Mario Sironi. Cover illustration for Gioacchino Volpe, _Il risorgimento d’Italia_, 1934.
“An art of effects, nothing but effects, espressivo at any price”: the propaganda art of the Italian painter Mario Sironi might well be seen to exemplify everything that Nietzsche deplored in his famous characterization of Wagner’s musical dramas—their grandiloquence, their obsessively repeated leitmotifs, and their use of every available means to maximize the emotional impact of the work on the public. But if Sironi’s lifelong passion for Wagner, first pointed out by Mario de Micheli in 1973, deserves the closest critical scrutiny, it is to Walter Benjamin’s reflections on shock and the “destruction of experience” that one must turn to understand the working methods and the essential relevance of this unedifying but arguably most important Italian artist between the wars.\(^1\)

For Benjamin, an “atrophy of experience” was a defining feature of modern life. He traced its beginnings to capitalist commodification and the rise of a mass culture based on technological reproduction whose effects were particularly evident in the daily press. As he noted,

If the purpose of the newspaper was to allow the viewer to incorporate news as part of his own experience, it would be an unqualified failure, but its goal is just the opposite and it achieves it: to separate as much as possible the news item from anything that might connect directly to the readers’ lived experience.\(^2\)

The tendency toward brevity and comprehensibility was one element that contributed to this effect; another was the newspaper’s sensational layout. Both served to screen out the living reality of an event for the impatient, distracted modern-day reader.

Sironi’s propaganda art exemplifies these new conditions of reception. The succinctness of his graphic style of commentary, as seen in the many hundreds of front-page political illustrations he made for Mussolini’s newspaper *Il popolo d’Italia*, epitomizes a mode of communication that “replaces older narration with information and information with sensation.”\(^3\) Much the same could be said about Sironi’s monumental installations of the late 1920s and early 1930s, which along with his
consuntivi (summings up) in the daily press made him the best-known and most recognizable Italian artist between the wars. For Benjamin, quoting André Gide after a visit to one of Sironi’s shows, these propaganda settings reflected an “architectural journalism” that was the true essence of fascist monumentality.4

Like other writers of the period, including Theodor Adorno, Benjamin recognized that the language of journalism was only one aspect of a more profound modern-day “barbarism” that could not be dissociated from either the long history of capitalist expansion or, in more recent times, from the trauma of the Great War, when, as he put it in a famous passage in “The Storyteller,” “you could see the soldiers returning home from the front turned silent, not richer but poorer in communicable experience,” to which he added, significantly, “and the stream of photo-albums that came out after the war was anything but experience communicated directly from mouth to ear.”5

Benjamin’s reflections on the war closely parallel Adorno’s in Minima Moralia. Both recognized that the Great War had dramatically accelerated trends that throughout the nineteenth century had affected only a fringe of “traumatophile types” like Baudelaire, in whose lyric poems Benjamin had recognized the first signs of a more general “breakdown of experience.”6 With the war, the irreducibility of trauma to normal categories of experience seemed to have penetrated more deeply and widely into the relationship between the subject and the outside world, altering “overnight, and in ways previously thought impossible,” as Benjamin noted, “our very image of the external world.”7 Such profound perceptual shifts affected as much the work of artists and writers of the interwar period as they did the quality and the texture of everyday life. A typical symptom was the feeling that social reality had somehow become “less real,” that the boundaries between art and everyday life, subject and object, had become blurred—a recurring theme of late-modernist literature. Sironi’s famous Paesaggi urbani of the late teens and early twenties, representing the industrial suburbs of Milan as eerily empty landscapes ruled by impersonal forces, convey a similar mood, whose reverse side, in the social field, was the proliferation of what Tyrus Miller has called “mimetic practices”: role playing, slogans, contagious imitation, ways of speaking and dressing, and other ritualized forms of behavior reflecting a general “de-authentification” of social life during these years. Such mass cultural phenomena—the first signs of a “society of the spectacle” where “everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation,” as Guy Debord would write forty years later—invested every industrialized country in the West.8 In Italy they were nowhere more evident than in fascism’s obsessive preoccupation with symbols, gestures,
and ritualized forms of behavior on which its aesthetic, even more than political, appeal was based. Sironi’s work was an essential element in this drive to construct a new fascist subjectivity. His installations offer a unique insight into the way, in Benjamin’s words, new forms of perception could be pressed into the service of “ritual values.”

In what follows, I examine the most sensational of Sironi’s propaganda exhibitions, the *Mostra della rivoluzione fascista* (Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution; EFR), mounted in Rome in 1932. I especially focus on the relationship between the work and the viewer. Like Benjamin describing the poetry of Baudelaire, I take the experience of shock as the key to deciphering the “secret architecture” of Sironi’s work, of which we can say that, like Baudelaire’s, it involved a high degree of conscious planning. Of special interest, as we shall see, is how Sironi strove to create the hypnotic feeling of boundary loss that, as several critics have noted recently, was one of the most distinctive features of the “fascist experience.” No less central is how he used a whole new range of materials and techniques to construct an ideological narrative whose very power and vividness was directly proportional to its ability to evacuate the living reality of an event. To consider Sironi’s work in this way is not to dismiss its cultural, stylistic, or psychological dimensions, which have been the subject of a great deal of writing in recent years; rather, it is to highlight the structural forces at work in some of the first media events of the twentieth century, forces that Sironi reveals in a particularly clear way. Contrary to many accounts of the artist that tend to cast him in the role of avatar of a timeless tradition of Italian classicism, however, I argue that Sironi’s installations were based on a clear set of journalistic principles; that their driving mechanism was the principle of shock; and that their goal, not unlike that of the emerging culture industry, was to promote the massive reconfigurations of human perception that accompanied the rise of the society of the spectacle.

