Craig Owens

From Catalogue *9, September/October 1978*

*If philosophy is memory or a return of the origin, then
what I am doing cannot, in any way, be regarded as philosophy;
and if the history of thought consists in giving life to half-effaced
figures, what I am doing is not history either.*

The Archaeology of Knowledge, Michel Foucault

Philip Johnson: History, Genealogy, Historicism

In 1950, when Philip Johnson published his then recently completed Glass House, he compiled a miscellany of historical sources from which he claimed the Glass House had been derived.[1] The entries in Johnson's book of quotations ranged from the Acropolis and Ledoux's visionary projects to the painting of Malevich, Mondrian, and Van Doesburg, and the architecture of Mies van der Rohe. In their heterogeneity, the ancestors of the Glass House form neither a set nor a series; the former is composed of related or similar elements, while the latter arranges these in temporal or spatial succession. Johnson's sources are, by contrast, a dispersed collection of monuments which possesses no internal cohesion or logical order whatsoever; they do not demonstrate the solidarity by which we recognize a tradition.

In this text, Johnson effectively turned the popular conception of architectural modernism as anti-historical inside out to reveal a fundamental historicity at the heart of modernist practice.

Before proceeding, it is worth rehearsing the strategic logic according to which Johnson presented his sources. Before arriving at the Glass House, the reader encounters (1) a farm village plan by Le Corbusier from 1933 (fig. 3); (2) the Illinois Institute of Technology Buildings designed by Mies van der Rohe in 1939 (fig. 5); (3) Theo van Doesburg's "The Basso Continuo of Painting," (fig. 7) first published in 1922; (4) the Acropolis (fig. 8); (5) Karl Friedrich Schinkel's Casino in Glienicke Park, near Potsdam, ca. 1830 (fig. 1); (6) Claude Nicholas Ledoux's Maison des Gardes Agricoles at Maupertuis, ca. 1780

(fig. 6); (7) Mies's Farnsworth House, designed in 1947 (fig. 2); and (8) Malevich's "Suprematist Element: Circle" from 1913 (fig. 4). This order does not reflect any hierarchy of importance, but follows Johnson's "processional" view of architecture;[2] he thus began with the approach to and siting of his buildings before arriving at the Glass House itself. As a result, any ranking of sources, as well as any question of an historical development or evolution up to the Glass House, are suspended.

In dealing with what is an essentially historical question—what are the sources of the Glass House?—Johnson disregarded the most basic techniques of historiography: chronological succession and the historical process. The former links discrete events into the unbroken chain of a linear development, while the latter characterizes the present as either the natural or inevitable result of the interaction of autonomous historical forces. In Johnson's text, instead of the linearity of an unbroken chain there is a vertical system of correspondences, a projection in depth; instead of the cause-and-effect relationships of an evolution or development, a set of retroactive confiscations; instead of the singularity of an origin, a complex network of distinct and multiple elements, difficult to unravel; instead of the objectivity of the historian's discourse, the autobiographical *I*. This associative, mnemonic relationship to the past may appear to be *a*historical, since a history of the Glass House written

according to historiographical models would presumably have proceeded from the Crystal Palace through the Maison de Verre and Mies's Farnsworth House before culminating in Connecticut. Johnson obviously did not want to reconstruct that history—a refusal which demonstrates the fundamental anti-historicism of the modern movement. However, the relationship to the past as a dispersed set of monuments is not an annihilation of history; rather, it is an attempt to transform history into an entirely different mode of inquiry. The term *genealogy*, conceived by Nietzsche in opposition to history as it was written in the nineteenth century, describes this new operation.

Nietzsche criticized History as an attempt to capture essences; it assumes the existence of immutable forms which precede it and shape its course. Genealogy, by contrast, does not reveal ahistorical essences lying behind things or events, but the "secret" that things have no essence, or that what we call their essences were in fact "fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms."[3] Essences are historically constituted figures, and only as such are they admissible as objects of investigation. The genealogical study of essences thus has a deconstructive aim: if, in *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche traced the descent and emergence of the concepts of good and evil, it was to prepare for their dissolution.

