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18 BL: Fascist Mass Spectacle

Moscow or Rome? The question was posed with urgency throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Socialist pamphleteers drew up diagrams to illustrate the stark choice confronting all of humankind: “Fascism or Communism; Rome or Moscow.”1 Fascist syndicalists like Sergio Pannunzio envisioned contemporary history as a clash between the two secular churches that had arisen after the death of God: the fascist “religion of spirit” and the Bolshevik “religion of matter.”2 Others formulated the dilemma less as a choice between Rome or Moscow than between Rome and Moscow versus the old Europe:

Italy and Russia . . . two spatial unfoldings of history. Modern revolution is born in these gigantic theaters. The first great in the spiritual grandeur of its universal mission. The second great in the human grandeur of its many peoples. The political process that began in 1789 and extended into the capitalist phase, now explodes and reaches its revolutionary epilogue, fusing in equal measure the enduring vitality of Roman civilization and the fresh and primitive vitality of Moscow’s anti-civilization.3

A widespread conviction subtends these views: namely, that liberal democracy had run its full course in history. Industrialization had ensured the triumph of a new mass society and, so many believed, the demise of all liberal forms of social, cultural, political, and economic organization. The bourgeois individual, who once stood at the center of the universe of liberal democracy, had been buried in the trenches of World War I. The question facing humankind was, therefore, one of succession. What sort of being would take the place of the bourgeois subject? What sort of mass society would arise out of the trenches’ mud? Would the identity of the new subject and society be anchored in the concept of class or in that of the nation? Would their character be utopian, utilitarian, and collectivist; or instead mythical, aesthetic, and individualist? Did all roads lead to Moscow or instead to Rome?

Culture was the laboratory within which a new mass subject could be shaped and new forms of mass organization tested out. I use the metaphor of the “laboratory” advisedly, not only because it pervades the cultural debates of the 1920s and 1930s, from the Proletkult to the Bauhaus, but also because it underscores the inaugural role assigned by both revolutions to cultural artifacts. Works of fascist or communist art were conceived not merely as instruments of propaganda; they were to serve as messengers from the future, relays from the imagi-
nary to the real, activating within the collective’s mind and body the entire complex of the revolution’s values yet to be fully realized in history. And since the values in question encompassed every area of human activity—from work to leisure, from politics to ethics to individual psychology to a regime of bodily hygiene and exercise—culture was envisaged in total, even totalitarian, terms.

From the start the theater was the revolutionists’ art of choice, much as it had been during the French Revolution. Due to its value as a tool for mobilizing an illiterate population, to its status as the preeminent fin de siècle art form, and to its potential as a total spectacle blending all of the arts, the theater underwent an explosion in the years following the October Revolution. Hundreds of amateur and professional clubs sprang up throughout Russia and performed agitprop works, leading Viktor Shklovsky to remark wryly that “drama circles . . . are propagating like protozoa. Not lack of fuel nor lack of food nor the Entente—nothing can stop their growth.”4 Thousands of actors performed in open-air mass spectacles recreating the events of the revolution; worker theaters proliferated under the guidance of Alexander Bogdanov’s Proletkult; and directors such as Vsevolod Meyerhold proclaimed a “Theatrical October,” launching a war against the bourgeois theater as millions starved and Russia battled through its bitter civil war. By 1920, it seemed to Shklovsky that “all Russia is acting; some kind of elemental process is taking place where the living fabric of life is being transformed into the theatrical.”5 The purpose of this theatricalization of everyday life was understood by contemporary theorists as at once utopian and utilitarian. Through the revolutionary theater it was hoped that “a new generation of harmoniously developed individuals’ would be forged.6

Fascism was in its infancy as Russia decked itself out as a living stage. Originating from within the fold of socialism, the fascist movement emerged in 1919 out of an ill-defined grouping of nationalists, irredentists, futurists, and war veterans, drawn together by their opposition to Italy’s parliamentarian regime, to its politics of accommodation vis à vis a wave of strikes and factory occupations, and to the Treaty of Versailles. Although small, the movement was able to seize state power in 1922. But it was not until the late 1920s that fascism’s “cultural revolution” truly began: first, because Mussolini had ruled over the old parliamentary state until 1925, when his dictatorship was declared; second, because fascism was an inherently unstable ideological formation. Fascism did not have at its disposal a complete philosophical system like that provided by Marxism-Leninism as it struggled to address such fundamental conflicts as those between its populist and elitist currents or between its cult of heroic individualism and its institutional call to order. Rather, fascism was little more than a complex of ethical principles, credos, and aversions, held together by a rhetorical-aesthetic glue. Unable to resolve the question of its identity by means of recourse to the utopias of theory and technology, haunted by its own belatedness with respect to its Bolshevik rival, fascism required (and attempted to stimulate through the lavish patronage of

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modern art) "an aesthetic overproduction—a surfeit of Fascist signs, images, slogans, books, and buildings—in order to compensate for, fill in, and cover up its unstable ideological core." This is one reason why the fascist regime, despite its authoritarianism, tended toward an "eclecticism of the spirit" in its cultural policies, encouraging a proliferation of competing formulations of fascist modernity, among which Mussolini felt free to choose as a function of circumstance.8

