the ordinary within the extraordinary, the least remarkable sights on the most remarkable site. Meanwhile the stunningly atmospheric photographs of Laura Padgett, which capture Zumthor’s intentions toward the evanescent, were absent.

What is this new compulsion to banalize the wonderful, to isolate so carefully, amidst works of great power and originality, those points that can be framed to look most trivial? Have we become afraid of “character,” or temperament, or “beauty,” or expressive line? In our dread of vulgarity are we so discomfited by unfolding space, or an emotive palette, or the sheens and textures of a florid mix of surface? And like Sugimoto, Lambri, and Ruff, do we locate the transcendental only where the ground is cool and clinical and sure enough to absorb it without embarrassment? Surely what Goff possessed was the courage to follow the logic of any scheme to the possible bad taste of its conclusion. Such exuberance deserves not trivializing but dramatizing. He needs an exaggerated eye to show us the exaggeration of his forms, their bright lights, high sheens, diminishing perspectives, vivid colors, translucencies, transparencies, luxuriously unnecessary gestures. For it is these excesses and the dynamism they produce, rather than from static contemplation, that Goff’s architecture gains all its expressive force.

NICHOLAS OLSBERG
Patagonia, Arizona

John Musili, director
Philip Johnson: Self Portrait

Barbara Wolf, director
Philip Johnson: Diary of an Eccentric Architect

Philip Johnson died in January 2005 at the age of ninety-eight. Today it is audiovisual media that best convey the architect’s charisma and character. These two documentaries—now historical documents—produced at different moments in his life shed light on his personality and self-created media image. They illustrate the connections between Johnson and the man and his impact on architecture. Johnson did not believe in “principles” of architecture, and his many views and assertions on the subject do not amount to a coherent or synthetic theory to be taught and replicated. If anything, he preferred stories and anecdotes, with which the architect could publicize his artistic moods before an audience. He constructed his own persona in analogy to an aesthetic object—filled with contradictions, mysterious at times, and never reducible to “just” words. Not least because of his education in the classics and philosophy at Harvard before considering a career as an architect at the age of thirty-four, Johnson liked to borrow loosely from Heraclitus’s wisdom; he agreed with the philosopher, who stated that “eyes are better inferiors than ears,” and adopted his belief that change is the only constant.1

The medium of motion pictures appears best suited to capture Johnson, who constantly related his thoughts with the help of words, grimaces as well as gestures. It is as if the narrative aspect of the film medium duplicated his idea of “procession” in architecture, always leading from one surprising event to the next, and never standing still in one place.

Whoever tries to understand Johnson’s personage and to grasp “what makes [him] tick”2 is therefore bound to revisit some of the film footage, which makes him come alive in a different way after his recent death. What historiographic status these films and documentaries will be given versus the more traditional records for the writing of history (in other words, textual material) will have to be decided by the individual historians who reconstruct Johnson’s legacy. A classical deontological argument for favoring textual documents over film material could be that seeing Johnson “perform” compromises the ideal of the historian’s detachment and objectivity.

Yet arguably, and without falling into an overly “ceci tuera cela” contention, the “modern” media have become so central to both Johnson’s modus operandi and the cultural context in which he operated that historiography might have to reconsider some of its most cherished principles. In Johnson’s case, his attention to the “live” delivery of his character makes him unique among architects and thus should be counted as part of his contribution to the field. His extravagant demeanor appears to be what motivates both his way of speaking and his way of conceiving architecture. Here is a man whose words are truly “embodied” by their author, and to disconnect them from his physical body will inevitably lead to the diminution of his words’ potential meaning. Johnson documented history in his idiosyncratic and animated way, and therefore, animated documentaries should be counted among the most effective means by which to remember him.

Philip Johnson: Self Portrait and Philip Johnson: Diary of an Eccentric Architect, separated from each other by a decade, hinge on the idea of Johnson thinking aloud about his art. Both films weave in a survey of his wide range of aesthetic dispositions, with the undeniable entertainment value of his relentless comments and explanations. In both cases, the spectator is offered a demonstration of this architect’s mercurial wit at the basis of the social persona for which he was notorious by the time of his death.

Philip Johnson: Self Portrait is structured around a series of interviews conducted by art historian Rosamond Bernier, founder of the renowned French art magazine L’OEIL and personal friend of many masters of the School of Paris, including Picasso, Matisse, Braque, Léger, Miró, Ernst, and Giacometti. As an interviewer, Bernier understands that any attempt to be too inquisitive with Johnson tends to lead to either self-deprecating statements or amusing hyperboles. As such, while Johnson casually proclaims that he is “just a pasticheur,” he also declares that he is now “without doubt the leading architect in the United
States” and that, therefore, “everybody hates [him] now.” It is important to understand that the film appeared only a couple of years after Johnson inaugurated his building for the AT&T headquarters in Manhattan, nicknamed “The Tower of Power” by New York Magazine—a building that gave him icon status in America. Carefully maneuvering around his anecdotal overstatements, Bernier gives the dialogues a more conversational character, backed by a musical score that switches from melodramatic to droll.