The longest-running propaganda show ever mounted by the Italian fascist government, now recognized as “the most important cultural and political event of the ventennio,” the Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution
opened in Rome on October 29, 1932, to mark the tenth anniversary of fascism’s assumption of power. In Mussolini’s words, the exhibition was to be “an offering of faith that the old comrades hand down to the new ones so that, enlightened by our martyrs and heroes, they may continue the heavy task” of building a fascist Italy. The first in what would become a series of similar events leading up to the World Exhibition planned for 1939 at the EUR in Rome, the show could hardly have come at a better time for the regime, whose popularity in Italy and abroad was then approaching its peak. The relative health of the economy compared to other Western countries, along with the widespread belief that Italian fascism represented a “third way” between capitalism and communism was echoed in the self-confident tone of the organizers and in the show’s uniquely innovative and experimental character. Indeed, the significance of the exhibition in the history of Italian art and architecture can scarcely be underestimated. As the first major experiment in the field of propaganda exhibitions, it helped to focus attention on a wide range of issues related to the development of a “fascist style,” stimulating new directions of work in many fields, from architecture to photography and the graphic arts, as well as introducing many fledgling artists and architects to the wider public. Some of these, including the sculptor Mario Marini, became leading figures in Italian and European art after the war.

The building chosen to house the exhibition was the Palazzo delle Esposizioni, designed by Pio Piacentini in 1881. Photographs offering views of the palazzo on the day before the opening, commemorating the tenth anniversary of the March on Rome, show files of Blackshirts marching down Via Nazionale on their way to Piazza Venezia, where Mussolini would inaugurate Via dell’Impero. During its entire two-year run, the show effectively became the principal site of fascist worship around the world, attracting an estimated four million visitors, including, among others, Paul Valéry, Auguste Perret, Maurice Denis, Le Corbusier, and André Gide, their recorded reactions ranging from extreme disgust (Gide) to equally extreme enthusiasm (Le Corbusier).

As the principal inspiring force behind this event, Sironi already had a long career as propagandist behind him. Even before the March on Rome, his job as political illustrator for *Il popolo d’Italia* had put him in almost daily contact with Mussolini, designing hundreds of illustrations for the newspaper and dozens of posters and covers for books and...
magazines. His first propaganda installations dated from 1928, when he designed a series of press pavilions advertising the publications of *Il popolo d’Italia*, first at the Fiera Campionaria di Milano (1928) and then at the Pressa exhibition in Cologne (1928) and the International Exposition in Barcelona (1929). Through these early and still somewhat tentative works, realized in collaboration with the Milanese architect Giovanni Muzio, Sironi had become familiar with the latest techniques of exhibition design, as seen, for example, in the spectacular work of El Lissitzky in Cologne and Barcelona. Photomontage, typographic inscriptions, photographic enlargements, and large relief decorations were among the techniques he and Muzio used to amplify the visual effects of the newspaper’s front page. No less important, however, was Sironi’s discovery of architecture’s potential to underscore the vividness of the presentation through a ritual sequence, as seen, most effectively, in the Sezione Arti Grafiche at the Villa Reale in Monza (1930). The power of a monumental architecture to appeal to the viewer’s subconscious had been a recurring concern of Sironi’s paintings, and by the early 1930s, amid the debate surrounding rationalism as the new “architecture of the state,” it had become a favorite topic of his writings. Here, consistent with the *mot d’ordre* of a constructive synthesis from the experimental phase of the avant-gardes, Sironi called for a new alliance between painters, sculptors, and architects to define a fascist style at once monumental, religious, and warlike, based on “concentration rather than dispersal,” and employing unambiguous symbols to achieve a unity in the arts analogous to the one Mussolini had accomplished in the political realm.  

The EFR was Sironi’s long-awaited opportunity to construct a fascist *Gesamtkunstwerk* on a scale unprecedented in his career as propagandist *par excellence* of the fascist revolution. Organized by the future ambassador to Berlin, Dino Alfieri, assisted by Luigi Freddi, who would go on to play a significant role in the state’s cinema industry, the show was designed by a team of approximately twenty artists and architects, many of them young and with relatively little experience. Sironi’s part in this event included acting as de facto artistic director, attending frequent meetings with the organizers to determine the overall plan and the principal sequence of spaces, and designing the largest and most important series of rooms (P through S).

