

# Runic Enchantments :

## Mario Sironi and the Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution (1932)

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Fig. 1: Adalberto Libera and Mario De Renzi, *Temporary Facade, Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution, Rome 1932-34.*

Unity and separation: the driving forces of the “society of the spectacle” described by Guy Debord can also be seen in the exhibition designs of Mario Sironi, arguably the most important Italian artist between the wars and a leading propagandist for the Fascist regime. In what follows I examine Sironi’s contribution to the “Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista” (1932), mounted in Rome on the tenth anniversary of Mussolini’s government and only recently recognized, after a long period of understandable neglect, as « the most important political and artistic event of the period » (1). More specifically, I would like to consider two aspects of Sironi’s work in which the spectacle’s nature as a unified but separate “pseudo-world apart,” as Debord called it, emerges in a particularly clear way (2). The first is the artist’s organic conception of the synthesis of the arts, a central theme of his work throughout the 1930s that reflects, I argue, his often-noted, but never carefully considered, Wagnerianism (3). The second aspect, related to his career as a political illustrator for Mussolini’s daily paper *Il Popolo d’Italia*, is his fascination with the new means of mass communication, especially the press. Both reflect the pervasive dualities of this artist, arguably the most important Italian painter between the wars, whose work has been described as progressive and reactionary, modern and classical, populist and elitist. Both also exemplify the merging of avant-garde and ritual themes that was one of the show’s most remarkable features.

The Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution (EFR) was the longest-lasting, most successful, and by all accounts the most memorable propaganda show ever mounted by the Fascist party in Italy. Staged at a time when the regime’s popularity was approaching its peak both at home and abroad, it stood for two years as the symbolic center of

Fascist worship around the world, attracting an estimated four million visitors and drawing widespread praise for its artistic as well as its political significance. The building picked to house the exhibition was the old 19<sup>th</sup> century Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome, which was completely transformed with a new temporary facade designed by the young architect Adalberto Libera assisted by Mario de Renzi (fig. 1), and by the addition of a group of smaller rooms in the back. Inside, a team of artists, mostly young members of the avant-garde, used the most advanced methods of exhibition display, from photomontage to mural relief and even sound effects, to turn the more than twenty rooms of the Palazzo into a rivetting narrative of Fascism’s rise from WWI through the March on Rome. Having supervised the design and construction of the EFR’s two most direct precedents, the Italian Press pavilions at the international exhibitions in Cologne and Barcelona in 1928 and 1929 respectively, Sironi was by far the best-known and experienced participant. He designed the show’s largest and in many ways most important sequence of rooms, while also serving unofficially as artistic director for the whole event.

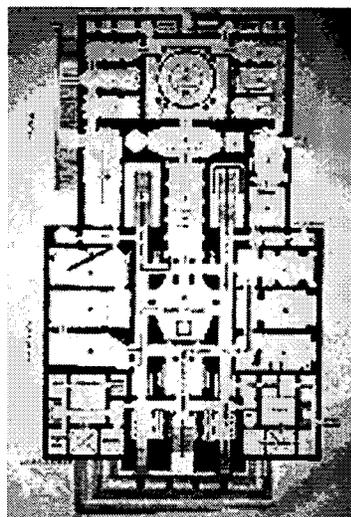


Fig. 2: *Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution, Ground Floor Plan.*

The plan of the building, which in its modified form (Fig. 2) was very likely due to Libera working together with Sironi, laid out a single path leading from the entrance through a succession of fifteen historical rooms (A through Q). As might have been expected, the narrative featured three main characters, each melodramatically invested with positive and negative connotations. The first was Italy, in its various embodiments as the people or as a female figure representing Italian civilization. Then came communism and its allies (socialism to liberal

democracy) from whose clutches Italy had to be saved; and finally Mussolini, whose triumph over evil and subsequent deification formed the main theme of the exhibition's concluding segment. The latter took up four major halls on the building's main axis of symmetry, culminating in the Shrine of the Martyrs (U), dedicated to the memory of those who had died for the cause.