This essay examines one such formulation: an experimental mass spectacle that was engaged both in negotiating the fascist revolution's relation to its Soviet predecessor and in forging an alternative to Bolshevism's mechanical mass subject—the fascist ideal of "metallized man." Entitled 18 BL (after the model name of its truck-protagonist), the spectacle was the featured event of the 1934 Littoriali Della Cultura e dell'Arte, fascism's youth Olympics of art and culture (fig. 1).9 The collaborative creation of seven young writers and a film director, 18 BL brought together two thousand actors, fifty trucks, eight bulldozers, four field- and machine-gun batteries, ten field radio stations, and six photoelectric brigades in a stylized Soviet-style representation of the fascist revolution's past, present,
and future. But however titanic its scale, its ambitions were even greater: to institute a theater of the future, a modern theater of and for the masses that would end, once and for all, the crisis of the bourgeois theater. Against the bourgeois stage’s emphasis on individual psychology, its reliance on the star system, and its maintenance of partition between interior and exterior forms of spectacle (between the theater’s private dramas and the state’s public acts of self-display), 18 BL elaborated a total concept of spectacle founded on fascism’s wholesale theatricalization of Italian life. Moreover, it aspired to fashion a distinctive mass hero for the new mass theater: a being cast in the image of the nation’s leader, at once individualized and mass produced; a subject identified with the transnational values of industrialism, as well as with new image and voice technologies, but in whom the principle of the nation could be modernized and preserved. It created, in short, a mass protagonist who could represent the fascist revolution’s continuities with its Bolshevik double but who, in so doing, could also embody the distinctive fascist ethos of constant exertion and fatigue endured by means of individual and collective discipline.

18 BL was but one of a number of interlocking theatrical initiatives undertaken in early 1930s Italy, so I begin by examining the event’s broader context. I then turn to the spectacle itself, to its organization, realization, and failure, concluding with some remarks on fascist culture as a whole. I wish to insist from the outset, however, that my object of analysis here cannot be designated as the “official theater of the regime.” A diversity of theaters coexisted during the 1930s, some traditional in character, some avant-garde, few “propagandistic” in the ordinary sense. No simple correlation exists, therefore, between state sponsorship and explicit political content. Those few major works that, like 18 BL, endeavored to devise specifically fascist forms of theater have generally been dismissed either as “kitsch” or as expressions of artistic bad faith.

I view the effort to dissect works like 18 BL and to reconstruct the complex social choreography of their staging as a challenge to the modes of writing cultural history that have prevailed in the study of Italian fascism. For reasons having to do with the urgent need to dismantle fascism’s cultural-political claims, the first generation of post-war cultural historians was averse to an enterprise of this sort. Whether liberal or Marxist-affiliated, this generation took as axiomatic Benedetto Croce’s notion, articulated in the 1925 “Manifesto of the Anti-Fascist Intellectuals,” that fascism and culture were diametrically opposed. Its historiography therefore emphasized apolitical or anti-fascist writing, turned a blind eye to the political commitments of writers such as Giuseppe Ungaretti and Luigi Pirandello, and elaborated the fiction that neorealism—the characteristic cultural form of the 1930s and 1940s—represented a revolt against the unreality and manipulations of the fascist epoch. Although its findings were sometimes valuable, this historiographical model was gradually displaced by more complex second- and third-generation approaches that addressed a question the first-generation his-
torsians either could or would not: namely, How did Mussolini’s regime maintain the support of the Italian populace during a period of over two decades? Terror and censorship were inadequate responses; so, inspired by the ground-breaking work of historians such as Renzo de Felice, “consensus”-oriented historians turned their attention to the fascist state’s instrumentalization of the realms of media, culture, intellectual inquiry, and leisure. “Consensus” studies have revolutionized the study of fascist cultural politics. Yet, due to an inherent bias toward matters of policy and a desire to provide a unified, top-down perspective on fascist culture, they tend to shy away from sustained engagements with fascist aesthetic artifacts, with the result that the latter still remain largely unread.

