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Published by: Alexandrine Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/23289495

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Architecture as Media Event: Mario Sironi and the Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution, 1932

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The 1932 Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista staged in the nineteenth-century Pallazzo delle Esposizioni in the centre of Rome is a prime example of the potential of architecture to affect the viewer on a subconscious level. It is argued that the four rooms in the exhibition designed by Mario Sironi reflect the influence of Wagner on the artist. One critic described Sironi’s use of architecture here as a ‘tour de force unequalled in the history of Italian modern architecture’, while André Gide coined the phrase ‘architectural journalism’ following a visit to the exhibition.

The Italian painter Mario Sironi, best known for his sombre, angst-ridden urban landscapes of the early 1920s, spent a great deal of time during the following decade designing propaganda exhibitions for the Fascist government. Long ignored by critics and historians who have generally preferred to focus on Sironi’s paintings, these prototypical media events testify to some of the most pervasive cultural phenomena of the period, including what Benjamin (1999) called fascism’s aestheticization of politics and the ‘atrophy of experience’, that accompanied the spread of new means of mass communication. A reconsideration of their place in the artist’s oeuvre, along the lines of the recent exhibition Sironi: la grande decorazione, is essential to understand this un-endearing, but arguably most important Italian artist between the wars.¹

In what follows, I would like to focus on the most sensational of Sironi’s propaganda exhibitions, the Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista, mounted in Rome in 1932 to celebrate the tenth anniversary of Mussolini’s rise to power. My main concern is to consider how, at the dawn of a consumer culture in Italy, Sironi’s heroic installations served to promote a set of mimetic and contagious practices: slogans, gestures, ways of dressing and moving that were at the heart of fascism’s aesthetic, more even than political, appeal. Of special interest, as we shall see, is how Sironi attempted, through every available means, to elicit an oceanic feeling in the viewer, a sense of complete identification and loss of boundaries that has been recognized, recently, as a central characteristic to the fascist experience (see, for example, Kaplan, 1986, pp. 3-41). This hypnotic quality, as we shall see, owes some of its most distinctive features to Sironi’s well known passion for Wagner’s dramatic productions, an aspect of his work that has yet to receive serious attention. Finally, while some of Sironi’s tactics, like his use of photography, were plainly derived from the works of his ideological rivals, the Russian constructivists, it will be interesting to consider how he ritually refunctioned them to suit his own quite different needs.

The Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution (EFR) was the longest-lasting and most successful propaganda show ever mounted by the Fascist party in Italy. Organized by
Dino Alfieri, president of the Fascist Institute of Culture in Milan, assisted by the painter Cipriano Efsio Oppo and Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, the show was meant to be, in Mussolini’s words, ‘an offering of faith that the old comrades hand down to the new ones so they may continue the heavy task’ of building a fascist Italy. Staged at a time when the regime’s popularity was approaching its peak at home and abroad, the exhibition stood for two years as the symbolic centre 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 (see Alfieri and Freddi, 1933).

Although Sironi’s crucial role in planning the exhibition was never officially acknowledged, there is no doubt that he was the principal inspirational force behind the event, which culminated a decade-long career as ‘propagandist par excellence’ of the fascist revolution. A brief survey of his many accomplishments during the preceding years helps to understand his approach to the EFR and to exhibition design in general. Since 1919, Sironi had served as the exclusive political illustrator for Mussolini’s daily paper Il Popolo d’Italia. It was here that, working in close collaboration with the future prime minister, he developed a distinct style of political commentary that effectively embodied the spirit of the regime throughout the 1920s and 1930s. The gestural force of its imagery (stars, eagles, daggers, warriors and other ‘primal symbols invested with positivity’, as Adorno might have called them), is apparent in the thousands of illustrations, posters, and book covers he produced during these years, which vividly convey the combination of religiosity and militarism at the heart of the movement.