As I have argued elsewhere, this plan was based on a definite ritual structure which reproduced the liturgical sequence of a Mass. The opening ceremonies began with an *introitus* (the hymns sung on the steps leading up to the entrance), a *credo* (the swearing of the oath in the atrium), a symbolic re-enactment of the passion (the procession through each of the historical rooms), and a concluding sacrificial rite of communion in the Shrine (4). Such a ritual emphasis, evidently intended to underscore the show's nature as a cult object, could also be seen in Sironi's four rooms (P, Q, R, and S in the plan, fig. 2), which were placed strategically at the end of the historical narrative and at the start of the final procession towards the Shrine, thereby underscoring the show's main message of continuity between the past and present, or between the revolution and the regime. As the guidebook put it, comparing the exhibition to a "giant symphony":

*"When the last note falls ... [the viewer] has to feel that this is not the end, but a new beginning, and that the symphony continues in time, substituting the impetuous rhythm of the insurrection with the tenacious and hard-working pulse of reconstruction."*(5)

Indeed, a musical analogy seems the most suited to describe how Sironi skillfully adapted the spaces of the old Palazzo to his needs, creating a single escalating rhythm of spaces from the first room to the last. By dividing the first room (P) into two parts by means of a massive wall raised about three meters from the ground, Sironi effectively created a crescendo of five (rather than four) spaces, each larger and more imposing than the preceding one. The wall itself effectively served as a curtain raised onto the first act. From here the narrative unfolded in an escalating rhythm across the first two rooms (P and Q), which celebrated the March on Rome and Fascism's assumption to power, through the Salone d'Onore (R), dedicated to Mussolini, and into the Galleria dei Fasci (S), offered as a final recapitulation of the entire period covered by the show.

A similar theatrical quality can be seen in Sironi's successive handling of each space, like in a wagnerian drama where all the arts converged into a multi-sensory performance. The transition from flat surface to sculpture to architecture evoked the unity of the arts that was a recurring theme of the artist's writings and work. Like Wagner, Sironi conceived the "synthesis" as a hierarchy, with architecture occupying the most important position as the most powerful expressive medium. Like Wagner, he mobilized each of the arts according to its own inherent potential, taking the viewer through a series of increasingly charged psychological atmospheres designed to abolish any separation between the viewer and the work.



Fig. 3: Mario Sironi, study for room Q.

The great number of studies that survive give a good idea of the artist's intentions. Many of them show him restlessly exploring ways to mould the spaces through dramatic projections, distortions, and rhythmic superimpositions. While photography and typography dominate in his studies for the first room, it is sculpture and architecture that are the main expressive focus towards the end. As a whole, these studies vividly illustrate the formal and narrative shifts through which Sironi attempted to appeal successively to the viewer's mind, heart, and body. Two of them, for the first and second room respectively, illustrate his overall strategy. The first is a collage in mixed media, with photographs of mass rallies and newspaper headlines arranged in a linear sequence like in a static film. The second (fig. 3) is a study in tempera that well conveys the artist's drive to spatialize the viewer's temporal experience. She is shown standing roughly in the center of the scene, surrounded on all sides by a single mass, swelling and contracting in response to structural or expressive needs, the whole viewed through a mist of heavy shading that recalled the steam curtain used in Wagner's operas and suggesting a feeling of oceanic oneness.

I would like now to look more closely at the rooms as built, emphasizing the many ways in which Sironi tried to intensify the emotional impact of the work on its audience. Of special interest are 1) the changing narrative registers through which he pursued the goal of a mystical union with the viewer; the overall development might be described as moving from a figurative, to a thematic, to a structural mode of narration, 2) the way in which he exploited the magical effects of new techniques of mass communication, in particular photography and the press, and 3) the sacred tone of the entire setting, which borrowed systematically from religious precedents (6).



Fig. 4: Mario Sironi, Room P, view from the entrance.

The first room (fig.4), as mentioned, celebrated the March on Rome, the mythical act of violent "insurrection" that was the founding event in Fascism's mythologized account of its own origins. Passing under the raised curtain, viewers entered the main part of the room like spectators onto a stage. Here, in a dark romantic light, they confronted three giant constructions. Facing them on the far wall was large "photomosaic" showing the Fascist legions in march towards the capital. The repeated rows of marching soldiers might have recalled photographic documentaries from the Great War or, just as easily, like in the overture to *Tannhauser*, the march of pilgrims to Rome. The most immediate reference would have been to the stream of viewers themselves. Like in Wagner's operas, the incorporation of the audience into the performance served to further implicate it as an « actor » in a sacred drama (7).