I believe that it is precisely this sort of analysis of the fascist imaginary that must now be undertaken in the pursuit of a complementary, as it were “lateral,” perspective on the cultural history of the fascist decades. Cultural historians, that is, need to look beyond the broad descriptive taxonomies that have heretofore occupied them to bring to bear a broader set of methodological tools (psychoanalysis, reception theory, and so on) on the reading of the period’s aesthetic production. In so doing, their task will be twofold: on the one hand, to propose new periodizations that help to account for the notable continuities between fascist-period culture and pre- and post-fascist aesthetic production; on the other hand, to attend to the deeper question of how and why a generation of writers and artists, as well as a substantial segment of their audience, not only heard and gave heed to the regime’s call to forge an authentic fascist culture but also expanded upon and reinvented this call, often transforming it into a personal calling. Fascism’s interpellative success in post–World War I Italy, that is, points less to the efficacy of certain violent tactics and policy initiatives or to the crisis of the liberal state than to the fact, well understood by Georges Bataille, that fascism elaborated a myth far more powerful and psychologically astute than that provided by either its liberal or socialist rivals. While Mussolini’s policy efforts have been well described, it is only recently that the persuasive effects of this revolutionary myth or its ability to sustain a plurality of competing cultural formulations has begun to be accounted for in any detail. The event under consideration here, 18 BL, put forward one distinctive redaction of this fascist myth. Although influential among intellectuals in the heady atmosphere of the early 1930s, with its debates on the collective novel, rationalist architecture, and fascist typography, this version would prove less successful in the long run. And this lack of success renders 18 BL all the more valuable a case study of the uncertainties of fascism in the making. The first (and last) fascist experiment with Soviet-style mass theater was many things to many people: to the fascist youth organizations, a training exercise; to its director and his supporters, a battering ram against cultural conservatives; to the theater community, a solution to the crisis of the theater; to Mussolini’s state, a potential answer to the vexing question of fascism’s (cultural) identity. In this essay, this cluster of meanings is explored.
Shklovsky’s earlier-cited remark that the fabric of Russian life was being “transformed into the theatrical” in the wake of the 1917 revolution could well be applied to fascist Italy. As never before, theater came to permeate the fabric of Italian life in the 1920s and 1930s, from the streets to the public squares to the factory floor to the corridors of Palazzo Venezia. Among the fascist hierarchs, no less than six ministers or Grand Council or Directorate members were involved with the theater: Enrico Corradini, author of Giulio Cesare; Roberto Farinacci, who penned a play entitled Redenzione; Galeazzo Cianno, foreign minister between 1936 and 1943 and author of La fortuna di Amleto; Cornelio di Marzio, creator of Occhi di gufo; Alessandro Pavolini, future Minister of Popular Culture, author of Le fatalone; and, finally, Edmondo Rossoni, head of the fascist labor unions and minister of agriculture between 1935 and 1939, co-author of Il canto del lavoro, with musical accompaniment provided by Pietro Mascagni. Never one to be outdone by members of his entourage, Benito Mussolini dabbled frequently in the contemporary theater. During the 1930s he collaborated with Giovacchino Forzano on a trilogy of tragedies depicting the lives of Napoleon, Cavour, and Julius Caesar.12 To these exercises in playwrighting (however modest their literary value) one must add a vigorous participation in debates concerning state patronage of the theater and opera.13

The hierarchs’ singular commitment to the art of theater must be viewed against the backdrop of a widely perceived and decried “crisis of the traditional theater”: a crisis of inadequate facilities, of a diminishing contemporary repertory, of a faltering star system, and of audiences in decline due (or such at least was a widespread perception) to growing competition from movies and sporting events. It was as an expression of the former commitment and in response to the latter crisis that a series of policy initiatives came about in the later 1920s, designed to achieve three interrelated goals: first, to absorb the fragmented world of theater into the regime’s corporative structures; second, to expand the traditional audience of theater, whether from the standpoint of topography or of social class, in order to forge a genuine mass and national audience; and third, to alter and ideologically inflect the way in which theatrical works were delivered to this new audience. The first of these aims was addressed via the creation of the Corporation of Spectacle in December 1930: a national entity bringing together individuals at all levels of the music, theater, and film industries.14 The second and the third objectives were addressed via the creation of “philodramatic” associations, Theatrical Saturdays, Thespian Cars, and open-air festivals. Like the open-air festivals, “philodramatic” associations had preexisted the March on Rome, but it was under fascism that they came into their own. They consisted in amateur drama clubs that, under the aegis of the fascist after-work organization, the Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro (OND), trained workers in the theater arts.15 Such clubs had been rare in the prefascist era, but by 1938 they numbered over 2,000 and performed in 1,200 theaters all over Italy, in addition to which they
staged 360 open-air performances before an audience of nearly 200,000 spectators.

If the philodramatists’ stagecraft remained for the most part traditional (embarrassingly so in the eyes of fascist intellectuals), the intended intellectual horizons were hardly provincial. The juries of the annual philodramatic contests always included major critics like Silvio D’Amico, and the movement’s standard reference manual was authored by no less than Antonio Valente, one of the designers of the 1932 Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution and inventors of the Carri di Tespi. It called for a theater cast in the image of “our era of the masses”: a theater suited to the “incredulous and, in a way, atheistic spirit of the modern world” and founded not on individual protagonists, but instead on an “aesthetics of the company.” But beyond such qualitative considerations, it is the sheer scale of the movement that is striking. As early as 1931, the philodramatists performed 13,733 plays in a single year. By 1938 the number of regular philodramatic actors had surpassed 32,000, and the movement was administering 45 acting schools and 469 regional theater libraries.

To this mass mobilization of amateur dramatists corresponded initiatives focused instead on the professional theater. The so-called “Theatrical Saturdays,” a program of reduced-rate matinee performances held in smaller cities, reached over 400,000 workers and peasants in 1936 alone. But far more telling, as regards the regime’s determination to forge a national mass audience, were the Thespian Cars: state-of-the-art traveling theaters designed by Valente and Forzano. First developed in the late 1920s, the Carri di Tespi were divided into four squadrons, each with its own company of up to four hundred actors, dancers, musicians, and staff. Three were dedicated to staging plays; a fourth to operas. For nearly ten years, these four companies criss-crossed the peninsula every spring and summer, performing before small-town audiences ranging in size from two to fifteen thousand. Their 1937 schedule, for instance, took them over 10,000 miles, with the drama cars performing 124 times before 170,000 spectators and the opera car performing 75 times before 430,000 spectators. The tours’ immediate purpose was that of bringing provincial audiences within the fold of Italian high culture. They aimed to further fascism’s “spiritual and intellectual reclamation” of Italy and to propagate the national language “in those areas where dialects still deform our marvelous language.”

