



VISIBILITY AS FUNCTION: THE VILLA NOAILLES

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Abstract

The historical circumstances that surrounded its construction and the events that took place in it after, gave the Villa Noailles a special place in the culture of the 20's and 30's. The importance of the Villa as a total site transcends the relative importance of its specific aspects. The Villa Noailles' compound of cultural layers has grown in visibility and historical relevance to the point where it has become a constellation. The most obviously shining stars in this particular dark sky of modernity are: Mallet-Stevens' project for the Villa itself, Gabriel Guévrékian's triangular 'cubist' garden, Man Ray's surrealist film *Les Mystères du Château du Dé* (1929) and the marginaux patrons themselves, the Noailles couple.

A constellation is a moment of reciprocal illumination; the other stars of the constellation reinforce each star's shine. Through this, a figure emerges from a random landscape of luminous points. To see a constellation implies a distinction between luminescence and visibility. Thus visibility is not solely a problem of reflected light; instead, it is a function of a given disposition of circumstances.

If we transpose the 'functionalization of visibility,' to the terrain of media and architectural modernity, we find the starting point for this paper. In tracing the lines of this constellation, one discovers not a circumstantial collection of cultural artifacts, but an intentional strategy of mediatic visibility orchestrated by the Noailles. The very discovery of a 'constellation' is in some way evidence of its success.

The strategy of mediatic visibility could be much more simply and bluntly stated: advertising. Advertisements or publicity are by definition activities whose main function is visibility. Advertisements identify desirable objects and dictate their diffusion throughout the culture. We also know that the desire for the objects is imposed by their visibility, it is not necessarily intrinsic to them. Could the need to mediatize life itself be a desperate attempt to make it more desirable, more enjoyable?

Perhaps this equation is best expressed by the formula: Modernist Advertising Machine. Advertising Machine refers to the strategy. Modernist alone refers to the historical and cultural circumstances and the lifestyle. Modernist Machine, already a product of the equation, is a machine that includes mediatization at the core of its mechanic operations; it is a Modern Machine with self-awareness.

To make the equation fully adherent to the constellation, cinema, the predominant media through which these operations are mediated, must be added as another variable. Thus the full equation should read: Cinematic Modernist Advertising Machine

Recentering the focus on the Villa, its construction and its architects, it is now possible to argue that the cinematic was the matrix and mediatization the core of Villa Noailles' modernist adventure.



This adventure is best played retroactively. Playing it backwards, the little ghosts and undertones that the normal chronological history of the villa leaves behind are rendered visible. The relations between architecture, cinema and social visibility that engender this 'machine' do not follow linear paths. A more heterogeneous mix of this relation reveals their mediatic efficacy. Thus a framework parallel to the structure of the villa – a succession of episodes, of different sets – will structure this essay. These episodes describe a movement from Man Ray's film, through the theoretical relation of Mallet-Stevens with set design and his experience designing movie sets, to the project and construction of the villa itself. Perhaps if we were dealing here with a classic machine, the movement would demand continuity. But this is a cinematic machine, and the logic of its workings demands montage and reversal.

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