Sironi's most likely source for this work (one of the few examples of a technique he would later repudiate as too commercial) was El-Lissitzki's large photomontage for the USSR pavilion in Cologne (1928), which stood nextdoor to his own, and which used a similar orthogonal arrangement of photographs to narrate the development of the Russian press. Contrary to El-Lissitzki, however, Sironi monumentalized the images to life-size scale, dramatizing the viewer's absorption in the historical document. He also placed the scene directly on the ground, the foreshortened views drawing the viewer forcefully into the epic space of the picture. The concern to create a seamless narrative continuity, if necessary even by blurring the dividing line between one image and the next, also expressed a ritual conception of the photograph basically at odds with El Lissitzki's much more transparent construction methods (8).

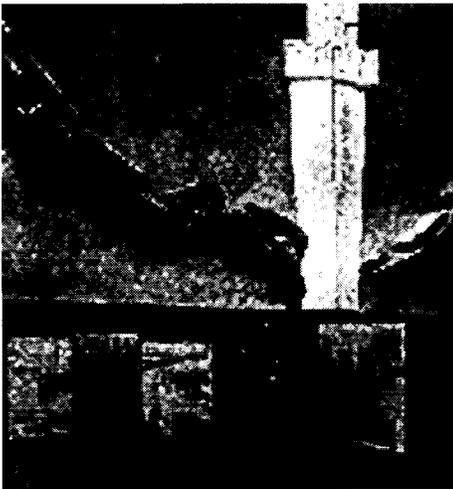


Fig. 5: Mario Sironi, Room P.

As if to underscore the inadequacy of a mere documentary presentation, two sides of the room presented large mural compositions celebrating the "liberation" and subsequent "take off" of Fascism. Both were based on Sironi's earlier political illustrations for *Il Popolo d'Italia*, where he had worked for many years in close collaboration with Mussolini developing a repertoire of dramatic symbols suitable to the Duce's image-laden style of speech. Their synthetic, signal-like quality exemplified the particular mode of communication of the press, with its emphasis on brevity and legibility. Like his own full-page newspaper images, which effectively eliminated the frame so as to bring the viewer face to face with the scene, both murals appeared to merge completely with the walls, amplifying their quasi-physical force on the viewer. The first, looming over the entrance as the viewer passed into the room, was a fine example of this method of theatrical 'deframing,' which was likely inspired by Wagner's stage productions in Bayreuth (Fig. 5). The second mural displayed an eagle and flag, with the giant inscription "La Marcia su Roma" in white characters against a dark background (Fig. 4). As the guide-book explained, it formed a "plastic progression" building up three-dimensionally towards the exit door, where the head of the eagle projected dramatically from the surface of the wall. The typically wagnerian mixture of painting, relief, sculpture, and typography, was evidently meant to illustrate the unity of the arts. It might also have recalled Adorno's criticism of the Gesamtkunstwerk, which, as he put it, imposed « a seamless external principle in which disparate procedures are simply aggregated in such a way as to make them appear collectively binding ». Sironi himself recognized this much when he noted that "we may have lost some points in stylistic orthodoxy" (9).



Fig. 6: Mario Sironi, Room Q.

The drive to intensify the visual effects of the printed and illustrated page could also be seen in the next room (fig. 6). The monumentality of the space reflected its greater thematic emphasis, which in good melodramatic form offered the contemplation of virtue (in this case, the "Advent" of Fascism) as its final scene. On the far wall, recalling the headlines of the magazine, were the giant letters of Mussolini's first words to the King upon assuming power. They were arranged in compact rows like the typeset characters of a printing press. On the right, a relief of two warriors raising the Roman standard effectively recycled Sironi's own commentary on the event ten years earlier in "Resurrezione" (1922), the suppression of color and figurative detail dramatizing its meaning as a "pure symbol of fascist energy." Here as elsewhere, the alternation of visual and oral slogans evoked the sensory split between sound and sight, image and word, characteristic of the newspaper. In this way, and against to the purported spirit of the Gesamtkunstwerk, Sironi's settings actually reinforced the fragmentation of perception that by the 1930s was becoming even more pervasive with the spread of radio and cinema (10).