But on a deeper level, the medium was the true message. Mobile and modular, capable of rapid assembly and disassembly by teams of technicians, featuring the best in contemporary stage and lighting design, the Thespian Cars functioned as vehicles for fascist values. Their mere arrival constituted an event, thanks to media coverage and to efforts on the OND’s part to coordinate transportation of rural workers to the show. Such expectations would come to a head on the day of the performance as the trucks rolled into the city’s main square, whereupon an army of technicians would feverishly set about the task of erecting canvas and
steel armatures.\textsuperscript{22} Always well attended, this pre-performance “show” was meant to put on display the efficiency achieved through corporative organization. In the words of Paolo Orano:

The scientific discipline of work is applied with the utmost rigor. Every gesture has a function and is brief, resolute, firm. Hands and shoulders turn toward pieces whose position in the construction is known precisely. Suddenly, the scaffolding of tubes rises solidly up into the air. Every worker is a technician; he lives and masters the sector of material for which he is responsible.\textsuperscript{25}

Broken down into segmented tasks that can be mastered by individual laborers working in close collaboration, the “scientific discipline of work” displayed in the building process may sound just like the sort of Taylorist ideology advocated by Lenin during the first phase of the Soviet revolution.\textsuperscript{24} But it is only superficially so inasmuch as the end product toward which the discipline strives is not a technological utopia founded on an ethos of utilitarianism. Instead, it aspires to realize an aesthetic “totality” (identical to the nation): a totality amounting to more than the sum of any given set of individual parts, functions, or elements. In the case of the Thespian Cars, the totality in question is at once human, mechanical, aerial, and electrical. Explicitly associated with the advent of beauty, it claims to result from fascism’s “miraculous” overcoming of human nature, time, and space—an overcoming, however, whose authenticity is guaranteed by its being bound by nature, time, and space:

Everything is intelligence and certainty and precision. The skeleton takes shape before the ecstatic eyes of onlookers; it becomes walls, pillars, and vaults. From the hammer to the bolt to the pulley to the dynamo to the generator that distributes and multiplies and interrupts the electrical current for purposes of lighting: the entire gamut of devices as well as the full range of technicians, stand before the people. A people who sees and learns just how rapidly and easily fascism’s school of innovation transfigures crude matter into style, harmony, and beauty. Here then is the miracle of transformation, of construction, of making things men time space obey: the miracle, that is, of the corporative age.\textsuperscript{25}

The rapid passage described here from crude matter to art, from mere technology to a transfigured totality (the corporative age), was central to the mythos of the Thespian Cars, to the “political style” of the fascist state, and, as will soon be seen, to the concept of spectacle elaborated in \textit{18 BL}.

One could go on detailing other features of the Thespian Cars: their refined electrical control booths, their longitudinal tracks for rapid set changes, and so on. One could also document their increasing use as platforms for political propaganda: “Giovinezza” and the “Hymn to Rome,” for instance, were sung at the conclusion of the opera car’s tour in 1937, a year during which “the most significant epic lyrics concerned with the Fascist Empire” were recited during intermissions.\textsuperscript{26} But the key point would remain much the same: through these and other aspects of their design, construction, and staging, the cars portrayed the
fascist government as a ubiquitous agent of cultural-political modernization reaching out directly to attend to the needs of the Italian masses and to forge the nation into a unified whole. Moreover, the sleek vision of fascist modernity conveyed by the cars and by their stagecraft was not to be contemplated in isolation. Rather, the “marvelous reality” that they would bring to the provinces was to resonate not only with the open sky but also with the classical, medieval, and renaissance architectural backdrops provided by Italian cities, so as to imply a genealogical link between the nation’s past and present grandeur.27 Such indirect forms of allusion to cultural tradition would give way to far more heavy-handed ones during the period of Italy’s imperial adventures in Ethiopia, where open-air festivals brought as many as two million spectators a year into sites such as the Roman arena in Verona.28

The initiatives just described reached as many as three million Italians a year. Yet they were never intended as more than a preparatory stage. A second phase was always envisioned in which the prefascist repertory would yield its place to an authentic fascist repertory made up of works that would convey the revolutionary spirit of the times.29 This fascist repertory was rarely conceived in narrowly propagandistic terms. Propagandistic intent, crude didacticism, and an excessive reliance upon mechanization were among the features of the Soviet revolutionary theater most regularly decried in the cultural debates of the 1930s, to the point that in 1932 Mussolini went so far as to turn down a proposal for the building of two national theaters on the grounds that “the belief that modern facilities will save the prose theater” is “a typically mechanico-positivist, materialist error.”30 The solution instead lay with contemporary authors, and to them Mussolini addressed himself in April 1933, insisting that “a State cannot create its own literature.”31 He went on to summon them “to prepare a theater of masses, a theater able to accommodate 15,000 or 20,000 persons [that will] stir up great collective passions, be inspired by a sense of intense humanity, and bring to the stage that which truly counts in the life of the spirit and in human affairs.”32 The “theater of masses” Mussolini had in mind was, in the first place, a physical plant akin to a modern sports arena. In the second place, the phrase envisaged a popular, even populist theater that would forego the representation of private emotions in favor of “the great collective passions.” The task of puzzling out just what such passions might consist in or just how one might find for them an adequate dramatic form was left to others.