"There is no set of maxims more important to the historian than this: that the

actual causes of a thing's origin and its eventual uses, the manner of its incorporation into a system of purposes, are worlds apart; that everything that exists, no matter what its origins, is periodically reinterpreted by those in power in terms of fresh intentions; that all processes in the organic world are processes of outstripping and overcoming, and that, in turn all outstripping and overcoming means reinterpretation, rearrangement, in the course of which the earlier meaning and purpose are either obscured or lost."[4]

Johnson's text on the Glass House describes precisely such a process of reinterpretation and rearrangement. According to the architect, a whole array of formal models were confiscated from history—he frequently uses the verbs *to copy* and *to derive*. By incorporating them into a new order, by recombining them with other, dissimilar elements, their original identities are submerged, subjugated to the roles they play in a new structure. Their "functions" are entirely dependent upon the position which they occupy in a new system. As a result, "the earlier meaning and purpose are either obscured or lost."

Thus, it no longer makes any sense to ask whether the glass house is original or derivative.[5] As Michel Foucault has stated, only objects which occupy the *historical* field may be classified as either old or new, traditional or original, "conforming to an average type or deviant:" "One can distinguish . . . between two categories of formulation: those that are highly valued and relatively rare, which appear for the first time, which have no similar antecedents, which may serve as models for others, and which to this extent deserve to be regarded as creations; and those ordinary, everyday, solid, that are not responsible for themselves, and which derive, sometimes going so far as to repeat word for word, from what has already been said."[6]

However, by parsing its materials according to the polar opposition of the original and the traditional, historical analysis, Foucault continues, "reinvests in the empirical element of history, in each of its stages, the problematic of the origin."[7] The new is original in so far as, in the absence of ancestors, it may serve as a model for future works—originality in the sense of seminality. Whereas the derivative is always derived *from* something; it is that something, in the form of an origin, which historical analysis seeks to locate.

However, in his text on the Glass House, Johnson effectively suspends the question of originality. The originality of the Glass House has always been compromised by the precedence of Mies's Farnsworth House, designed in 1945–6, but not built until 1950, after the completion of Johnson's project. We might be tempted to inquire which came first, but Johnson makes his indebtedness to Mies clear: "The idea of a glass house came from Mies van der Rohe. Mies mentioned to me as early as 1945 how easy it would be to

build a house entirely of large sheets of glass. I was skeptical at the time, and it was not until I had seen the sketches of the Farnsworth House that I started the three-year work of designing my glass house."[8]

Despite superficial differences in elevation and plan—Mies's house is raised above the ground on stilts and painted white, while Johnson's hugs the ground, is black, and has a cylindrical core which, Johnson claims, Mies never would have sanctioned[9]—the resemblance between the two seems to have been the result of Mies's direct influence upon Johnson (Other preliminary working drawings show Johnson experimenting with other distinctly Miesian schemes; for example, the "court houses," which date to June, 1947, appear to be elaborations of certain of Mies's court house projects from the early 1930s). However, the Farnsworth House is the *eighth* source cited by Johnson. It is preceded by other, apparently less significant examples in which Johnson complicates the question of originality.

Earlier in the text, Johnson invoked another Miesian precedent: the relationship of the Glass House to its brick guest house and sculpture group was "influenced by Mies' (sic) theory of organizing buildings in a group. The arrangement is rectilinear but the shapes tend to overlap and slide by each other in an asymmetric manner."[10] These asymmetric rectangles are immediately compared with shapes which appear in Mondrian's paintings: "These shapes, best known to posterity through the painting of Piet Mondrian, still have an enormous influence on many other architects besides myself."[11] Among which Mies van der Rohe is presumably to be numbered. Significantly, Johnson does not illustrate this passage with a Mondrian, but with Theo Van Doesburg's "The Basso Continuo of Painting." If "best known to posterity through . . . Mondrian," why republish a Van Doesburg, unless it be to stress the fact that "The Basso Continuo . . ." was published by *Mies* in the periodical G in 1922? Re-enacting his predecessor's gesture—republishing the painting originally published by Mies—Johnson suggests that the "origin" for the arrangement of his buildings was not "original," but also derived from a source. By locating an origin within the origin, Johnson begins to trace its retreat.