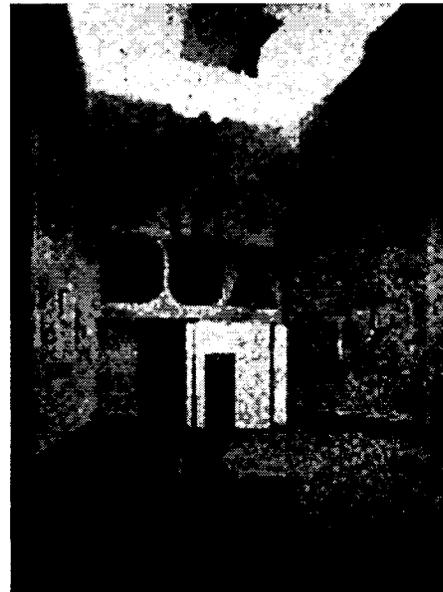


Fig. 7: Mario Sironi, Salone d'Onore.

With the Salone d'Onore (fig.7) the narrative took a new turn, taking the viewer into a subliminal space charged with powerful inner conflict. The Salone represented nothing less than the apotheosis of Mussolini, whose more than life-size statue dominated the hall from a high niche. The Duce held a rifle and a book in each hand, symbols of the active and contemplative life of the "perfect fascist." The entire space

recalled the inside of a fortress, the walls treated as rough-hewn granite. The sides were shaped like abstracted fasci and bore the Duce's mottoes, « believe obey fight » and « order authority justice, » runic inscriptions that might have recalled the Christian « faith hope and charity. » At the Duce's feet stood a steel cubical cell, made with the inked plates and the cylinders of the printing press and containing, like in a tabernacle, a faithful reconstruction of Mussolini's headquarters at *Il Popolo d'Italia* in Milan. The simultaneous sacralization of the Duce and the press reflected Mussolini's own role as 'absolute celebrity' in an already media-saturated climate increasingly dominated by Hollywood stars (11).

The most remarkable feature of the Salone, however, was its forceful tectonic expression, which drew directly on the viewer's subconscious identification with primal forces. Architecture stood here in the same relation to the figurative and thematic representations of the previous rooms as music did, for Wagner, with respect to the other dramatic arts ; that is to say, as the deepest level below conscious awareness on which the innermost aspects of the drama could be lived through and experienced (12). This shift to a structural register is best seen in the way Sironi dramatized the effects of load and support. The square, block-like characters of the word DUX, for example, seemed to be physically supporting the upper projecting portion of the wall. A similar structural rhetoric dictated the design of the exit, where two giant piers supported an aggressively cantilevered Roman numeral ten, symbol of the Fascist decennial. The overall effect was well described by the art critic Margherita Sarfatti as «tumultuous and truly Michelangelesque» (13).



Fig. 8: Mario Sironi, Side entrance to Salone d'Onore.

Even more forcefully, the side entrances (Fig. 8) exhibited red triangular wedges that seemed to have been driven energetically between the top of the pier and the lintel of the door. This was a direct reference to Sironi's own « Synthesis of the World War » (1918) in which the wedge symbolized Liberty's victory over Barbarism. It is interesting to note, however, that in works such as « La Bomba » (1918) Sironi had used a similar image to represent the cleansing power of war. What Benjamin noted about the illustrated war books of the 20s, that they conveyed "everything except lived experience communicated from mouth to ear," could also apply to Sironi's pervasive war imagery (14),

which in this way as well, reinforced the « loss of experience » that Benjamin attributed to the age of mass spectacle, where as Debord would say, « all that was directly lived has moved away into a representation » (15).



Fig. 9: Mario Sironi, Galleria dei Fasci.