Like many fascist intellectuals, Alessandro Pavolini, the originator of 18 BL, heard Mussolini’s speech as an invitation to create a theater modeled after fascism’s most immediate contribution to Italian national life: the mass rallies and ceremonies that had become a common feature of daily life since the March on Rome. Such an interpretation would have been buttressed by il Duce’s frequent self-styling as the dramaturge of the Italian masses. In the phrase “stir up the great collective passions,” Pavolini and his cohorts doubtless also heard echoes of
the cultural war cry of F. T. Marinetti’s 1909 *Manifesto of Futurism*: “We will sing the great crowds stirred up by work, pleasure, and revolt; we will sing the multicolored and polyphonic tides of revolution in modern capitals.”\(^35\) Since futurism had played an inaugural role in the rise of fascism, for Pavolini there could be little doubt that the “multicolored and polyphonic tide” best suited to the requirements of both the futurist leader and Mussolini was the fascist revolution. Here, then, was a fitting subject matter to be sung in the new mass theater. And who better to sing it than Italy’s youth: the first generation to have been raised in the bracing climate of the fascist era, the first generation untainted by the pre-fascist past?

Pavolini had risen rapidly through the ranks of the PNF to become the federal secretary of the Florentine *fascio* by age 26.\(^34\) In this capacity he was entrusted with organizing the 1934 “Littorial Games of Culture and Art”: a national competition among university students in fields such as painting, poetry, economics, and political science.\(^35\) The games were a key component in the regime’s overall strategy for “avoiding at all costs a rift between the generation that fought the war and the Revolution, and subsequent generations.”\(^36\) In the words of Achille Starace, national secretary of the PNF during the 1930s, “the goal of the Littoriali was and is to directly influence youth, spurring them to reflect seriously outside the classroom on the most pressing problems of contemporary political and spiritual life, in order to have a decisive impact on their training as a ruling class.”\(^37\) A breeding ground for the future fascist elite, these “Olympics of the spirit” seemed the ideal setting for the first theater “born and realized by forces with no prior experience of theater or spectacle: conceived by youth, directed by youth, and acted out by youth.”\(^38\)

The project was set in motion in late 1933 as Pavolini convened a series of meetings at the Casa del Fascio in Florence, attended by seven young to middle-aged critics, playwrights, directors, and set designers: Luigi Bonelli, Gherardo Gherardi, Sandro De Feo, Nicola Lisi, Raffaello Melani, Corrado Sofia, and Giorgio Venturini. (Called in at a later point were the choreographer Angela Sartorio and Ugo Ceseri, the actor who would play the driver of the lead 18 BL truck.) In a period of intense debate over the so-called “choral” novel, the spectacle took shape as a group creation. As Pavolini describes it:

> Each of us contributed. First the physiognomy of the spectacle was discussed, then ideas for its plot were put forward, and finally the idea of articulating the whole around an 18 BL truck was seized upon: a truck as protagonist; as single and collective personage; as hero of the war, of the struggles of the Fascist squadrons, and of building projects.\(^39\)

The era of the masses, it was thought, required new collective forms of art and new collective heroes, be they human or mechanical. The psychologism of the naturalist novel would have to give way to a mass epos that, miming communications technologies such as radio and following the lead of novelists like John
Dos Passos and the Soviet writers’ collectives, commingled “the infinitely vast and the infinitely minute, the individual’s voice and the mob’s howl.” The intertwined realities of urban experience, the trials of the modern mass individual, could be represented by pressing modernist techniques, like the insertion of external objects into the narrative stream and the use of multiple narrative voices, into the service of a distinctly fascist form of realism. Such was the theory behind the “choral novel” as formulated by the publisher Valentino Bompiani. It remained to be seen, however, whether the proposed collective epos would be a matter of process or simply of product. In Pavolini’s experiment the answer would be “both.” Every phase of the production process—from the shaping of the script to the selling of tickets—would put on display fascism’s culture of collective discipline and collaboration. And the spectacle itself would place masses of actors and machines on stage before a mass audience.

Among the plots considered by Pavolini’s collective were a sequence of battles from World War I, the so-called eccidio di Empoli, and the murder of the young fascist Giovanni Berta at the hands of Florentine communists. The latter theme prevailed at first, but as deliberations proceeded the fascist martyr was shunted aside in favor of an 18 BL truck. The selection of a truck as hero may not seem self-evident, especially given the importance of the national train system to the fascist imagination. Since the late nineteenth century trains had indeed become a privileged symbol of modernization throughout the world. This was all the more true in a fragmented nation such as Italy, where they had come to signify three key fascist “conquests”: the reimposition of discipline after the labor disruptions of the post-war period, the forging of a centralized national state, and the democratization of once-bourgeois modes of transport. This rendered trains an effective symbol of central governmental power. But when it came to representing the revolution’s beginnings, it was the truck—the proletarian vehicle par excellence—that would prevail (much as in Bolshevist and Maoist iconography).