In 1928, in what was to be the first in a series of similar projects, Sironi was charged with the design of the Popolo d’Italia’s pavilion at the Fiera Campionaria in Milan. The commission was a logical extension of his prime responsibility as chief ‘image maker’ for the Fascist government. Developed in collaboration with the architect Giovanni Muzio, who designed its façade displaying the block-set title of the newspaper’s front page, it was meant to publicize the paper and its satellite publications. In the following years, Sironi and Muzio used a similar scheme for a series of press pavilions representing the Italian government at various international events, such as the Pressa exhibition in Cologne (1928) and the International Exhibition in Barcelona (1929), where Sironi was able to witness first-hand the striking achievements of the Soviet artists. A pervasive fascination with the press, evident in the way bold inscriptions, posters, giant reliefs, and stained glass windows all attempted to amplify the visual effects of the newspaper, was common to all of them. Equally important was the role of Muzio’s neoclassical interiors in creating a setting at once ‘religious and warlike,’ as Sironi put it. The potential of architecture to affect the viewer on a subconscious level is especially apparent in the monumental spatial sequence of the Sezione Arti Grafiche mounted in the halls of the Villa Reale in Monza (1930), its metaphysical atmosphere of stillness recalling paintings of a few years earlier like I Costruttori (1928).

The EFR was a grandiose summation of Sironi’s four years of experience on propaganda exhibitions. The building picked to house it was the largest available space in the centre of Rome, the nineteenth-century Palazzo delle Esposizioni, which was completely transformed with the addition of a temporary façade, poster-like with its four giant fasci standing several metres from the wall (figure 1), by the young architect Adalberto Libera assisted by Mario de Renzi. Inside, a team of some twenty artists, architects, and sculptors, including Giuseppe Terragni, Achille Funi, Quirino Ruggieri, and Marino Marini – to mention only the best known today – used every available means to transform the rooms of the Palazzo into a gripping narrative of fascism’s rise to power, from the outbreak of
World War I to the March on Rome. A final sequence of monumental spaces culminating in the so-called Shrine of the Martyrs, by Libera and Antonio Valente, concluded the exhibition. The largest sequence of spaces was assigned to Sironi, who designed the two rooms celebrating the climax of the historical narrative, and the first two halls on the building's axis of symmetry, the Salone d'Onore, dedicated to Mussolini, and the Galleria dei Fasci, offered as a grandiose 'recapitulation of the entire period covered by the show' (Alfieri and Freddi, 1933, p. 212).

Before considering Sironi's four rooms in detail, it is useful to examine briefly the overall plan (figure 2), which was probably designed by Libera assisted by Sironi, and which was only arrived at after two earlier schemes were considered and rejected. Both of them would have maintained the centrality of the old Palazzo, with the side rooms open towards the main sequence of monumental spaces. In contrast to such a scheme, which would have allowed the viewer a relative choice of movement, the final plan 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 towards the Shrine. This rigidly sequential arrangement appears to have been inspired by El Lissitzki's idea of a 'static film', as illustrated most effectively in his USSR pavilion in Cologne (1928), where it stood next-door to Sironi's and Muzio's. In any event, as indicated in both the internal documentation and in several surviving studies by Libera, it was clearly intended to recreate a cinematic experience, in which the story of fascism would be told through a montage of contrasting views. Alongside such innovative narrative techniques, however, it is interesting to note the plan's underlying ritual character, which was best seen in the elaborate inauguration ceremonies, where Duce presided over a four-part ritual, consisting of the singing of the fascist hymns on the front steps of the Palazzo, the swearing of the oath in the entrance atrium, a slow procession through each of the fifteen historical rooms, and a concluding rite of communion in the Shrine. The tone and form of the ceremonies followed quite closely the liturgy of a mass, with its introitus, credo, re-enactment of the passion, and communion. Such an emphasis on ritual was evidently meant to underscore the nature of the exhibition as a cult object, exploiting the ritual possibilities of new techniques of display while capitalizing on the religious beliefs of the Italian people (see Andreotti, 1992).