We might also inquire into the relationship between Van Doesburg and Mondrian. Is one the source of the other? If so, which? The answers are not forthcoming; rather than a clear hierarchy of sources and derivations, Johnson proposes a complex network of relationships which does not resolve itself into the linear progression of a clear-cut development. This strategic retreat of the origin was prepared in Johnson's very first entry, in which an illustration of a farm village plan by Le Corbusier carries the following text: "The approach to the house through meadow and copse is derived from English eighteenth-century precedent. The actual model is Count Pückler's estate in Sile-

sia."[12] Only later are we informed that it is the footpath between the Glass and Guest Houses that was "copied" from Le Corbusier. However, the question of Le Corbusier's relationship to picturesque models remains—and remains unanswered. By setting up the possibility of potentially infinite regress, Johnson subverts the methodological certainty of historical models. The mapping of antecedents does not guarantee a definite hierarchy of originals and derivations, causes and effects. Nothing carries "originality" with it as a property or quality; rather, "originality" is wholly a function of the system that is under scrutiny.

Johnson also undermines the criterion of resemblance, upon which historical relationships have, since the nineteenth century, been based.[13] On what ground may the Glass House be said to resemble its sources? Johnson's fourth entry depicts a plan and perspective of the Acropolis, reinterpreted for the oblique angle of approach to his buildings, as well as their arrangement so that only one would dominate the visual field from a given point. However, what Johnson interpreted was itself already an interpretation—of the principles of Greek city planning by the Beaux-Arts historian and archaeologist Choisy. Thus, "from the focal point at the beginning of the footpath near the parking lot, the brick house (Propylea) is passed and forms a wall on the right hand. The statue group (Athena Promachos) is in full view slightly to the right."[14] To complete the analogy, then, the Glass House becomes the Par-

thenon—not because they resemble one another, but because they occupy analogous positions in two similar systems. Analogy is not based upon resemblance, but upon *function*.

With the exception of Mies's works, there is no immediate resemblance between the sources cited by Johnson and his Glass House. Resemblances that may appear emerge only within Johnson's text, as results of the field in which Johnson situates his house. Resemblance is not a criterion of relationship, as much for, say, Schinkel's Casino as for the Farnsworth House. Even if the Glass House resembles the latter, this does not guarantee their identity. So that Johnson is not simply compiling a list of monuments which resemble his own work; rather, in tracing the descent of the Glass House, he is describing an effective field of appearance specific to it. He designates the set of conditions within which the Glass House operates: "One can no longer say that a discovery, the formulation of a general principle, or the definition of a new project, inaugurates in a massive way, a new phase in the history of discourse. One no longer has to seek that point of absolute origin, or total revolution on the basis of which everything is organized, everything becomes possible and necessary, everything is effaced in order to begin again. One is dealing with events of different types and levels, caught up in distinct historical webs."[15]

Such an acknowledgment of historical indebtedness constitutes neither a depar-

ture from modernism nor an anticipation of the more legible eclecticism that began to appear in Johnson's—and other architects'—subsequent work. Rather, the relationship to history as a collection of dispersed monuments is precisely that of the modernist work. Modernism emerged during the second half of the nineteenth century as, in part, a rejection of the rampant historicism of that century. And if *genealogy* seems to describe Johnson's strategies—and those of modernist works in general—it is because Nietzsche conceived genealogy in opposition to history as it was practiced in his time. Genealogy and modernism emerged at the same time and in response to the same situation; they were parallel phenomena.