Passing through the narrow wedge-shaped portal, the viewer finally emerged into the Galleria dei Fasci, a space of truly monumental proportions lined on either side by ten massive pilasters, each symbolizing one year of the Fascist revolution (16). Towering over the viewer with their sharp diagonal projections set against a lit background, the pilasters might have recalled, as Giorgio Ciucci notes, Melnikov's Rusakov Club in Moscow (17). A more direct source, however, would have been the gesture of Roman salute: like the facade, where twelve soldier-apostles mimicked the shape of the fasci with their outstretched rifles and bayonets, but on a deeper structural level, the Galleria was meant to serve as a backdrop for files of saluting militiamen. Here, finally, the viewer's body was completely absorbed within the architectural structure. The inversion of human and object-like properties, the confusion of boundaries between the self and the other, the hypnotic contamination of subject and object, might have recalled Freud's definition of the oceanic feeling, the sense of "an indissoluble bond, of being at one with the world as a whole" (18). The relentless rhythm of the pilasters, like the mechanized image of Italy on the March on the end wall, evoked the drumming beat of the rallies (often appropriately referred to as "adunate oceaniche") with their euphoric regression to a pre-symbolic state of consciousness typical of love or religious rapture. Thus the Galleria concluded Sironi's sequence of rooms in a grand finale that has been rightfully described as "a tour de force unique in the history of Italian modernism" (19).

To conclude with two general remarks, and to return to my opening suggestion, first, I think it is clear that Sironi's work for the EFR was strongly indebted to Wagner's myth of the "total work of art." It is hardly necessary to note the contradictions inherent in this idea, such as its a-historical appeal to a primordial wholeness. As Adorno noted, the Gesamtkunstwerk leads to "something resembling an epic totality, simulating the unity of internal and external, subject and object, instead of giving shape to the rupture between them" (20). More space would be necessary to show that Adorno's critical reading of Wagner offers a valid model from which to approach the work of this formidable figure in the

history of modern Italian art. Suffice it to mention what were, for Adorno, some of the characteristic features of Wagner's music: a fascination with the magical effects of technology, a "spatializing of time" through rhythm and repetition, the use of reiterated, exteriorized motifs and "image-gestures" designed to "hypnotize the audience into submission." All of these find a direct echo in Sironi's own art of effects, which are thus open to the same charge of « totalitarianism » that Adorno made against the German composer.

This is not to say that a more nuanced reading is not also possible, however. As Adorno himself admitted, the one redeeming feature of Wagner's operas was their neurotic force, which sometimes was able to produce a "black, abrupt, and jagged music which instead of underlining the vision, unmasks it." A similar remark could be made about Sironi's own, deeply conflicted artistic personality which, while admittedly more evident in the melancholic furor of his famous paintings of the 1920s, is also apparent in his stern, angst-ridden political imagery. A promising starting point for such a reading would be the artist's mystical glorification of war, which suggests something like the compulsive repetition of a traumatic dream — in other words, the typical symptoms of shell shock, which were not uncommon in the culture of Europe of the 1920s and 30s (21).

Second, the EFR shows clearly the extent to which Sironi contributed to that quasi-religious aura that historians now define as one of Fascism's most remarkable features. This pseudo-religious element is what Debord intended when he noted that "separation is the alfa and omega of the spectacle" (22). By separation, Debord means the projection of human powers onto an mystical plane beyond reach. The basic mechanism of such a projection is not unlike that of religion. As Debord explains:

*Religious contemplation in its earliest form was the outcome of the establishment of the social division of labor and the formation of classes. Power draped itself in the outward garb of a mythical order from the beginning (23).*

But if power as a separate realm has always had a spectacular aspect, what distinguishes the modern spectacle from older forms of religious illusion is the immensely greater productive capacity of modern technology, which promises to "realize" paradise on earth. As Debord puts it,

*Mass allegiance to frozen religious imagery was originally a shared acknowledgement of loss, an imaginary compensation for a poverty of real social activity that was still widely felt to be a universal fact of life. The modern spectacle, by contrast, depicts what society can deliver, but within this depiction what is permitted is rigidly distinguished from what is possible. The spectacle preserves unconsciousness as practical changes in the conditions of existence proceed (24).*