In the specific case of Pavolini’s spectacle, the choice of an 18 BL was ensured by the fact that this particular truck was already fully enshrined within the mythology of fascist squadism. Featured in the works of painters such as Mario Sironi, the 18 BL merged the iconography of industry with the evocation of fascism’s “outlaw” origins.

A first treatment entitled 18 BL was developed from the brainstorming sessions held at the Casa del Fascio. Each author was assigned the task of fleshing out a subsection of the work and, after collective discussion, the drafts were passed along to Alessandro Blasetti, the young filmmaker Pavolini had selected to direct the spectacle. Regarded by many as the Eisenstein of the fascist cinema, Blasetti had just completed a suite of historical films involving large numbers of amateur actors, notably Sole, Terra Madre, and 1860. From these directorial experiences Blasetti would bring to 18 BL a battery of techniques for mounting battle scenes and achieving complex twilight lighting effects, as well as a stylized realist

18 BL
FIGURE 2 (above). Site map of the “Theater of the Masses”; *La nazione*, 18 April 1934. The theater was built downriver from the Ponte della Vittoria, beyond the Oltrarno neighborhood of San Frediano and across the Arno from the Cascine, Florence’s largest public park. Black areas represent buildings and gray areas vacant fields. Arrows mark the two points of access to the stadium: Viale della Regina (numbered tickets) and Via Isolotto (general admission).

FIGURE 3 (below). Alessandro Blasetti, lighting and stage design for act 3, pencil drawing on mimeograph, 1934. The positions of searchlight brigades are indicated by numbered boxes. Numbers within circles indicate staging areas connected by field telephone to home base (1). Letters mark the principal roads traversing the stage. Cross-hatched zones stand for the canted platforms on which the action unfolded. Pencilled-in arrows indicate the movement of trucks and actors from road C to A, then onto and off the center of the stage under searchlights 3, 11, and 12. Source: Blasetti Archive.
mode of narration always open to allegorical intimations. Blasetti reworked the collective's texts with the demands of staging such a large spectacle in mind, carrying over from his films numerous formal and thematic elements.\textsuperscript{46} During the ensuing months of preparation he would adopt, for instance, Sole's Manichean dialectic of darkness and light, according to which the Pontine marshes represented the values of "darkness and old age" and the reclaimed swamps the promise of "sun and youth."\textsuperscript{47} From Terra Madre, he would borrow the mass open-air ceremonials and use of intervals of silence as a dramatic device. From 1860 he would carry over, among many other ingredients, the film's vast landscape settings; its myths of rural virtue and urban vice; its mass choreographies; its use of songs, flags, and banners; its tendency to create dislocated relations between bodies and voices; its oblique presentation of Garibaldi through the masses converging toward unity under his leadership; and the triumphal parade featured in its coda.\textsuperscript{48}

But the first challenge facing Blasetti was less the script than the design and
construction of an outdoor theater: an arena, as per *il Duce’s* orders, “able to accommodate twenty thousand persons.” This Blasetti set about with several dozen workers, a team of thirty earth movers, and with barely six weeks at his disposal.49 Inspired perhaps by contemporary projects like Walter Gropius’s “total theater” and Gaetano Giocca’s teatro per masse, the young director had initially dreamed of building an amphitheater that would turn the conventional Greco-Roman theater inside out: placing the audience at the center of a crater, surrounded by a circular upward sloping stage.50 But practical factors led to the adoption of an alternate plan (fig. 2). The site selected for *18 BL* was on the left shore of the Arno, across from the Cascine, Florence’s principal public park. The terrain, known as the Albereta dell’Isolotto, was cleft in two by a deep gully (Via Argin Grosso) which the city authorities agreed to expand so that Blasetti could transform it into a command post and lighting pit. The gently sloping river bank to the north was chosen as a seating area; the steeper incline rising up to the south as a stage.51 The stage was roughly six hundred feet wide by two hundred feet deep, occupying an area equivalent to two and a half football fields. Blasetti had a series of artificial hills carved into this platform: a three-stepped hill to the left, a two-stepped hill to the right, and, at the center, a three-hundred-foot-long ridge with a basin hollowed out in its middle, behind which rose a conical hilltop—the stage’s highest point (figs. 3 and 4). Some twelve staging areas were cut into the various hill sides for the preparation of the spectacle’s scenes, as well as a circuit of roads and trenches for moving actors, artillery, horses, and trucks. A network of field telephones was installed to ease communications between the staging areas and the director’s headquarters.52

Since this was a stage without a curtain, Blasetti determined that the action should migrate from one area of the stage to another, following the movements of Ceseri and his truck. While the spectacle unfolded within these sharply lit zones, new scenes could be prepared in the darkened areas; during pauses in the main action, “thunderous sounds and luminous effects [would] draw the public’s attention toward zones extraneous to the action” in order to “hold together the dramatic design of the action from one moment to another.”53 Given that both sides of the stage sloped steeply downward, Blasetti envisaged *18 BL* as a kind of shadow play in reverse, with figures rising up and disappearing rapidly over the horizon line. The actors and machines, that is, would be viewed in profile from below, as in the films of Alexander Dovzhenko. Their silhouettes, cut out against either the night sky or against fields of light produced by means of pyrotechnics and searchlights, would thereby appear to have been raised to a higher, more volatile plane of existence: a plane defined by the propensity of these sharply outlined bodies and machines to suddenly emerge out of or dissolve into seas of darkness or brilliant light (fig. 5).

