## The Book Review as Intellectual Craft: A Bibliophilic Tribute to Sue Curry Jansen

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Scholarship is the craft of writing for a handful of readers—a small, specialized audience. Winning even a meager readership counts as an achievement. Most published research, after all, is destined for citation-less oblivion. The real test of craftsmanship is evidence of depth and rigor in the face of that sad fact. There's something stoic and admirable in the craft-for-craft's-sake commitment to high standards, even when—*especially if*—no one is watching.

Of all scholarly formats, the book review and the discursive footnote are probably the least read. If there is such a thing as (semi-private) scholarly craftsmanship, here's the place to find it. Sue Curry Jansen, among the sharpest analysts of knowledge flows, is a master of both forms. She has published dozens of journals articles and a number of influential books, but it's the less visible stuff that testifies to her scholarly craft: the intricate endnotes, and especially the book reviews.

This essay is an appreciation of Jansen's reviews. Between 1969 and early 2017, when her latest review is slated for publication, she will have published over fifty book reviews or review essays in well over a dozen journals. Each one is lucid, fair, and judgmental—a carefully crafted act of self-contained scholarship.

One angle from which to admire the reviews is their writerly grace. Jansen is allergic to what Howard Becker (1986, 10) calls "Greek-fed polysyllabic bullshit"—though with nothing conceded to anti-intellectual theory-bashers. She is a sensitive exegete, but also a generous one, even when her synopses give way (as they sometimes do) to vexation. Knives are never plunged, even when her prose is tart and punchy (as it often is). The reviews, the shortest ones included, have a structure. They typically open with an allusion or quoted bit of wisdom, and wrap up with a runic last thought—a half-concealed judgment or prediction.

A near-random example is Jansen's (1985a, 176-178) review of an edited volume, *Communications in Transition* (Mander, 1983), which appeared—like 25 of her other reviews—in the field's flagship *Journal of Communication*. The opening sentence is a typical one: "Thomas Pynchon's dictum—'If they can get you asking the wrong questions, they don't have to worry about

the answers'—concisely captures the dialectical thrust of the sixteen essays in this collection."

Jansen describes the collection as "deliberately, even aggressively eclectic," and proceeds to rein in the anarchy with synoptic pith. She grants that most of the essays pose "useful questions" (if not, in Pynchon's sense, the "right" ones), but faults some of the answers—and their fancy prose style. The review's conclusion is vintage Jansen: She writes that, "in a period of genre shifting and genre mixing, eclecticism is a useful mask, one that can expand and energize the way we communicate about the way we communicate." A mask that reveals more than it conceals—which is only a paradox if mask-less insight is possible. Jansen doesn't think so.

Every review is salted with unexpected phrasings and wry, literate asides. "We children of the cybernetic age," begins one review (Jansen 1978a, 306), "forget we did not invent futurism." In another, Jansen (1976a, 483) writes that sociologists prefer genius "at a distance and safely endentured in professorial robes." Or consider this opening line, a synecdochal shotgun-burst from the mid-1980s: "This is the decade of communication: of silicon chips, Chomsky, Habermas, the New International Information Order, and ET; of gramma tally, backyard satellites, Pacman, Foucault, and electronic terrorism" (Jansen 1983a, 632-633). One book "carries the burden of an inflated title" (Jansen 1981a, 167) and another "cannot be read without pencil in hand" (Jansen 1978b, 236). A point about market discipline gets rendered in arch metaphor: "Even the voice of the adversary culture must continuously prove its resonance in the proper column of the accountant's ledger" (Jansen 1981b, 148).

Jansen writes with self-reflexive verve, and the reader isn't spared: "Since [the authors'] work is full of holes, why do I recommend it? Because my work and your work is also full of holes and the holes in [the authors'] work are holes that most of us haven't looked through for some time" (Jansen 1986, 150). Occasionally Jansen will adopt a volume's stylistic cadences, as in this sly, brilliant send-up of a book-length history of radical radio:

The topic is pure Marcuse. The style is a blend of rock-groupie-fan-think, Berkeley-sixties-social-science-on-the-run, and the-new-journalism-in-lengthy-rerun... what Tom Wolfe's *Radical Chic* and *Mau-Mauing the Flack-Catcher* might have atrophied into if he had thought about them for a decade. (Jansen 1980, 239)

Jansen's reviews are unrelentingly literate, which I take as a polite protest against narrow academicism. The sheer range of reviewed books—in philosophy, sociology, linguistics, anthropology, and on and on—amounts to a rebuke by aggregation. Academics may dominate the university, but Jansen (as she affirms fifty times over) sides with the intellectuals.