I would like now to examine some of the tactics used by Sironi to intensify the visual impact of his four rooms on the viewer, emphasizing in particular their source in Wagner's dramatic productions, as analysed most perceptibly by Adorno (1991). Especially noteworthy among these tactics are Sironi's ritualizing of the viewer's temporal experience, his repetitive use of dramatic

Figure 1. Libera and De Renzi, temporary façade.
gestures, and his merging of disparate artistic forms for the sake of effect. The use of new techniques of display like photographic enlargement and electrical lighting also deserves close scrutiny. Finally, I would like to conclude with a few general reflections on the social significance of his work.

We get a good idea of Sironi’s intentions if we consider two inconspicuous but significant changes made to the plan of the old Palazzo (figure 2). Both of them reflect Sironi’s concern to abolish any possible distance between the viewer and the scene. The first was the decision to displace the...
door between the first two rooms in such a way as to create a diagonal circulation path. The principal effect of such a change was to disengage the viewers from a close frontal relationship with the documents characteristic of the U-shaped circulation scheme adopted everywhere else in the building, ritualizing their temporal experience and implicating them spatially in the narrative. The second decision was to create an entrance vestibule, which was separated from the rest of the room by means of a massive ‘hung wall’, open at the base (as indicated in the dotted lines of the plan, figure 2), which cleverly reconfigured the entire spatial sequence, from the entrance to the Galleria, as a single escalating progression. Appearing like a curtain being raised on the final act of the historical drama (figure 3), the wall also served effectively to dramatize the opening scene. Viewers were meant to pass under it like spectators onto a stage.

Sironi’s almost obsessive concern with the viewer is nowhere more apparent than in the many surviving studies for the EFR, which offer a rich source of information on his intentions. Of particular interest among these is a group of drawings that show him exploring two subliminal images, both strongly gestural and evidently chosen for their dramatic effect (figure 4). The first, recalling Sironi’s own description of the exhibition itself as ‘a giant wedge planted in the heart of Rome’, is often represented as a dagger. Its most direct source is Sironi’s own Sintesi della guerra mondiale of 1918 (figure 5), which evoked the cleansing power of war through the red wedge of Liberty striking the green circle of Barbarism. The second, often referred to simply through a diagonal gesture, was none other than the Roman salute, the form of greeting with outstretched arm that the Fascist Party Secretary, Achille Starace, had recently imposed as a requirement for all party members (figure 6). Presented as more aesthetic than the old-fashioned handshake, the salute was a key element in a whole system of ‘fascist customs’ which, like trademark features of the movement, were designed to establish a code of behaviour and appearance for a new generation of recruits (see Falasca-Zamponi, 1997, pp. 119–139).

These two recurring and complementary gestures, the dagger and the Roman salute, constitute the underlying reference for Sironi’s four rooms. Both are also present in the poster he designed for the exhibition, displaying the fascio and bayonet with the characteristic diagonal emphasis used over and over throughout the exhibition (figure 7). Their most striking feature, analogous to Wagner’s leitmotifs as described by Adorno (1991), was their exteriorized, quasi-physical intensity, which gave them a pulsating and signal-like quality. A glance at the rooms as built shows how Sironi mobilized them...
Figure 4. Study for room P.

Figure 5. Sironi, Sintesi della Guerra Mondiale (1918).

Figure 6. The Roman salute.

Figure 7. EFR poster.

Figure 8. Room P, the end of the liberal era.
to create an even more succinct rhythm of ABABAB . . . , alternating like the tonal and the dominant themes in a musical score. The opening scene in the first room was a giant relief of a Roman dagger cutting a heavy red chain, symbol of fascism’s victory over communism (figure 8). Like other similar reliefs, this one too was designed to amplify the visual force of Sironi’s earlier political illustrations, its gestural force dramatized by its architectural setting over the wide opening separating the entrance from the main space of the room. This image was followed, in the relief that took up the entire exit wall, by the diagonal thrust of the flag and the eagle, symbolizing fascism’s ascent to power (figure 9). The exit door, where the letter R of the inscription LA MARCIA SU ROMA seemed to pierce through the entire thickness of the wall, returned to the motif of the dagger, this time in a more sculptural typographical mode. Looking beyond the door into the next room on Victory, viewers would have recognized its motif counterpart in the diagonal gesture of two warriors raising the roman standard, which dominated the space from the top of a high pedestal, its bold relief anticipating the structural expression of the following rooms (figure 10).