In addition to lighting, there was a second element that would sustain dramatic tension in *18 BL*: the alternation between silence and the “thunderous
"sounds" alluded to above. The scale of Blasetti’s stage was such that microphones had to be planted throughout the landscape in order to ensure the diffusion of the work’s terse dialogues and choral shouts. The musical score, songs, and sound effects were all recorded in advance for broadcast over the same loudspeakers employed by the microphones. The procedure was not unlike that adopted in 1860 where, in order to avoid the limitations imposed by bulky sound equipment, Blasetti had the film shot as if silent, dubbing the dialogue and sound effects over what, in essence, was a silent film. This recourse to microphones and a recorded soundtrack would later prove controversial, but its principal aim was to permit actors to move about without concern for whether they could or could not be heard. It also permitted the amalgamation of natural and artificial sounds: mechanically reproduced music, voices, and machine sounds could thereby be intermingled with live noises produced on stage by actors, weapons, and trucks so as to create an unstable boundary between the real and the imaginary. Moreover, it allowed for some highly original spatial effects, forming “a vast sonic field that, besides surrounding the audience, can move sounds, songs, rhythms, and noises close up or far away.” But most important of all, in a spectacle within which a few individuals would speak for the nation, it permitted amplification. A “vocal gigantism” could be achieved that would grant the occasional dialogues exchanged among the human protagonists priority over the sea of machine noises.

Because this theater for the masses was also meant as a theater of the masses, the seating area too was designed as a theatrical space. Shaped like a rectangle with a curved back, it was flanked on both sides by a high embankment. Much as

in a modern sports arena, the more expensive numbered seats (5,000) were placed along the central axis, and the inexpensive “popular” seating areas (15,000 places) relegated to the flanks. This distinction between numbered and unnumbered seating may seem perfectly ordinary. But it becomes somewhat less so when one observes that it corresponds to a complex social choreography, reflected in turn in the play’s staging of the dialectic between mass man and the heroic individual. Two separate entrances were provided for the public. The one on the Oltrarno side of the river was restricted to the popolari, who were obliged to assemble in Piazza Gaddi and descend a blind alleyway known as Via Isolotto: a “natural” itinerary given that many of them would be arriving from the adjacent proletarian neighborhood of San Frediano (site of Berta’s “martyrdom”). As they entered the mist-filled stadium, these working-class spectators would have been dazzled by eighteen large open books topped by bayonets built in a ring around the stadium’s periphery. Powerful floodlights were pointed against the books’ white pages so as to bounce light back out into the stalls. Amidst these pages yet to be inscribed by the first generation of fascist youth, the popolari would have gazed upon the procession of dignitaries entering the theater’s middle section. The latter would include writers like Ugo Ojetti and Massimo Bontempi, most of Italy’s theater critics, and hierarchs like Galeazzo Ciano, so an equation would have been implied between fascist faces, fasces, weapons, and books.

The elite members of the public would reach their numbered seats by following an itinerary restricted to the city side of the river. Having traversed Florence’s affluent nineteenth-century neighborhoods, they would have reached Piazza Zuavi, proceeding down the spacious tree-lined promenades of the Cascine to the theater’s true entrance: a bridge of riverboats, lit by torches held by boatmen (fig. 6). Boat-bridges were one of the most ancient forms of military bridging, so the symbolism of moving across the river toward a “theater of war” as if one were a soldier could not have been lost on the audience. But the primary aim was surely symbolic. I quote from a contemporary source:

For this new type of theater a new method of entry was essential. The theater of the Albereta is a kind of inaccessible hermetic temple: will it be, amidst the nightlights, a phantasmagoria recreating the myths that Wagner conceived for the Bayreuth stage but with entirely new means than those of which he disposed? Here we are dealing not with myth, but with contemporary history. Nevertheless, the latter is sufficiently poetic to partake of the appearance and fascination of myth.

Traversing this bridge, standing under a celestial X formed by beams of light projected from opposite sides of the Arno, the spectator would have gazed down the river and over the city’s rooftops upon such monuments as Giotto’s bell tower. He would then have completed his “walk on the water,” ascended a broad stairway, and passed through a triumphal gateway of fasces marked with the Roman numeral twelve (dating the spectacle according to the revolutionary cal-
FIGURE 6. Giannetto Mannucci and Maurizio Tempestini, boat bridge entrance to Theater of the Masses, pen and ink drawing, 1934; Guido Salvini, “Spettacoli di masse e 18 BL,” Scenario 3, no. 5 (May, 1934): 251–55. As indicated in this early design, the initial plan was for a double boat bridge. As late as 22 March 1934, Blasetti pleaded with local military authorities for additional boats, fearing that a single bridge could not handle the mass of spectators. A dearth of boats ensured the adoption of a single bridge solution.

...Beyond the gateway lay the cement books with bayonets and, beyond them, the misty swirl of the assembled crowd surrounded by the Tuscan landscape and under the night sky. There, the heart of the hermetic temple would at last have been reached: a place of mass communion where the distinction between members of the priesthood and mere believers was maintained, even as they rubbed shoulders and merged into a single community.