The overall plan of the exhibition, cleverly adapted from the old neoclassical order of the Palazzo delle Esposizioni, makes clear the organizers’ intentions. The scheme was arrived at only after two earlier proposals were considered and rejected, one by the conservative architect Enrico
Del Debbio, the other by the stage designer Antonio Valente. Both had failed to meet Il Duce’s demand for “something bold and audacious, without gloomy reminders of past decorative styles.” More important, both schemes would have maintained the centrality of the palazzo’s neoclassical plan, with the side rooms opening toward the main sequence of monumental spaces. In marked contrast with these proposals, which would have allowed the viewer a relative freedom of movement, the final plan of the exhibition established a single path leading from the entrance, through a succession of fifteen side rooms, each narrating a moment in the history of fascism, and concluding with a grand procession of major halls down the building’s main axis of symmetry toward the final room, the Shrine of the Martyrs. This sequential layout was meant to evoke something like a cinematic experience, a possible precedent being El Lissitzky’s USSR Pavilion in Cologne (1928), which Sironi would have seen while working on the Italian pavilion nearby. Unlike El Lissitzky’s montage-like assemblages, however, the narrative here unfolded in a strictly linear manner, downplaying the possibility of peripheral vision so as to maximize the impact of the show on the viewer.

Even more significant was the implicit ritual structure on which the entire sequence was based, a structure that recalled the liturgy of a Catholic mass, with an introitus, a credo, a symbolic reenactment of the passion, and a final rite of communion in the Shrine of the Martyrs. A militarized version of this four-part sequence constituted, in fact, the essential and never openly acknowledged subtext of the ceremony of inauguration, where Il Duce presided over the hymns sung on the front steps of the palazzo, the swearing of the oath in the entrance atrium, the slow procession through each of the fifteen historical rooms, and a concluding rite of communion in the Shrine. Such a ritual structure—itself a textbook case of fascism’s use of technology “for the production of ritual
values”—was clearly intended to exploit the force of religious traditions in Italy. Through semantic displacements and substitutions like that between the passion of Christ and that of the fascist martyrs, it capitalized on deeply embedded narratives in order to recast fascism itself as a new, secular “religion of the State.”

A marked ritual emphasis is clearly apparent in the design of the temporary façade by the young rationalist architect and sometime futurist Adalberto Libera in collaboration with the older and more experienced Mario De Renzi. Photographs depict the façade at nighttime because the exhibition was meant to be visited by night as well as by day. Libera’s scheme, evidently based on Sironi’s and Muzio’s press pavilion in Barcelona of 1929, was poster-like in its simplicity. A red square block, symbolizing the blood of the martyrs, was flanked by two lower wings in gray, with four giant fasci standing several meters from the wall and connected by a horizontal slab supporting the letters MOSTRA DELLA RIVOLUZIONE FASCISTA. Centered symmetrically on the arched opening, the façade presented itself as a modern reinterpretation of a triumphal arch, with the fasci substituting for the giant order of columns. In Rome this was a direct reference to the nearby classical ruins, a main point of attraction for visitors to the capital. In this way the façade expressed a major theme of the decennial celebrations: the link between fascism and Italy’s Roman heritage.

The most striking feature of the design, however, was the way it merged the themes of war and technology. One perceptive viewer, the poet Ada Negri, called it a “war machine . . . sharp and cutting,” an aspect forcefully conveyed by the fasci, which were made in bolted copper plates, and by the razor-sharp axes. The entrance consisted of a barrel-vaulted corridor with narrow metal bands filtering artificial light, a poetic metaphor in praise of technology and electricity (the entire show used electrical lighting to the almost complete exclusion of natural sources). Both the façade and the entrance thus reflected the anti-utilitarian conception of technology implicit in Libera’s slogan “the machine as a work of art.” Both also illustrated Benjamin’s remarks on the connection between fascism’s cult of war and the tradition of aestheticism. As Benjamin noted in 1935, with prescient awareness of the approaching disaster, “the fascist theory of art has the mark of the purest aestheticism. . . . The ‘art of war’ . . . incarnates the fascist idea of technology freed from banal use. But the poetic side of technology, which the fascist upholds against the prosaic conception of the Russians, is also its lethal side.”

Equally if not more telling was the way in which the design sought to include the bodies of the twelve soldier-apostles standing in front, which

Opposite, left: Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution, ground floor plan with Sironi’s rooms P through S highlighted.

Opposite, right: Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution, ground floor plan; detail of Sironi’s rooms.
the guidebook described as “human decorations.” Their posture of attention mimicked the shape of the fasci, the metal of which alluded to the soldiers’ helmets, while the blades related to their bayonets. Such mimetic contaminations between an “animated” architecture and mechanized human bodies were a characteristic feature of the show. Indeed, much the same could be said about the façade’s relation to the masses of Blackshirts marching by it on the inauguration day. The blocks of people were no less part of the total image being conveyed than was the building itself. It was through this kind of imagery—which, as Benjamin noted, employed human masses as integral elements of the composition—that fascist architecture traced a “magic circle” around the work and the viewer, drawing both into an illusory and complete other world in which art appealed as a totality.²⁴