The point is that the reviews are worth reading just for their writerly craft. Clean, lucid, generous sentences, punctuated by passages that—to borrow Jansen's characterization of Lewis Mumford—"often assume the power and grace of aphorisms" (Jansen 1976a, 482).

A second, differently angled entry point to the reviews is the idea of scholarly citizenship. The careful appraisal of academic books, especially for fields like communication and sociology in the partial grip of physics envy, is unrewarded work. There are no tenure-committee props to win. The two fields' quantitative wings venerate double-blind peer review, and even the fields' humanist camps treat book reviews with benign indifference. It was a signal moment when, eight years ago, the *Journal of Communication* lopped off its books section from the print journal, with reviews exiled to a poorly marked web-page "supplement" (ICA 2008). This was a depressing turnabout: In its mid-1970s to late 1980s heyday, the journal published a rich, 40-page plus review section *every issue*, including dozens of Jansen's pieces.

This gap in the reward system relegates reviewing to that class of crucial but invisible activities that, behind the scenes, props up its more visible counterparts. Along with article refereeing and marking up colleagues' drafts, book reviewing is academia's second shift. This is a tragic misallocation of priorities. Reviewers are proxies for the rest of us, judgmental stand-ins who separate the signal from the (unrelenting) noise. In large part because the task is so under-appreciated, most published book reviews are scrupulously neutral, hollowed-out chapter summaries.

The review is, or should be, an act of *criticism*, akin to the film or art critic's task of appraisal. A virtue of Jansen's reviews is their consistent, un-shy wheat-chaff sifting. They are iterative acts of scholarly citizenship, animated by criticism—serious, fair criticism, in the expansive sense of the term.

A pair of examples will help illustrate the point. After marinating Michael Schudson's (1981) *Discovering the News* in justified praise (Jansen 1981b), Jansen did not conceal her disappointment in his (Schudson 1985) book-length apologia for advertising (Jansen 1985b). Schudson, "an accomplished social historian, perceptive student of professionalism, and a skilled wordcrafter," has packed the book with "many fascinating anecdotes, observations, dialectical low-wire acts, and essays within essays" (544). Still, she continues, reading "most of *Advertising*, like reading most advertisements, is a frustrating, irritating, often involving, sometimes dazzling, but ultimately disappointing experience." Schudson's argument is "flawed in conception, execution and documentation" (544-45).

The review—and this is telling—is the farthest thing from a hatchet job. Indeed, two of its four pages extol Schudon's brilliant, last chapter on "capitalist realism": "These things have been said before, but they have not been said as well" (546). The review is a distilled version of Jansen's hermeneutic care: Schudson may have "let the balance pole slip this time," she writes. "Nevertheless, I strongly recommend [the book] as dialogic bait" (547).

Or take Jansen's (1983b) lengthy review of Dallas Smythe's (1981) *Dependency Road*. She recognized the book's significance, calling it a "profoundly important synthesis of post-Marxist scholarship on the Consciousness Industry (CI)" (421). She proceeds to furnish a generous and attentive exegesis of Smythe's audience commodity thesis. What's notable is that the review—in spite of, or let's say in league with, its laudatory core—takes Smythe to task for a pair of blindspots. His revolutionary program, she writes, is a species of naive Prometheanism. He offers "no guidelines for insuring that successful liberationalists will not collapse horizontal communication networks into hierarchical channels" (425). This, she adds, "has proven an irresistible temptation for successful revolutionists throughout history." Jansen also faults Smythe for his muscular faith in his own law-revealing insight: He "assumes that objective readings of the dialectic of history are possible. I assume that history is constructed in the reading" (425). She con-

cludes that her reservations about Smythe's political program are "substantial," but they do not "diminish my appreciation for what Smythe has done" (425).