The same alternating rhythm of motif and counter-motif dictated the design of the Salone d’Onore (figure 11).
side entrances, two giant wedges recalling Sironi’s *Sintesi della Guerra Mondiale* seemed to be forced between the top of the piers and the lintel of the door (figure 12). In their rhetorical doubling, they played off against the design of the exit, where a colossal Roman numeral ten, symbol of the fascist decennial, dominated the space from on high with its crossing diagonals (figure 13). Passing under it and into the last of Sironi’s rooms, the Galleria dei Fasci, viewers might have expected a return to the initial dagger motif. What they found instead was the diagonal, reiterated insistently in the ten massive pilasters, each one symbolizing one year of the fascist revolution, looming gigantically with their oblique projections recalling, as Ciucci notes, Melnikov’s Rusakov Club in Moscow (1928), but even more directly the gesture of the Roman salute (figure 14) (Ciucci, 1982, p. 52). The choice of motif for the Galleria was no accident: its rationale becomes apparent in the overall plan of the show, where it served quite effectively to intensify the impact of the Shrine of the Martyrs, where the dagger motif returned, with the greatest possible force, in the image of a metal cross planted in the ground (figure 15).

As we can see, a single pair of gestures, placed usually at the entrances or at the exits to strike the viewer each time with greater force, structured the entire sequence of rooms. Their character as embedded images, recurring periodically like pulsating signals and appearing each time in a different guise, was clearly meant to produce a hypnotic effect in the viewer. Like Wagner’s leitmotifs,
which as Adorno noted were ‘conceived in terms of the gesture of striking a blow’, their purpose in hammering home the message was to induce a trance-like state of ‘oceanic regression’ in the viewer (Adorno, 1991, p. 30.).

Aside from their orchestration of gestures, Sironi’s installations were also Wagnerian in the way they merged together different and at times incompatible artistic forms for the sake of vividness. A typical example was the large mural reliefs, where various genres combined to produce an unstable but visually effective mixture that Sironi himself described as ‘stylistically unorthodox but effective’. Sironi’s attitude here is like Wagner’s: for both, an overriding concern for effects leads to technical inconsistencies that ignore the requirements of each expressive medium. Adorno described this tendency in Wagner as ‘the replacement of an internal logic with a seamless external principle in which disparate procedures are simply aggregated in such a way as to make them appear as collectively binding’ (Adorno, 1991, p. 102). A similar tendency can be seen in Sironi. In the relief of the ‘March on Rome’, for example, the need to create a sculptural ‘crescendo’ from left to right results in a hybrid mixture that literally blends together architecture, typography, various degrees of relief, and painting.

On a larger scale, we find a similar ‘seamless external principle’ applied to the spatial sequence as a whole, in the long sculptural crescendo from flat surface to sculpture to architecture that was the driving theme of the four rooms. The guidebook explained how this principle of ‘plastic development’ reflected the artist’s conception of the unity of the arts, a recurring theme in his writings. An obvious reference here was to Wagner’s notion of the gesamtkunstwerk, or the synthesis of all the arts, which as Adorno observed, expressed both the longing for the recovery of a lost wholeness and, more prosaically, a desire for effects – a fact that made it particularly prone to ‘psycho-

Figure 14. Room S. Galleria dei Fasci.

Figure 15. Libera and Valente, Shrine of the Martyrs.
rational control’. Like Wagner, Sironi’s idea of the unity of the arts was based on a strict hierarchy of expressive means. At the top of the hierarchy stood architecture, the most powerful component of the total expressive medium.