Among the rooms leading up to Sironi’s monumental sequence of spaces, the most striking by far was Giuseppe Terragni’s Sala O, which directly preceded Sironi’s rooms and narrated the period of social unrest leading up to the March on Rome. Sironi is known to have taken an active role in its design, determining, among other things, the diagonal arrangement of the space as lead-up to the following rooms. Photographs of Sala O convey a feeling of lightness and airiness in which the bombardment of optical signals expresses the excitement and confusion of the “pre-insurrectionary” period. Terragni used diaphanous screens to display large graphic compositions that were illuminated by beams of light, producing a vivid interplay of light and shade. A concern for optical effects was especially apparent in what the guidebook described as the “transparency and interpenetration” of the figures in Terragni’s narrative. This was most evident in his systematic use of reflective materials and in his superimposing and laterally displacing one image over another, as in the graphic constructions on the diagonal screen, which were supposed to convey “the rapid succession” and the “simultaneity of events” of the insurrection.²⁵ Their effect was to dissolve the reference planes of the ground, the four walls, and the ceiling. The shiny black linoleum floor, the silhouetted cross on the ceiling, the copper and aluminum constructions on the diagonal screen that, as one critic remarked, conveyed the effect of a flame, a symbol of religious ardor, all served to abolish the ground plane and walls as firm datums.²⁶ The resulting sensation of weightlessness, of literally floating
in space, was described by the architecture critic Edoardo Persico as a “fantasia terremotata,” a seismic fantasy.27

The sources for Terragni’s design included a number of constructivist precedents. The spatial arrangement, centered on the diagonal screen upholding one arm of a giant X silhouetted against the lit ceiling, was likely based on Konstantin Melnikov’s USSR Pavilion of 1925, which displayed a similar contrast between a diagonal path and a rectangular enclosure and which also included a crossing motif over the open passage. The screen itself, acting as both a billboard and a showcase, was probably derived from Le Corbusier’s Nestlé Pavilion in Zurich (1928). The giant photomontage that took up the left wall of the room, showing an immense crowd merging into a field of hands raised in the Roman salute, was strongly reminiscent of a poster by the Russian constructivist Gustav Klutsis, while the three spiraling turbines that crossed the composition leftward from the lower right were likely taken from Le Corbusier’s L’art decorative d’aujourd’hui, which contained a similar image.

Such borrowings, testifying to Terragni’s avid interest in the works of European modernism he would have seen in illustrated journals like La casa bella, were far from neutral, however. For example, unlike Le Corbusier, Terragni used the turbine to link technology with modern warfare. A photographic enlargement at the center of the photomontage included a line by the poet Giosué Carducci: “quando col sangue alla ruota si da il movimento” (when with blood the wheel is set in motion). The reference to the martyrs turned the whole composition into a militaristic glorification of human sacrifice—a fitting illustration of Benjamin’s remark that “imperialist war is a rebellion of technology which collects, in the form of ‘human material,’ the claims to which society has denied its natural material. Instead of draining rivers, society directs a human stream into a bed of trenches.”28

In much the same way, Terragni’s borrowings from Melnikov reflected a different intention that can be seen in a study sketch preserved in his archives, showing an axonometric view of the room. The sketch indicates that Terragni was trying to define a succession of spaces in such a way as to provide a spatial equivalent for the narrative. The tripartite division into a longitudinal corridor, a semicircular space behind the screen, and a progression of vertical panels on the left wall was meant to express “the rhythm and the movement” of the narrative in its three main stages, which might be labeled...
organization, struggle, and sacrifice. Thus the escalating sequence of panels on the left, each one of which would have been taller than the preceding one, was meant to evoke the wave of mass gatherings leading up to the March on Rome, with the lone column in the far left corner probably standing for Italo Balbo’s infamous “column of fire” (“colonna di fuoco,” the scorched-earth campaign against the farming cooperatives of the north that marked the beginning of the insurrection). A comparison between the drawing and the executed scheme shows that Terragni’s intention was only imperfectly realized. Nonetheless, a distinctive feature of his architecture, the idea of a rhythmic and narrative subdivision of space into successive stanzas, made its first appearance in his work here, as a direct response to the practical requirements of the show. The most sophisticated development of this theme would be the Danteum project of 1939, which was based on the textual structure of the Divine Comedy.

For all its richness and intricacy, however, Sala O’s main purpose was merely to prepare the viewer for Sironi’s grand finale, offering itself as both a lead-up and a foil to the monumental sequence that would follow. A glance at the overall plan of Sironi’s four rooms (P through S) suggests a very different formal approach than Terragni’s. Where the latter sought fragmentation and dispersal, Sironi aimed for unity and concentration, stressing mass over line and tactile over optical qualities. This sculptural emphasis can be seen in what the guidebook called the overall “plastic development” of the four rooms, which moved gradually from flat wall decorations to increasingly bold relief, to architecture, the slow and dramatic pace of the narrative underscoring the transition from a predominantly optical to a tactile register.