The film addresses a nonexpert audience and introduces a multitude of Johnson’s edifices throughout the—then—four decades of his career as a practicing architect, relating each building to one of his stylistic periods as well as to a “new” idea. Among these projects, the Museum of Modern Art’s sculpture garden is described as the only “piazza” in New York; the IDS Center in Minneapolis from 1973 as a Piazza San Marco turned outside-in; the Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth as a Miesian glass box hidden behind a “screen” of en pointe arches; the Fort Worth Water Garden from 1974 as a symphonic collage of both natural and architectural landscape elements and water basins; the trapezoid-shaped Pennzoil twin towers from 1976 as housing unique offices with views of the different pavilions in his estate; the cone-shaped Study or Library House, also from 1949 and transformed in 1953; the miniaturized, arched Lake Pavilion in 1962; the underground Painting Gallery with mobile wall roundels from 1965; the white, Mediterranean, stair-as-building Sculpture Gallery from 1970; the cone-shaped Study or Library from 1980; the Ghost House as homage to Frank Gehry from 1984; the 1985 Kirstein Tower in honor of Johnson’s friend Lincoln Kirstein, the impresario, writer, and founder of the New York State ballet; the Gate House, a crossbreed of New England vernacular with German expressionism; and finally, the very small, “deconstructivist” Dog House from 1998. This autobiographical scenario is the backdrop for the dialogues between Bernier and Johnson, and their talking voices constitute the connecting tissue between the different filmic insertions of the buildings referred to in the discussion. The documentary’s playful and humorous tone and the swift rhythm of the filmic montage vividly capture Johnson’s nonchalant approach to the art of architecture.

Philip Johnson: Diary of an Eccentric Architect is more psychoanalytic in nature and weaves together two parallel narratives. The first looks forward, documenting all the different phases from the Gate House’s (or “Da Monsta’s”) conception to its construction; in particular, it portrays Johnson’s impatience in seeing the second-to-last edifice on his estate go up. The second narrative looks backwards, following Johnson recount his memories and views of the different pavilions in his New Canaan compound. The result is a dense web of stories, descriptions, and recollections, always related cinematographically to the built artifacts. Architecture here appears as the architect’s interior monologue turned inside out, and the estate’s collection of buildings materialize as his autobiographical storybook and, at the same time, as his architectural memoirs “written” in brick, stucco, steel, and glass. Says Johnson, “clients are so awful,” and therefore, “there is only one good client: that’s me”; he adds that being an architect is “such fun,” that each building that he added “has been more fun than the last.”

In the film, the crude reality of the Gate House’s construction site is contrasted with the architect’s ludic and capricious fantasy world: Johnson’s preoccupation with his own imaginary world is particularly well illustrated in the film when he walks through his Sculpture Gallery, stops in front of a Frank Stella sculpture, and explains how he visits the work of art’s interior by envisioning himself really small and inside of it: on his imaginary voyage to the inside of the sculpture, he can then discover enormous stalactites coming down at him, and he can climb around the sculpture’s caverns and crevices. In analogy to this particular experience, Johnson visits his personal memory palace while walking through the whole estate.

The film also shows Johnson in dialogue with his companion David Whitney, whose caring seriousness and earnestness stand out against Johnson’s display of simulated philistinism. Whitney emerges as a midwife to Johnson’s carefree asides, especially when the two discuss the paintings in their collection, which were mostly selected by Whitney; one witnesses their ritual of making each other rehearse what they know about this artist, and that painting, and what the circumstances of the work’s acquisition were. Whitney takes a subordinate role to Johnson’s sophist performance. Similarly, two conversations with sculptor Frank Stella and architect Rem Koolhaas reveal themselves as mere pretexts to tease out more of Johnson’s contradictory assertions.

As is apparent in these two documentary films, Johnson was well aware of the power of the media to construct his public persona. While his most famous and visible moment in the mass media might well have been when his portrait appeared on the cover page of Time Magazine in January 1979, holding a model of the newly commissioned AT&T
building, there exists an impressive number of newspaper commentaries, film documentaries, and radio and television interviews in which he broadcasted both his character and his ideas to a broad audience. Among the more important documentaries on him is an early black-and-white film from 1965, directed by Merrill Brockway, entitled This is Philip Johnson. By the 1990s, a significant number of films appeared, including The Artist at Work: Philip Johnson from the Museum of Television and Radio Seminar Series in September 1991, the BBC’s Philip Johnson: The Godfather of American Architecture from 1994, and Beyond Utopia: Changing Attitudes in American Architecture by Michael Blackwood Productions in 1997. In addition, Johnson made several appearances on the Charlie Rose Show between 1993 and 1996, on the occasion of his ninetieth birthday, and also paired with some of the “kids,” including Frank Gehry, Peter Eisenman, and Charles Gwathmey.

Beyond his own appearances on the screen, Johnson was also attracted to other media personalities and the power exuding from them. Reverend Schuller, his charismatic client, commissioned the Crystal Cathedral, from which the Hour of Power has been televised nation-wide as well as internationally. Indeed, part of the lure of the mass media for Johnson involved the possibilities of aesthetic spectacle. In his early twenties, he witnessed two such spectacles: a Hitler rally in 1931, and a Nazi rally in Nuremberg the following year. The aesthetic aspect of these mass gatherings mattered more than their politics, and he described both of the events as “just exciting,” much “like going to La Bohème.”

Also, in his younger years, Johnson wrote for Father Coughlin’s rightist paper Social Justice, contributing some articles about Hitler’s Poland invasion in 1939.

It is clear that Johnson’s relationship with the media precedes his career as an architect, and—to say the least—is a complex one. For all the sympathetic and energetic character shown in the two documentary films by Musilli and Wolf—in both cases an astute portrait of Johnson as a person—the critical viewer is left to judge the cultural legacy of both Johnson’s person and his oeuvre, especially in the light of the controversial political choices he made in his twenties. Whatever one concludes, Johnson’s dictum “you cannot not know history” might well be followed by “you cannot not know Philip Johnson,” for he remains a unique cipher to a long and significant period of twentieth-century architecture.

EMMANUEL PETIT
Yale University

Notes
3. Philip Johnson, transcript of interview by Peter Eisenman, Oct. 1982, no. 3, p. 69, Philip Johnson Papers [980060.38.2-4], Getty Center Archive, Santa Monica, Calif.