Historicism developed out of Romanticism during the second quarter of the nineteenth century—but should we not say, with Foucault, that it "erupted," since the very notion of development implies unbroken continuity and is therefore thoroughly historicist? Historicism, "the first offspring of a rebellious sire [Romanticism], [was] more eager to accommodate itself to the world as given by common experience, less interested in innovation and change, a natural inheritor of the family business."[16] According to the historicist, history is a continuous, purposeful process; although the historian's materials are discontinuous figures—regions, periods, social groups, individuals—she or he links these together in unbroken chains of succession and thus in-

sures the passage from one to the other in a continuous thread. The historian's concerns are interstitial and unifying; an apparent discontinuity is transcended by relating similar objects to one another in temporal sequences.

However, historicism is not simply a method; it is also a philosophy which grants special privilege and authority to historical knowledge. For the historicist, the search for all intelligibility and value comes to an end in history. In *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault traces the ways in which, during a progressively more historicist nineteenth century, history became "the depth from which all beings emerge into their precarious, glittering existence."[17] Indeed, the primary concern of that century was what has been called the wholesale "historicization of reality";[18] economics was transformed into a materialistic philosophy of history, biology into the history of evolution, linguistics into philology, and anthropology into the history of races.

The architectural practice of the nineteenth century was also profoundly historicist. Although the various Revival "styles"—Greek, Roman, Romanesque, Gothic . . . —which that century produced were sanctioned by a belief in certain immutable architectural essences which are manifested in all buildings,[19] according to Nietzsche eclectism was simply a mask for "the closely guarded secret of modern culture:" that the "culture" of the nineteenth

century was in fact a fundamental lack of culture. "We moderns have nothing of our own. We only become worth notice by filling ourselves to overflowing with foreign customs, arts, philosophies, religions, and sciences; we are wandering encyclopedias . . ."[20]

Nietzsche diagnosed this condition as one of the excesses of the *historical* consciousness, which he identified as "the power of gradually losing all feelings of strangeness and astonishment and finally being pleased with everything."[21] Thus, historicism was also responsible for the various Oriental styles of architecture—Egyptian, Moorish, Indian, Japanese—which that century produced. These, in consort with historical revivalism, effectively dispossessed the Age of History of any claim to an architectural style of its own. Eclecticism effectively eradicated all of the *differences* by which we recognize and characterize styles.

The architectural domesticization of the strange and exotic had its counterpart in the profoundly historicist anthropology of the nineteenth century. If, at the beginning of our century, anthropology was to become "a discipline whose main, if not sole, aim is to analyze and interpret *differences*,"[22] then it had to divest itself of certain historicist notions—such as the unity of "mankind"—which had accrued to it during the previous century. According to Claude Levi-Strauss, historicism was an attempt "to suppress the diversity of cul-

ture, while claiming to acknowledge it fully."[23] Historicism worked to reduce all cultural differences to an historical dimension; although it works within the field of the discontinuous—history—historicism is wholly concerned with "closing gaps and dissolving differences."[24] Since Hegel, history was conceived as unified and cumulative. Western civilization, the most advanced stage of human evolution, thus preserved all other cultures within its memory and institutions. So that without stepping outside its own boundaries European culture was capable of comprehending the Other within the unity of its own development. However, this knowledge was possible only by means of a radical reduction: the Other was assimilable to Western culture *only* as an anterior stage of its own development. For an historicist anthropology, "primitive groups are survivals of earlier stages whose logical classification reflects their order of appearance in time."[25] Thus, cultural diversity was reduced to a temporal, i.e., historical, dimension; the only differences that remained were those of stages in a genesis.

In all of the arts, modernism emerged at mid-century into this atmosphere of rampant historicism. It was an acknowledgment of limits, a reintroduction of difference into what was conceived to be the continuous field of the same. Modernist literature revealed a fundamental unintelligibility to lie at the heart of the familiar; modernist painting deployed historical ma-

terials in discontinuous patterns which thwarted their synthesis. At the end of the century, the attempt to forge a new, and consequently different, ornamental style was overtly anti-historicist: Art Nouveau strategically inverted the crucial historicist distinction between nature and history, to which the historicist had attached exclusive importance.[26]