Two slight modifications to the plan of the palazzo were especially effective here. The first was the inclusion of a small entrance vestibule, which served effectively to create a single five-part sequence with each space larger than the preceding one. The second modification, made possible by opening a door in the far corner of room P, was the choice of a diagonal path across the first two rooms. Both served to increase the viewer’s presence in the space and to propel him or her forward through an escalating spatial progression.

The vestibule was marked off from the rest of the room by a massive wall lifted about three meters from the ground. The wall itself might have recalled a curtain rising on the final act of a drama. Viewers were meant to pass under the wall like
spectators onto a stage, the transition from constrained to open space dramatized by the light that flooded the room through a silk screen hung from the ceiling, producing a mistlike haze reminiscent of the steam curtains used in Wagner's operas.

The drive to make the public into an “actor” in the drama clearly dictated the theme and the placement of the large photomontage of the March on Rome, which took up the entire wall facing the viewer as he or she stepped onto the scene. The repeated rows of life-size soldiers shown marching toward the capital, like the pilgrims’ march to Rome in Wagner's overture to Tannhäuser, were likely drawn from the many photo albums of the Great War published throughout the 1920s—the same ones that epitomized, for Benjamin, the destruction of experience inherent in the press. For the viewing public, however, the most immediate reference would have been to itself, the entire image reflecting the stream of visitors crossing the room diagonally toward the exit. Like Wagner’s theater productions, which, as Adorno remarked, aimed to “incorporate the audience as an integral element of its effect,” the representation of the public served to promote to the greatest degree its identification with the scene.32

Technically, the photomontage was likely inspired by El Lissitzky’s work in Cologne and Barcelona, which made spectacular use of this medium. In stark contrast with El Lissitzky’s didactic approach, however, Sironi exploited the illusionism of the photograph in order to suggest a spatial extension of the room and to draw the viewer forcefully into the space of the picture. The thematic unity, the tiered composition anticipating the great mural cycles that Sironi would produce a few years later, and the evident concern for narrative continuity (even to the point of erasing by hand the sharp lines dividing one image from the next) all expressed an archaic and magical conception of the photograph that was basically at odds with El Lissitzky’s documentary approach. It is no accident that the guidebook—perhaps in memory of the scandal John Heartfield had set off when he introduced two satires of Mussolini in a show of the Novembergruppe in Berlin a few years
earlier—systematically shunned the term *photomontage* in favor of the medievalizing description *photomosaic*, and that Sironi would eventually abandon the medium, perceived as too commercial, in favor of more permanent materials.\(^{33}\)

Aside from photography, the main decorative device used in the four rooms was the large mural relief, usually combined with a typographic slogan and clearly intended to amplify the percussive force of the artist’s own political illustrations. The juxtaposition of image and word might have recalled the magical concentration on sight and sound made possible by photography and radio—the separation and intensification of the oral and the visual—that was one of the effects of the new media. Likewise, the concealment of the construction process used in the reliefs, themselves a makeshift mixture of disparate materials recalling the hybrids Adorno criticized in Wagner’s operas, heightened the fetishlike quality of the figures.

Before we examine the stream of mural constructions that covered the walls of each room in a crescendo from flat surface to architecture, it is useful to consider some of the many surviving studies for these rooms, which are a rich source of information on Sironi’s intentions. More than a dozen survive in a wide range of media. Taken together, they present a bewildering variety of images with few similarities to the executed scheme, a fact that has led some critics to overemphasize Sironi’s talent for improvisation.\(^{34}\) On closer inspection, Sironi’s main concern appears to have been less with the images themselves than with their sensory impact and placement along the viewer’s path. Most of these studies display contrasting visual motifs that have a marked gestural quality. Two are especially dramatic: the diagonal and the wedge. Both were common devices in Sironi’s work and indeed in much of the graphic art of those years. The diagonal emphasis could be found in any number of earlier drawings, where it served, among other things, to counteract the static geometry of the page. In this case, however, an added connotation would have been obvious to most viewers, because the diagonal gesture was also that of the Roman salute, the latest in a series of stylized gestures, including the “passo romano” (the roman walk), intended to redefine the appearance of the “fascist man,” which had just recently been imposed as a required custom for young recruits.

Similarly, precedents for the wedge ranged from Luigi Russolo’s *La rivolta* (1911) to Sironi’s own *Sintesi della guerra mondiale* (1918).\(^{35}\) In both, the wedge was used as an image of
force and speed similar to that of a bullet in flight (as depicted, for example, in Ernst Mach’s famous photograph). Its meaning, in this case, was best summed up by Sironi himself when he compared the exhibition to “a giant wedge planted into the heart of the capital to sweep away the last remnants of resistance to modern art.” Indeed, whether as a dagger, a triangle, flag, or ax, the wedge was the most common motif used in the show.

Taken together, the gestures of the diagonal and the wedge were complementary—as may be seen also from Sironi’s cover illustration for the guide to the EFR which brings them together in one image. In reality, however, the gestures were meant to be played out successively, alternating like the tonal and dominant motifs of a musical score to suggest a repeated movement analogous to that of an arm raised and forcefully lowered in the act of striking a blow.