This description recalls Benjamin's well-known analysis of Fascism in the conclusion to "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" essay. Here Benjamin described the essential contradiction between the new historical possibilities opened up by modern technology and the new means of mass communication on the one hand, and Fascism's need to preserve an outdated class structure on the other. It was such a contradiction that determined Fascism's character as a "conservative revolution" and that explained its cultic use of the means of mass communication. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Sironi's work for the EFR. For this reason, I can find no better commentary with which to conclude this paper than Debord's own words, when he notes:

*The spectacle is the material reconstruction of the religious illusion. Not that its techniques have dispelled those religious mists in which human beings once located their own powers, the very powers that had been wrenched from them — but those cloud-enshrouded entities have now been brought down to earth. (...) The spectacle is hence the*

*technological version of the exiling of human powers into a 'world beyond' (...) It is the bad dream of a society in chains, expressing nothing more than its desire to sleep (25).*

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Jeffrey Schnapp, "Epic Demonstrations: Fascist Modernity and the 1932 Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution," in R.J. Goslan, *Fascism, Aesthetics, and Culture* (London: University Press of New England, 1992). The literature on the EFR has become quite extensive in recent years. See also the special issue of *JAE* (February 1992) with articles by D. Ghirardo, L. Andreotti, and J. Schnapp.

<sup>2</sup>Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone 1994) p. 12. The best overall study in English of Sironi is Emily Brown, *Mario Sironi and Italian Modernism* (Cambridge MASS: Cambridge University Press, 1999). See also Fabio Benzi and Mario Sironi, *Sironi Illustratore* (Rome: DeLuca 1988).

<sup>3</sup>The first to draw attention to Sironi's great passion for Wagner was Mario De Micheli in "Un wagneriano in camicia nera" in *Bolaffi Arte* 26 (1973). See also E. Brown, cit., pp. 28 ff.

<sup>4</sup>See my "The Aesthetics of War: the Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution" in *JAE*.

<sup>5</sup>Dino Alfieri and Luigi Freddi, eds. *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista* (Bergamo 1933) pp. 46-47. My translation.

<sup>6</sup>I adopt here a version of Northrop Fry's theory of modes, in *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973).

<sup>7</sup>Theodore Adorno, *In Search of Wagner* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 31.

<sup>8</sup>See Buchloh, "From Faktura to Factography" in *October: The First Decade*, edited by A. Michelson, R. Krauss, D. Crimp, and J. Copjec (Cambridge, MASS: MIT Press, 1987).

<sup>9</sup>Sironi, "L'architettura della rivoluzione," in Ettore Camesasca, ed., *Mario Sironi: scritti editi e inediti* (Milan: Feltrinelli 1980) p. 135 and Adorno, p. 102.

<sup>10</sup>For an excellent discussion of these changes in perception, see Alice Yaeger Kaplan, *Reproductions of Banality: Fascism, Literature, and French Intellectual Life* (Minneapolis MN: Minnesota University Press, 1986) pp. 3-41.

<sup>11</sup>Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle: the Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini's Italy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: California University Press, 1997) pp. 119-139.

<sup>12</sup>Brian Magee, *Aspects of Wagner* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) p. 36ff.

<sup>13</sup>"L'Exposition du Fascisme" in *Formes* (Zurich: 31 January 1933).

<sup>14</sup>"Experience and Poverty," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 2 1927-1934*, Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, eds. (Cambridge MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1999) pp. 731-2.

<sup>15</sup>Debord, p. 12.

<sup>16</sup>Alfieri, p. 220.

<sup>17</sup>"L'autorappresentazione del fascismo: la mostra del Decennale della Marcia su Roma" in *Rassegna d'Architettura* 4, June 1982, pp. 48-55.

<sup>18</sup>*Civilization and its Discontents* (New York and London: Norton 1961) p. 12. See also Adorno, p. 34 and Kaplan, pp. 3-41.

<sup>19</sup>Agnoldomenico Pica, "Il Gruppo 7," in *La Casa* 6 (1959), p. 145.

<sup>20</sup>Adorno, p. 156.

<sup>21</sup>Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, quoted in Tyrus Miller, *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts Between the World Wars* (Berkeley: California University Press, 1999), p. 79.

<sup>22</sup>Debord, p. 20.

<sup>23</sup>Ibidem.

<sup>24</sup>Ibidem.

<sup>25</sup>Ibidem, p. 18.