Both reviews, the Smythe and the Schudson, exemplify the seriousness that Jansen brings to the task of criticism. There is now much talk about "post-publication peer review" in the world of digital scholarship, but the buzzy phrase is actually an apt description of Jansen's mode of reviewing. Every paragraph in every review is animated by the duty to seek after the truth, from a scholar with no illusions that the quest will ever succeed. This daemon-seizing commitment to truth-seeking, in the face of post-positivist doubt, is what's most admirable in her reviews. Jansen's whole body of work is predicated on an after-the-fall loss of epistemological innocence, and yet the obligation to call out breakthroughs and lapses, even within a single work, is honored without qualification.

This half-Sisyphean commitment comes across in one of Jansen's (1979a) earliest reviews, of the sociologist Orrin Klapp's (1978) *Opening and Closing*. She catalogues the book's many failings:

It would be easy to write an uncompromisingly critical review of Klapp's work citing the thinly disguised resurrection of the equilibrium model; the organic analogies; the methodological defensiveness; the epistemological naivete...; (226)

The list goes on and on, but the review takes a hard turn in its next (and last) paragraph:

It would be easy to write such a review because Klapp's book is seriously flawed. But it would also be arrogant and ultimately dishonest. For, in spite of these complaints, I enjoyed—yes, enjoyed—reading Klapp. His prose is remarkably lucid. He avoids jargon and never fails to concretize his points with examples... In short, he makes a lot of good sense. (226)

It's this gem-polishing impulse of Jansen's reviewing—the unsparing but generous *judgment* that takes books and scholarship as objects worthy of earnest attention—that elevates her reviews to the status of craft.

The third, and final, angle that I want to use to appraise the appraiser is the idea of thinking in public. Throughout her career, Jansen has taken on reviewing as a signaling service for the rest of us—yes, here's what's worth reading, she says, or: don't bother with this one—but she is also us-

ing books as a canvas to test and refine her own ideas. In other words, Jansen uses reviewing as an invitation to engage with authors. Her pieces assume the character of a conversation, in the sense that her own projects (on Lippmann (Jansen 2012), on social justice (Jansen 2011), and on gendered technology (Jansen 2002)) are plainly in gestation. With the benefit of hindsight, it's possible to detect, in reverse engineering mode, the themes and conundrums that would appear, years later, in her own articles and monographs. She uses the public book-review forum to wrestle with the literature—to argue with, to learn from, and to research with her review subjects.

In that sense her reviews model the scholarly life as an ongoing graduate seminar—as a form of education through discussion, though carried out in print. Jansen's reviewing practice, at least in this regard, resembles the impossibly energetic review-publishing career of Robert K. Merton, the great sociologist. Merton, a graduate student at Harvard in the 1930s, was coaxed by George Sarton, the bookish historian of science, to draft reviews for his new journal, *Isis*. Over the next five years Merton published over 50 reviews for *Isis* and a range of other titles—all before he turned 30 (Merton 1985, 481). In just the way I am suggesting applies to Jansen, Merton viewed his prodigious reviewing as an indispensable element of his graduate education. Jansen has said that Merton's example was indeed an important source for her own torrent of early-career reviews. In a single decade—from 1976 to 1986—Jansen published 37 reviews, nearly three-quarters of her lifetime total. To put this in perspective, Jansen's reviewing pace approached four published reviews, year after year. Scarcely an issue of the *Journal of Communication* appeared in this decade without a Jansen book review.

After 1987, the rate of Jansen's reviewing fell off, as it had for Merton in 1940. Though Jansen had already taken up a university post three years before, 1987 marked the informal completion of her graduate education—at least that quotient conducted on the review pages. The date is significant for a second reason: Jansen's (1988) masterwork, *Censorship: The Knot that Binds*, was published by Oxford University Press the following year. Her research for the book, her grappling with the literature, was carried out in public. In dozens of reviews she took on silent,

page-bound interlocutors as she honed her original argument for constitutive censorship and reflexive power-knowledge.