If one now turns to the mural decorations as built, one can see how these two essential image-gestures, embedded like subliminal signals in the figures of the narrative, structured the entire spatial sequence from beginning to end. The barrage began in the first room, with the Roman dagger cutting the heavy red chain representing the downfall of liberalism, followed by the eagle and flag with the bold white characters LA MARCIA SU ROMA evoking the ascent of fascism. Conceived, like all the other reliefs, as unframed and integral with the wall so as to place the viewer inside the space of the picture, they activated the basic rhythm that would structure the entire sequence, the downward thrust of the first playing off the sideways sweep of the second. Even before entering the second room, the wedge motif returned in the violent thrust of the letter R of the word ROMA over the entrance door, which appeared to cross the wall from side to side, the force of the image recalling the machine-like precision of the printing press. (In an earlier study, Sironi had actually represented the R as a wedge.) Projected over the viewer as he or she moved into the room, the word ROMA framed the view of two giant warriors raising the Roman standard of victory. Lifted high above a pedestal, their stonelike texture soliciting the viewer’s...
sense of touch as well as sight, their strong diagonals recalled those of the earlier relief of the eagle and flag. The exit, with massive typeset characters of Mussolini’s declaration of victory weighing heavily on a single sturdy pier, enacted another forceful push downward, similar to that of the dagger in the first room.

The same two gestures, distilled to their bare essence and as if redoubled in strength, could also be found in the Salone d’Onore, representing nothing less than the apotheosis of Mussolini, whose more-than-life-size statue dominated the space from the top of a high niche. Their effectiveness was due in no small measure to the powerful structural rhetoric through which Sironi dramatized the effects of load, support, and structural penetration—as seen, for example, on the end wall where the square characters of the word DUX seemed to physically support the upper projecting portion of the wall. The first gesture took its place over the two side doors, hence directly above and facing viewers as they entered the room, where in a direct transposition of Sintesi della guerra mondiale a massive triangle appeared as if forced energetically between the top of the pier and the lintel of the doors. The second gesture was even more prominently displayed over the exit in the form of the two crossing diagonals of a gigantic Roman numeral ten, symbol of the fascist decennial, cantilevered dramatically over two massive piers. The overall effect, suggesting an epic battle of conflicting structural forces, was summed up by Margherita Sarfatti when she wrote of Sironi’s art that “its only law is struggle,” noting also that the exhibition owed its dominant character to “le meilleur des nos peintres italiens d’aujourd’hui, Mario Sironi, qui a
Andrèotti | The Techno-aesthetics of Shock: Mario Sironi and Italian Fascism

Sironi’s understanding of how architecture could be used to bind the viewer forcefully to the scene was nowhere more evident, however, than in the last of his rooms, the Galleria dei Fasci. Here, in a grandiose recapitulation of fascism’s heroic history, ten colossal pilasters lined the hall, five on either side. Each symbolized one year of the fascist revolution. Looming gigantically over the viewer with their oblique projections, the pilasters were vaguely reminiscent, as Giorgio Ciucci notes, of Melnikov’s Rusakov Club in Moscow (1928). A more direct and obvious reference would have been the Roman salute. Structurally encoded in the shape of the new “fascist order,” the repeated gesture also served efficiently to frame the image of “Italy on the March,” which took up the end wall. Executed by Quirino Ruggieri, a well-known and respected sculptor, this five-meter-high plaster relief presented itself as a nearly exact replica of one of Sironi’s cover illustrations of the journal Gerarchia from a few years earlier. Ruggieri’s scrupulous adherence to Sironi’s sketch reflects the coercive relations underlying the idea of the Gesamtkunstwerk that, as Adorno noted, anticipates the methods of the culture industry.

Like Libera’s façade, but in a more powerful because less figurative way, the Galleria was meant to be a backdrop for files of saluting militiamen, the mimetic exchange between architecture and the human body emphasized by the pilasters’ relentless repetition of a single unvaried theme of the diagonal. In point of fact, a curious feature of the Galleria was precisely the absence of a second theme. In the rooms preceding it, the diagonal and the wedge always followed each other: from the downward thrust of the dagger in the first room to the redoubling of the diagonal at the exit of the Salone, the orchestration of shocks and countershocks formed a regular and escalating rhythm of ABAABABA. At first sight, the Galleria appeared to contradict this rhythm. Instead of returning to the theme of the wedge, as one might have expected after passing under the giant Roman numeral ten in the Salone, it insisted on the single theme of the diagonal.