Sironi’s use of architecture in the EFR was a ‘tour de force unequalled in the history of Italian modern architecture’, as the critic Agnoldomenico Pica wrote, an achievement all the more remarkable for the fact that this was the first time that he realized a complete architectural setting unassisted by a professional architect. The most striking feature of both the Salone and the Galleria, as we have seen, was their powerful structural rhetoric, the astonishing bravura with which Sironi dramatized the effects of load and support, as in the bold cantilevers of the giant X in the Salone, or the dramatic projections of the pilasters in the Galleria. Architecture’s position here, relative to the figurative and sculptural expression of the preceding rooms, might be compared to that of music for Wagner in relationship to the poetry or dance: that is to say, as the deepest level on which the dramatic conflicts could be lived through and experienced (Magee, 1988, p. 36). Sironi’s understanding of its unique hypnotic power to abolish any distance between the viewer and the scene is especially apparent in the relentless rhythm of the Galleria, which like a backdrop for files of saluting militiamen consciously sought to blur the boundaries between the human and the tectonic. The overall effect, which Margherita Sarfatti described as ‘tumultuous and truly Michelangelesque’, can be summed up in Freud’s description of the oceanic feeling: a ‘sense of an indissoluble bond, of being one with the world as a whole’ (Freud, 1961, p.12).

Of all the means used by Sironi to affect a mimetic contamination between the viewer and the scene, special mention should be made of photography. Although poorly documented, Sironi’s use of this medium (for the first time in his career) illustrates the psychic mechanisms his work was meant to activate in the viewer. A fine example was the photomontage of the ‘March on Rome’ in the first room, showing the fascist legionaries marching towards the capital (figure 3). The repeated rows of soldiers might have recalled photographic documentaries from the Great War or, just as easily, as in Wagner’s overture to Tannhauser, the march of the pilgrims to Rome. Indeed, beyond its function as document, the scene was clearly intended to implicate the viewer in the narrative, the rows of life-sized figures offering a specular reflection of the streams of visitors themselves, who were thus invited to project themselves imaginatively as ‘protagonists’ in the events depicted. This blurring of the distinction between subject and object recalls Wagner’s own ‘collusions with the public’ which, as Adorno noted, sought to ‘incorporate the audience as an integral element of the presentation’ (Adorno, 1991, p. 31). Much the same could be said about the photographic images of the exhibition, showcasing the great affluence of visitors, disseminated through newsreels and the press.

Sironi’s use of photography was almost certainly inspired by El Lissitzki’s pavilion in Cologne, which made a spectacular use of photomontage while also incorporating elements from the printing press into the display. Although formally similar, Sironi’s photomontage reflected a quite different approach to the medium. Unlike El Lissitzki, he positioned the scene in such a way as to make it appear as a spatial extension of the room; he also used life-sized images and foreshortened views to draw the viewer forcefully into the space of the picture. The scene’s tiered composition, which seems to anticipate the great mural cycles he would produce a few years later, its thematic unity and evident concern for narrative continuity, all expressed a conception of the photographic image basically at odds with El Lissitzki’s more transparent construction methods.
A similar difference can be observed in other El-Lissitzkian ‘borrowings’, like the use of actual elements of the printing press to evoke the world of journalism. The most blatant example was the Salone d’Onore, which used the cylinders and inked metal plates of the press to construct the steel cubical cell, containing a faithful reconstruction of Mussolini’s office at the *Il Popolo d’Italia*, which occupied the centre of the space (figure 11). The quasi-religious aura of the setting could not have been more unlike El Lissitzki’s ‘production art’, whose functional recyclings were meant to educate the public on the actual working mechanisms of the press. The comparison is instructive, illustrating the fundamental distance separating the poetic and prosaic conceptions of technology that Benjamin (1999) attributed respectively to fascist and communist artists. Like Wagner, Sironi’s aestheticizing, anti-functionalist approach can also be seen in the way he exploited the psychological effects of electrical lighting, which flooded the rooms through silk ‘velariums’ hung from the ceiling, producing a mist-like haze that might have recalled the steam curtains used in Wagner’s operas.