The modernist aspirations which followed Art Nouveau were international and futurist in scope. The activism of modern architecture was, in its beginnings, violently opposed to historicism which had come to be an instrument of power—historicism had "accepted the emergence of the bourgeoisie as an accomplished fact and then tried to halt history in place to prevent the release of the class behind it, the proletariat."[27] Modernism, focussed on the future, was an attempt to reanimate a defunct historical machine. This was not, however, in order to reanimate or restore the past; rather, like Nietzschean genealogy, modernism was fundamentally a clearing operation. The self-conscious relationship of the modernist work to its history is not preservative, but an attempt to clear a space in which the new might emerge. The activism of modernism was an attempt to substitute a principle of *acknowledgement* of the past for the passive *adaptation* of traditional forms. In this, it paralleled Nietzsche's attempt to restore a principle of activity to an evolutionary theory that stressed adaptation: "The democratic bias . . . now dominates all of physiology and the other life sciences, to their detriment, naturally, since it has conjured away one of their most fundamental concepts, that of activity . . . Quite in keeping with this bias, Herbert Spencer has defined life itself as an ever more purposeful inner adaptation to external circumstances. But such a view misjudges the very essence of life; it overlooks the intrinsic superiority of the spontaneous, aggressive, overreaching, reinterpreting and re-establishing of forces, on whose action adaptation itself gradually supervenes. It denies, even in the organism itself, the dominant role of the higher functions in which the vital will appears active and shaping."[28] It is precisely this opposition of activity to *re*activity that motivates the modernist work of art, in which activity takes the form of an acknowledgement.[29]

If Philip Johnson's text on the Glass House stands as just such an acknowledgement of the architect's relation to history, this is an affirmation, rather than a contradiction of its modernity. To view the Glass House as either Miesian *or* romantic-classicist would be to situate it in terms of a logical continuity, a tradition. To see it, as Johnson encourages us to, as the result of an interplay of multiple, overlaping forces, is to perceive its fundamental modernism—original *and* traditional; autonomous *and* dependent. Johnson was not engaged in a recovery of the past; rather, operating within what was presumed to be a consolidated tradition, he demonstrated its fundamental heterogeneity.

If the radical dispersal of history which Johnson accomplished in his text on the Glass House underscores, rather than undermines, its modernity, the *assembly* of historical forms of the AT&T Corporate Headquarters pursues other ends. For AT&T is fundamentally preservative; Johnson has described it as a response to the antiquarian "spirit" of the seventies: "Today, we preserve everything—perhaps too much. But that is the feeling, the sensibility of our times."[30] However, the very notion of the "spirit" of an age—"which enables us to establish between the simultaneous or successive interplay of resemblance and reflexion, or which allows the sovereignty of the collective consciousness to emerge as the principle of unity and explanation"[31]—is itself profoundly historicist.

Johnson proposes a new "moral imperative": that architecture must be responsive to the *continuous* texture of the urban fabric into which it is insinuated.[32] It was precisely this sensitivity to the continuities of urban life which Nietzsche, in a short text "On the Uses and Abuses of History," distinguished as one facet of what he called "antiquarian history." Antiquarian history seeks the continuities of soil, language, and urban life in which our present is rooted and, "by cultivating in a delicate manner that which existed for all time, it tries to conserve for posterity the conditions under which we were born."[33]

The responsiveness of the AT&T Corporate Headquarters to a specific tradition of New York City architecture—McKim, Mead, and White, and Raymond Hood—is less a polemical statement, and more a personal one. For antiquarian history is the field of the personal, the idiosyncratic, the subjective: "The antiquarian is careful to preserve what survives from ancient days, and will reproduce the conditions of his own upbringing for those who come after him; he thus does life a service. The history of the town becomes the history of himself; he looks on the walls, the turreted gate, the town council, the fair, as an illustrated diary of his youth, and sees himself in it—his strength, industry, desire, reason, faults and follies. 'Here one could live,' he says, 'as one can live here now—and will go on living; for we are tough folk and will not be uprooted in the night.' And so, with this, he surveys the marvelous individual life of the past and identifies himself with the spirit of the house, the family, and the city . . ."[34]

Notes
1. Philip Johnson, *Writings* (New York: Oxford, 1979), pp. 212–26.
2. "Architecture is surely *not* the design of space, certainly not the massing or organizing of volumes. These are auxiliary to the main point which is the organization of procession. Architecture exists only in *time*. "Whence and Whither," in Johnson, op. cit., p. 151.
3. Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, trans. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell Univeristy Press, 1977), p. 142
4. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Francis Golffing (New York: Doubleday, 1956), p. 209.