Like everything else in Sironi’s settings, this effect was not accidental. The repetition of a single motif served to create something like a hypnotic suspension of time, the lack of closure contributing, furthermore,
to the darkly romantic angst of the space, which would have recalled ancient precedents such as the temple of Abu Simbel. Even more important, however, was the Galleria’s function to prepare the viewer for the last scene of the exhibition, the Shrine of the Martyrs, where the theme of the wedge would return for the last time, and with the greatest possible force, in the gruesome image of a cross thrust like a dagger into the ground and surrounded by a pool of blood. The Galleria thus acted somewhat like a prolongato in music to draw out the dominant key in the next-to-the-last note in order to heighten the force of the closing finale. This feeling was even more pronounced in the exhibition because the Galleria was separated from the Shrine by a small transverse room. Made by Leo Longanesi with the affected simplicity of Strapàese to illustrate Il Duce’s biography, this room marked a further gap, or “a moment of silence,” as the guidebook put it, before the final room.40

Designed by Adalberto Libera and the stage designer Antonio Valente but clearly inspired by Sironi’s political imagery, the Shrine of the Martyrs was based on the most famous site of Christian martyrdom, the Colosseum in Rome, which also had an iron cross standing in the center of the arena to commemorate the blood of the martyrs. Libera’s militaristic rendering of the theme, with bolted copper plates similar to the fasci on the façade, was evidently meant to annex this religious symbol to fascism’s own iconography. Just a few months before the opening of the exhibition, under the pretext of having to carry out archeological excavations, Mussolini had the cross in the Colosseum removed, only to reerect it at the heart of the EFR.41 (Not coincidentally, no official representative of the Vatican ever attended the exhibition.) Libera’s design was thus a particularly explicit example of the syncretism of ritual events like the EFR—the migration of symbols and displacements through which fascism, like any other mass political ideology, constructed its own discourse of self-legitimation.42 The same could be said about the obscure fascist funerary rite to which the Shrine alluded, a rite in which the assembled mourners would gather in a circle around the body of the dead comrade, the eldest among them would call out the names of the other dead comrades, and all those present would answer in unison “Presente!” (“Here!”). The word presente, recalling the litanies of a Catholic mass, was repeated ad infinitum on the six metal rings surrounding the cross in the Shrine.43

Like the façade, the architecture of the Shrine
exploited the magical effects of new materials and technologies such as metal and electrical lighting—its illusionistic effects made possible by Valente’s long experience in the art of stage design. In the Shrine, however, an added touch was provided by the sound recordings of the songs of the martyrs, which could be heard echoing from afar. Like Il Duce’s voice on the radio, the martyrs could be heard but not seen. The sensory split between sound and sight, image and word that was part of the effect of estrangement produced by photography and radio was evident here no less than in the juxtaposition of images and slogans recurring throughout the show.

In conclusion, it is important to emphasize the social function of the EFR as a “representative rite” intended to reaffirm and articulate a consensus around fascism as a new secular religion. This overriding imperative largely determined the EFR’s symbolism, its ritual organization, and its representation of the public as a protagonist in a mythical narrative. The same imperative also explains the importance to Sironi of Wagner’s methods, which as Jonathan Crary notes, were “all about the transformative effect that could be obtained through the collective experience of a ritual communal event.” The EFR also shows, however, that “the rational production of collective dream-like states”—as Crary aptly describes Wagner’s project—involved issues of organization, narrative structure, and perceptual control that were neither simple nor obvious. The question of how to effectively lead the audience toward a blind, oceanic immersion in the scene, to experience what Freud called “the sense of an indissoluble bond, of being at one with the world as a whole,” was only one of many issues inherent in Wagner’s project. The EFR shows how Sironi approached it with purpose, not hesitating to borrow ideas from his ideological rivals if necessary, and lifting a great many themes from the Catholic Church.

At the heart of Sironi’s strategy was the idea of a rhythmic repetition of blows, encoded in the figures of the narrative and carefully calibrated in their tone, formal register, and intensity. Central to this orchestral strategy, which as Nietzsche said of Wagner, “used music as a means to hypnotize,” was Sironi’s unique understanding of the effects of shock in both the print media and more recent fields such as
photography and radio. No less central, however, was the capacity of architecture to instill more deeply (because less consciously) the structures of feeling, the gestures and slogans through which the new fascist subjectivity was to be displayed. To a degree possible only for someone with the figurative sensibility of a painter, Sironi used architecture for its capacity to immerse the viewer in the scene and to focus his or her attention hypnotically on the signal-like motifs of the narrative. Ultimately, Sironi’s work shows how, through the cyclical repetition of gestures, architecture’s mode of tactile reception could be used in the tactics of mass mobilization to break down the subject’s resistance and entrain a whole series of automatic responses in the viewer. It was no accident that Benjamin saw architecture’s mode of reception as the “canonical model” for the way new media could be used to exercise “covert control” over the audience.

Finally, the EFR shows how Sironi was able to use the forms of distracted perception to construct powerful new narratives that both responded to and intensified the subject’s psychic fragmentation. Nowhere is this more evident than in the images of war that were one of the most obtrusive and disturbing features of the show, their endless repetition not unrelated to Sironi’s own experience of the battlefield and to the war neuroses that were common during those years. Indeed, the duality that Freud had observed in the symptoms of shell shock—the closing up of the ego on the one hand and the blind immersion in the scene of trauma on the other—was also a crucial component of the aesthetic experience generated by the EFR. There a passionate identification in the drama unfolding in the sequence of rooms took the form of an endless series of hammered blows, as violence was repeatedly and relentlessly staged in both the percussive design of the rooms and in the version of events represented in the narrative, culminating in the apotheosis of violence—literally a bloodbath—of the last room.