That book, and indeed all of her work, is animated by a pair of related questions. The first question is, How is defensible knowledge, and therefore critique, possible given that knowledge and interests are bound up with one another, inescapably so? If the god of objectivity has failed, if the view from nowhere is an ideological screen, if claims to disinterest merely conceal interests, if the censors will always be with us, where can an emancipatory politics find a place to stand? The second question is a kind of intensification of the first: How is knowledge or critique possible given the coalition of monied power and the compliance industries? In Jansen's diagnosis, concentrated power shapes the knowledge the rest of us receive, even as the knowledge gleaned from us feeds that concentrated power.

I read this pair of questions in every major project Jansen has undertaken, including her recent work on Walter Lippmann (Jansen 2012) and public relations (Jansen 2016). The 1988 *Censorship* book is the most direct formulation of these questions, and it's also the place where she furnishes her answers, centered on reflexivity. The three dozen reviews preceding the book's publication are Jansen's in-progress grappling with the questions, and their half-tragic answers.

Take, for example, Jansen's (1976b) first review from this period, of the German Marxist Hans Magnus Enzenberger's (1974) *The Consciousness Industry*. She acknowledges, through a displacement onto the generic reader, her own encounter with the essay collection:

To review Enzensberger's work is to betray it; but to read these essays is to experience their consequences. They inspire no simple affirmations and no easy condemnations. In a word, they disturb. Serious readers will find themselves drawn into a radical confrontation with their own conventional opinions, cherished theories, and comfortable professional mythos. (92)

The largely admiring review of the book, which outlines a critical theory of media from an unconventional though leftist standpoint, lingers on themes that concern Jansen. She suggests that Enzensberger's essays have "special relevance for anyone who is still courageous enough to harbor the conviction that the sociology of knowledge can be more than a chimera in an age in which the mass media has profoundly altered the roles of intellectuals and, all to often, transformed

them into accomplices in their own exploitation" (91). Jansen herself, as she later demonstrates in *Censorship*, does harbor that conviction, but in the disturbed key she registers with Enzensberger here. She also glosses, with an implicit endorsement, the German poet's insistence that capitalist culture, in Jansen's summary, "contains currents which run contrary to its dominant mission of stabilizing the status quo" (91). These "central ambiguities," the fissures and cracks in the consciousness industry, are a constant theme in Jansen's work through to *Censorship*: The profit motive and professed liberal-democratic commitments, in their own ways, open up space for critique. Capitalists, to some extent at least, are their own gravediggers—to borrow a metaphor that Jansen herself employs.

Another example, published two years later, is a review (Jansen 1978a) of a long-forgotten 1930 book on the future of censorship (Seagle 1930)—which, Jansen writes, she stumbled across while completing a literature review on the topic. She opened the book with "deep skepticism," only to discover that the author was "casually tracing his way back from the side of the dialectic I was still struggling to reach" (306). The book put forward the principle, so central to Jansen's own take, that censorship is a necessary precondition of all social formations: "Politics is censorship," in Jansen's summary of the author's claim. His category of "subterranean censorship"—the invisible, modern sort—is abetted by new media like "radio television" (307). The book's predictions have their eerie confirmation in the regime of 20th-century market censorship that Jansen would go on to chronicle in her 1988 treatment.

And so it is with the other reviews: Jansen is carrying on a public conversation centered on her scholarly preoccupations—censorship, critique, and post-positivist epistemology. In an mostly laudatory review of Gaye Tuchman's (1978) newsroom ethnography *Making News*, Jansen (1979b) pauses to question Tuchman's self-undermining "failure of nerve in an otherwise superb work":

[w]hen we finally arrive at the edges of relativism where we expect to discover resources for constructing a new rationale for free speech, we find our guide has deserted us, leaving behind the stale aftertaste of a cheerful but unsatisfying eclecticism, viz. 'we all tell stories' whether we are novelists, scientists, newsworkers, academicians, etc. (194)

Jansen, of course, also approached those edges of relativism, and her main task, in *Censorship*, is to resist the last step. Here, in this 1979 review, she presages the argument:

If, in our struggle for a more adequate theory of knowledge, we do not forge a similar wedge, our victory will be pyrrhic. The phenomenological critique of positivism has robbed us of our innocence... Yet, if we are to preserve the margin of heterodoxy secured by the Enlightenment, we must continue to offer solutions: to try to articulate viable standards (tentative hierarchies of values) for sorting fact and fiction. (194)

Her notion of "reflexive power-talk," as developed in *Censorship*, is her post-Enlightenment half-redemption of Enlightenment ideals. Back in 1979, Jansen faulted Tuchman for sidestepping the problem: "Tuchman is a first-rate thinker and a concerned humanist. She is not unaware of these issues. She owes it to her readers to confront them" (194)

In another, equally positive review of a similarly named book, Peter Golding and Philip Elliott's (1979) *Making the News*, Jansen (1981c) criticizes the authors for the opposite misstep: epistemological hubris. She writes that "they leave the impression that what they say about objectivist rituals and professional practice in journalism does not apply with similar resonance to the dramaturgy of objectivity and lures of professional practice in sociology and communication studies" (202). All radical critiques of objectivity—all honest ones, at least—lead their authors into a "hall of mirrors from which there is no escape":

Inhabitants of these glass houses can either shut their eyes and risk dogmatism or they can strike a pose of philosophic reflexivity and confront the irony of their predicament. Unfortunately, Golding and Elliott are on the verge of nodding. (202)

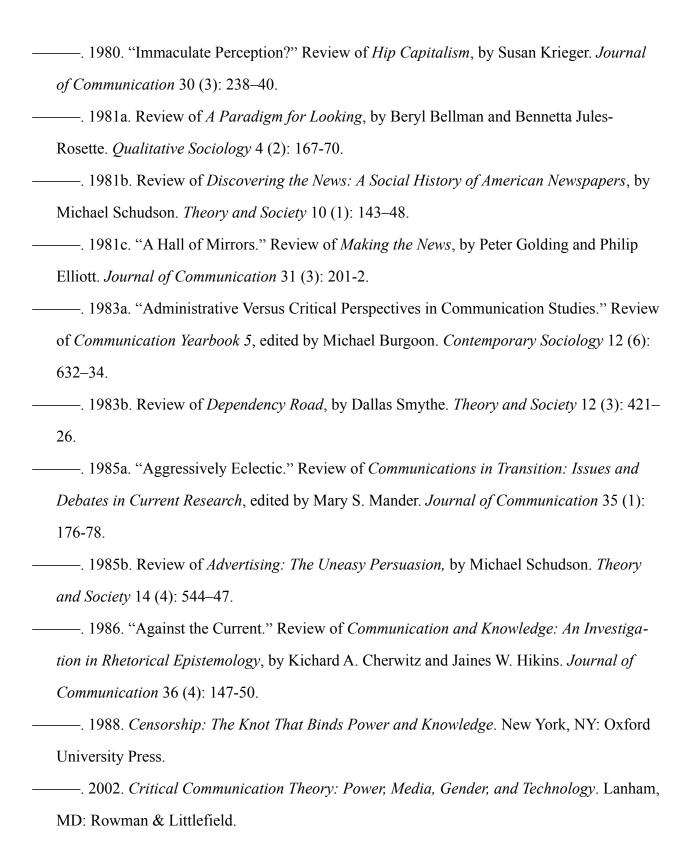
The needle-threading balance of *Censorship* and its recuperative ideal of reflexive power-talk, years later, was achieved by refusing both Golding and Elliott's ostrich head-burying and Tuchman's cliff-diving. In her reviews, she reserves special praise of those who, like Murray Edelman (1977) in *Political Language*, foreground their own interests and limitations. In a glowing review (1979c), she approves that "Edelman does not attempt to evade responsibility for his own entanglement in the *circulus vitiosus* he spins" (61).

Ralph Waldo Emerson maintained that the world belongs to the person who can see through its pretense. Murray Edelman has done a remarkable job in providing a set of lenses for seeing through the pretense of words that succeed and policies that fail in American politics. (63)

It's unfair for me to turn these words in Jansen's direction, but that's exactly what she has done in her work, and in this remarkable body of reviews: providing a set of lenses of seeing through the pretense of words—but without the solace that we can escape words.

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