No discussion of Sironi’s exhibition designs would be complete if it did not consider their larger social significance, so it is useful to conclude this study with some general reflections on their nature as media events. As we have seen, Sironi’s propaganda exhibitions were the logical outgrowth of his long experience with the fascist press. It was certainly no accident that after a visit to the EFR, André Gide coined the phrase ‘architectural journalism’ to describe how it used photographs and enlarged headlines to amplify the visual effects of the newspaper (Gide, 1997, p. 448, author’s translation). Gide’s strongly negative reaction to the exhibition (which emanated, as he put it, ‘an atmosphere utterly unbearable for the work of art’) was based on a critique of journalism articulated during those same years by Benjamin in his remarks on the debasement of language and the ‘destruction of experience’. As Benjamin put it,

> If it were the intention of the press to have the reader assimilate the information as part of his own experience, it would not achieve its purpose. But its intention is just the opposite, and it is achieved: to isolate what happens from the realm in which it could affect the experience of the reader. (Benjamin, 1997, p.112)

For Benjamin, the ‘atrophy of experience’ inherent in the press was only the most visible manifestation of a change in perception rooted as much in capitalist commodification as in the enormous, inassimilable shock of the Great War, when, as he put it in a famous passage in the ‘Experience and Poverty’, ‘you could see men returning from the battlefield grown silent, not richer, but poorer in communicable experience’ – to which he added, significantly, that ‘the flood of war books and publications that appeared ten years after were everything except experience communicated directly from mouth to ear’ (Benjamin, 1999, p. 731).

Benjamin’s reference here was to Freud’s description of shock as a rupture or breach of the individual’s protective shield, a flooding of large amounts of stimuli. As I have tried to suggest, Sironi’s settings display many of the characteristic symptoms of this condition, including a compulsive repetition of dream images, a regression to an earlier stage of narcissistic libidinal development, and the effacement of the boundaries between self and others (Leys, 2000, pp. 18–40). These symptoms – which were no doubt compounded by Sironi’s own experiences on the battlefield – are generally the same ones that Adorno recognized as prototypical of the ‘culture industry’ in Wagner’s operas. Their social significance is readily seen in the way they served to promote a general de-authentication of individual experience in the forms of group behaviour characteristic of the interwar period, and of Italian fascism in particular. A partial list, recently proposed by the American critic Tyrus Miller, includes ‘a pervasive tendency towards role playing,
ritualized behavior, contagious imitation, and rhythmic forms of association' – in short, all the forms of stylized comportment on which much of the attraction of fascism was based (Miller, 1999, p. 43). Disseminated through the media, these new forms of alienated social life were themselves the product of the media’s erosion of traditional narratives based on lived experience. Benjamin noted, for example, how the press tended to isolate and intensify the different senses of sight and sound. Much the same could be said about the alternation of visual and oral slogans in Sironi’s settings, which evoked the sensory split between image and word inherent in the press and even more in photography and radio.

If Sironi’s work might thus be seen to exemplify a modern structure of perception that elevates the experience of shock to a general principle, it is also clear that it anticipates many of the most common characteristics of post-war consumer culture – what Miller describes as the general de-authentification of reality and its progressive replacement by simulacra and spectacles. It is for this reason, rather than from an art historical or antiquarian interest, that his work merits the closest critical scrutiny.

NOTES

1. This essay is based on my contribution to the catalogue of the exhibition (Sironi, 2004).
2. The remarkable similarities with El Lissitzki’s famous poster Beat the whites with the red wedge (1919) are worth noting.
3. Margherita Sarfatti (1880–1961) was an Italian journalist, art critic, patron, collector, socialite, and one of Mussolini’s mistresses.

REFERENCES