The whole function of the oceanic feeling, including its capacity to compensate in some way for the alienations of modern life, was thus dependent on a categorical separation of the public as spectator, at once immediately present on the scene yet vastly removed from it. It was in this way that Sironi’s work both destroyed and rebuilt its relationship with the viewer: first by externally eliminating any possible distance, through theatrical and other more invasive devices; then by internally re-creating it as spectacular distance, through the objectification of the viewer as a mere element of the décor. As Benjamin noted, in the paralysis of the viewer at the mass rallies of fascism “art gains in its suggestive effect what it loses in its power to enlighten.”

Nowhere is the profoundly destructive aestheticizing double logic of
the spectacle more evident than in the incessant replaying of the ur-image of the EFR, *Sintesi della guerra mondiale*, which was produced in September 1918 while Sironi was still mobilized on the northern front. Recurring insistently, in all its archaic muteness like the compulsive repetition of a traumatic dream, it stands as a figure for the shattering of experience to which Benjamin alluded when he wrote,

“Fiat ars, pereat mundus,” says Fascism, expecting from war... the artistic gratification of a sense of perception altered by technology. This is evidently the consummation of l’art pour l’art. Humankind, which in Homer’s time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, has now become one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached the point where it can experience its own annihilation as a supreme aesthetic pleasure. Such is the aestheticizing of politics, as practiced by fascism. Communism replies by politicizing art.⁵²
Notes


12. See, for example, Alice Yaeger Kaplan, Reproductions of Banality: Fascism, Literature, and French Intellectual Life (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 6.


14. See Jonathan Crary, Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001). On Benjamin’s attitudes toward the mass media,


17. See Gide, 448; and Le Corbusier to Paul Otlet, 29 June 1934, in Archives Le Corbusier, Paris. Le Corbusier described the exhibition as a “miracle de visualisation et d’enseignement” (miracle of visualization and teaching). On the public reception of the EFR, see also Emilio Gentile, Il culto del littorio (Turin: Einaudi, 1990), 136.


19. On Sironi’s role in the EFR, see my interview with Mimi Costa, in “Architecture and Politics in Fascist Italy” (Ph.D. diss., MIT, 1989), app. B. For a detailed account of the planning history of the exhibition, see my “Mostra della rivoluzione fascista,” in Sironi: La grande decorazione.

20. Alfieri and Freddi, 8.


24. Benjamin, “Pariser Brief (1),” in Benjamin, critiche e recensioni: Tra avanguardie e letteratura di consumo, 261 (my translation).

25. Alfieri and Freddi, 176.


30. See Thomas Schumacher, The Danteum (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996). A letter from the historian Enrico Arrigotti in Rome to Terragni in Como, dated August 16, 1932, and preserved in the Terragni archives along with other material relating to the show, suggests a concern for sufficient circulation space in the room. Arrigotti wrote, “sono sempre più convinto che la Sala del ’22 rimarrà spaziata—di ‘respiro’” (I am more than ever convinced that the room of 1922 will have enough space and “breathing room”). This is probably the reason for Terragni’s last-minute substitution of
the panel sequence with the Adunate photomontage. Arrigotti supervised the work until Terragni’s arrival on September 3, 1932.

33. Alfieri and Freddi, 195 passim.
35. Similarities may also be noted between Sironi’s Sintesi della guerra mondiale and El Lissitzky’s famous poster Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge (1919).
37. “The best of our Italian painters of today, Mario Sironi, who has given to the exhibition the authority of his high talent and of his proud, powerful, and tormented soul: a soul and a talent that are tumultuous and truly Michelangelesque.” Margherita Sarfatti, “L’exposition du fascisme,” Formes (Zurich) 31 (January 1933): 3–4 (my translation).
39. On Wagner’s working methods, see Adorno, In Search of Wagner. The few detectable differences between Sironi’s drawing and Ruggieri’s sculpture—namely, the mechanization of the horse and of Italy’s outstretched arm—go against the flowing style of Ruggieri’s work.
40. Alfieri and Freddi, 220.
41. One of the historians working on the show, Antonio Monti, recalled that the final design of the Shrine was “merito precipuo del Duce” (principal merit of the Duce). See Antonio Monti, Rapsodia eroica, dall’interventismo all’impero (Milan: n.p., 1937). This view was confirmed in a discussion I had with the wife of Antonio Valente, who recalled that during one of several visits to the exhibition while preparations were underway, Mussolini discussed the design of the Shrine, suggesting the idea of a cross against the initial proposal for an altar to an unknown fascist martyr. Interview with Maddalena del Favero Valente, Rome, 15 September 1985.
43. For a description of this rite, see Ion S. Munro, Through Fascism to World Power (London: Alexander Maclehose and Co., 1933), 323.
44. I take the notion of representative rite from Emile Durkheim, The Elementary Forms of Religious Life (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 419. On fascism as a “secular religion,” see also Gentile, Il culto del litorio.
46. Crary, 148.

51. Benjamin, ”Pariser Briefer (1),” in *Benjamin, critiche e recensioni: Tra avanguardie e letteratura di consumo*, 258 (my translation).