5. The question of originality versus derivation has preoccupied Johnson's historians, particularly when writing about the Glass House. See, for example, Robert Stern, "The Evolution of Philip Johnson's Glass House, 1947–1948," *Oppositions 10* (1977).

6. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1972), p. 141.

7. Ibid., p. 142.

8. Johnson, op. cit., p. 232.

9. "The relation of cabinets to the cylinder . . . is more 'painterly' than Mies would sanction." Ibid.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. "The method consists in taking the part for the whole; in concluding, because certain aspects of two civilizations (one present, the other past) bear *resemblances*, that there is *analogy* from all points of view. Now, not only is this reasoning logically unsound, but in a fair number of cases it is refuted by the facts." Claude Levi-Strauss, *Race and History* (Paris: UNESCO, 1952), p. 252. My italics.

14. Johnson, op. cit., p. 216.

15. Foucault, *Archaeology*, op. cit., p. 146.

16. Hayden V. White, "Romanticism, Historicism, and Realism," *The Uses of History* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1968), p. 159.

17. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Pantheon, 1971), p. 219.

18. The phrase is Karl Löwitn's, quoted in Berthold Riesterer, "Karl Löwitn's Anti-Historicism," *The Uses of History*, op. cit., p. 159.

19. Thus Ruskin: "I have long felt convinced of the necessity, in order to its progress, of some determined effort to extricate from the confused mass of partial traditions and dogmata with which [architecture] has become encumbered during imperfect or restricted practice, those large principles of right which are applicable to every stage and style of it." *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (New York: Noonday, 1974), p. 10.

20. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History*, trans. Adrian Collins (Indianapolis: Bobbs' Merrill, 1957,), p. 24.

21. Ibid., p. 45.

22. Claude Levi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Jacobson and Schoepf (New York: Basic Books, 1963), p. 14.

23. Claude Levi-Strauss, *Race and History*, op. cit., p. 248.

24. Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), p. 263.

25. Claude Levi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, op. cit., p. 3.

26. However, when French Art Nouveau sought to consolidate its identity through legible references to Rococo sources in order to distinguish itself from its Belgian and German counterparts, it succumbed to both nationalism and historicism.

27. Hayden V. White, op. cit.

28. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Francis Golffing (New York: Doubleday, 1956), p. 211.

29. "*Dejeuner sur l'herbe* and *Olympia* were perhaps the first . . . paintings in European art that were less a response to the achievement of Giorgione, Raphael, and Velazquez than an acknowledgement . . . of the new and substantial relationship of painting to itself. Manet produced works in a self-conscious relationship to earlier paintings—or rather to that aspect of painting that remains indefinitely open. They were not meant to foster the lamentation—the lost youth, the absence of vigor, and the decline of inventiveness—through which we reproach our Alexandrian age, but to unearth an essential aspect of our culture: every painting now belongs within the squared and massive surface of painting . . ." Michel Foucault, "Fantasia of the Library," *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, op. cit., p. 92.

30. Interview with the author, *Skyline* (May, 1978), p. 8.

31. Foucault, *Archaeology*, op. cit., p. 22.

32. "In a city with traditions, you not only can, but you should use them. I think there's a new moral imperative here . . . So it becomes almost a moral imperative to make your own work knit in somehow. It's like a buttonhook, isn't it? You reach down in and join in with things . . ." Johnson in an interview with the author, op. cit.

33. Nietzsche, quoted in Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," op. cit., p. 162.

34. Nietzsche, *Use*, p. 18.