Willie Horton ads of 1988 it is difficult to be sanguine about the possibility of capturing the notion of "improper means" in legislation, especially in countries which lack an Electoral Commission.

These were the considered thoughts of my teacher on subjects on which I have pondered and published a great deal. Popper thought the mass media were a menace. I was addicted to them at the time I met him and his arguments failed to cure me. Yet his philosophy granted a freedom to challenge, to treat his views as the problem, since they clashed with mine, and to search for ways to mediate the dispute. I guess in one way or another in most of my writings on the mass media I have been engaged in an admittedly one-sided dialogue with him in which I tried to show that they were not the social problem he and so many of his generation thought them to be. Indeed, they were an intriguing new mode of social organization and aesthetic endeavor and that the problems surrounding them were rather different from what he imagined. But not everyone thinks such candid disputation is dignified. In the course of a mostly favorable review of *Hollywood's Overseas Campaign* for the *Journal of Economic History*, Susan Aaronson reproves me thus:

I was, however, taken aback by Jarvie's approach to criticizing the work of other film historians. Too frequently Jarvie uses sarcasm to point out what he sees as the inadequacies of their work (for example, pp. 128-31, 151-56). The manuscript is full of comments such as "Thompson's interesting suggestion ... is underdeveloped" (p. 130). This approach seems inappropriate and self-serving. [12]

Permit some philosopher's puzzlement. Admittedly, I am as prone to the vice of sarcasm as the next historian, as the present piece no doubt exemplifies. But the passages cited are entirely absent of it. What has taken Aaronson aback seems to be the way I bounce ideas and arguments off other historians who have stimulated me to criticize them both in their reasoning and ideas, and to the search for fresh facts. This is what we think of in the philosophy of science as proceeding by standing on the shoulders of predecessors, giants or otherwise. Another name for it is Socratic dialogue with other experts, dialogue which at times gets robust. In the spirit of *The Godfather's* Don Corleone, we all would benefit by taking the attitude, "you understand, it is nothing personal; it is only business". For there is a deep Popperian lesson here. He did not think we all politely cooperate and thereby inductively accumulate agreed facts. His view of scientific decorum was non-inductive. He taught that science proceeds by means of the friendly-hostile cooperation of scientists; that they view each other's work as a challenge to be replicated, tested and possibly overthrown. It is one's intellectual duty to criticize the ideas of one's self and of others. In case one fails in one's duty,

perhaps in the expectation that some of us will, it is also an institutionalized imperative that others will fulfil in your stead. Facts are a byproduct of this struggle. The history of science, thus, is the history of its controversies. In my view the history of history is also the history of its controversies, for controversy is the engine of intellectual progress. Questions of how much *odium academicum* is appropriate would be consigned by Popper and myself to the subjective realm of aesthetics.

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NOTES

- [1] In addition to the works mentioned below, the two best introductions to Popper's ideas are the autobiography, Karl R. Popper, *Unended Quest* (London, 1976), and David Miller (ed.), *Popper Selections* (London, 1985).
- [2] Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery, *Film History, Theory and Practice* (New York, 1985).
- [3] 'The well-meaning Utopianist ... substitutes for his demand that we build a new society, fit for men and women to live in, the demand that we "mould" these men and women to fit into his new society. This, clearly, removes any possibility of testing the success or failure of the new society.' Karl R. Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (London, 1957), §21.
- [4] Karl R. Popper *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London, 1959).
- [5] Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*, *op. cit.*
- [6] See I. C. Jarvie, Professor Passmore on the objectivity of history, *Philosophy*, 35 (1960), pp. 355-356.
- [7] '... when dealing with "Vulgar Marxism" I mentioned a tendency which can be observed in a group of modern philosophies, the tendency to unveil the hidden motives behind our actions. The sociology of knowledge belongs to this group, together with psycho-analysis and certain philosophies which unveil the "meaninglessness" of the tenets of their opponents. The popularity of these views lies, I believe, in the ease with which they can be applied, and in the satisfaction which they confer on those who see through things, and through the follies of the unenlightened. This pleasure would be harmless, were it not that all these ideas are liable to destroy the intellectual basis of any discussion, by establishing what I have called a "reinforced dogmatism". Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (London, 1945; quoted from the 4th ed 1962), Vol. 2, p. 215.
- [8] 'Theory' in literary and cultural studies bears no resemblance whatsoever to the creatures of that name to be found in science.
- [9] See the eponymous chapter in Karl R. Popper, *The Myth of the Framework* (London, 1994).
- [10] Karl R. Popper, *In Search of a Better World* (London, 1992), p. 224. Popper's reference to modern literature conveniently overlooks the horror and cruelty of such nineteenth century children's classics as the fairy stories of the Brothers Grimm and of Hans Christian Anderson. Unlike America's Tipper Gore, who almost seems to be echoing his sentiments, Popper on the previous page of the book confesses to living in country seclusion without a television or even a newspaper.
- [11] Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies op. cit.*, Vol. 2, p. 331.
- [12] Susan Aaronson, review of *Hollywood's Overseas Campaign*, *Journal of Economic History*, 52(3) (1993), p. 714.

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