18 BL’s first and only performance took place on 29 April 1934, one week after the opening day ceremonies of the Littoriali. The sell-out audience assembled according to plan and the bridge, the various massing points, and the book-lit auditorium all seem to have infused the assembled spectators with the sense that they themselves were the protagonists of Mussolini’s mass theater: “There were not 3,000 actors,” observed one audience member, “but 23,000.”65 The two-hour show began with the stage and the seating area veiled in a curtain of smoke. At the appointed hour, a call to order sounded over the loudspeakers and the lights and smoke were extinguished, exposing to view the immense stage, the surrounding landscape, and the night sky. The first of the play’s three acts began with the trumpet calls from the opening bars of Renzo Massarani’s orchestral...
score, Squilli e danze per il 18 BL.\footnote{66} Then came the broadcast of the spectacle's leitmotif, “The Captain's Testament,” a World War I hymn associated with the Alpine brigades instrumental in Italy's victory over Austria in the battle of the Piave River.

The action may be summarized as follows. \textit{Act 1, scene 1}. The location and volume of the chorus of voices oscillate as a light scans the right portion of the stage, finding bodies, barbwire, and galloping horses. Suddenly the rumble of an 18 BL Fiat truck is heard and, as it crosses over the horizon line, artillery barrages light up the night sky. A spotlight reveals the truck's destination: several hundred second-line Italian soldiers to whom its driver, Ugo Ceseri, delivers rations and mail. The truck's nickname, “Mother Cartridge-Pouch” (Mamma Giberna), is shouted out in the course of a dialogue.\footnote{67} \textit{Scene 2}. New volleys are fired in the distance as a machine-gun battle has front-line Italian soldiers pinned against barbed wire on the middle hilltop. The truck now rambles up the slope, its armored shield riddled by bullets. Snippets of dialogue can be heard interwoven with mechanical sounds. The driver heaves food sacks into a trench and continues down the backside of the slope out of view. \textit{Scene 3}. The truck reappears around the corner of the third hill. The twilight reveals that it is brimming over with young soldiers who are being transported to the front. Several dozen 18 BLs follow in its wake and unload their soldiers, who join in an assault across the top of the ridge. Machine-gun battles start and stop until victory is at hand. Far behind the first hill, an Italian flag is hoisted against the light of a sign that announces the conquest of Trento and Trieste. Ceseri's truck leads a parade of 18 BLs over the horizon toward the flag, accompanied by song. \textit{End of act 1}.

The transition between World War I and the labor strikes of 1922 is marked by the firing of a curtain of red fireworks over the public. \textit{Act 2, scene 1}. Beyond the red rain, the repositioned stage lights reveal a new landscape on the left hand side of the stage. Strewn across it are abandoned work implements, battered haystacks, rotting produce. Factory sirens sound but their wail is soon distorted into the squawk of rusty gears and the electronic growl of a howling mob. Ceseri and his mechanic attempt to unload their 18 BLs' cargo. They preach against the strike and become the target of a mob of strikers brandishing a red flag. The mob's “mechanical howl”—the phrase is from the script—grows to deafening proportions as the strikers batter the truck and leave the mechanic unconscious. At this instant the truck's engine starts up. The circle of strikers opens up and Ceseri can be heard crying out for revenge as the truck flees into a gully. \textit{Scene 2}. A banquet table bearing the word “PARLIAMENT” appears atop the central hillock. Seated at the table are politicians representing the liberal, socialist, and popular parties. Some wear black tuxedos and oversize top hats that hang down over their eyes; others are sloppily dressed and full of rhetorical bluster. The strikers rally round them, remaining silent except for an occasional chorus of “Long live the people’s representatives!” Soon all conversation has ceased and the

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only noises that can be heard are those of knives clanging on plates. An applause then rings out. A socialist politician stands up to begin a speech. Instead of a voice, however, the sound of a barrel organ issues from his mouth: a wind-up organ, like that employed by beggars with monkeys, playing the Dance of the Seven Veils from the opera Salomé. Behind him, hundreds of slogan-bearing balloons float into the sky “filled with empty promises.” The barrel organ churns away for several minutes, after which it begins to wind down as a newsboy cries out headlines announcing the foundation of fascist groups. The music stops. One of the elders croaks the words of Luigi Facta before the March on Rome: “But what do these Fascists want?” At this instant Mother Cartridge-Pouch thunders down the hill and overturns the tables of parliament. Afterward Ceseri harangues the mob: “One hundred and thirty million in damages to farming thanks to the socialist dictatorship in the Bologna region! Workers, when will you free yourselves from your mystifying leaders?” Scene 3. Fire alarms ring out. Fascist hymns are sung far away and nearby. A factory is ablaze in the left corner of the landscape. Ceseri’s 18 BL, filled with black shirts, goes to the rescue but is ambushed by an armed socialist mob. Bullets fly and, when the ambush is over, darkness redescends. In the twilight one can see the fascist dead being heaped onto the platform of Ceseri’s truck, as if an altar. The truck rolls up to the summit of the stage’s central crest. Two hundred fascists converge upon the truck, arranging themselves in formation and standing mutely at attention (fig. 7). Over the horizon a white light glows with ever increasing intensity. From out of the light, a “metallic and clear voice” (Mussolini’s) interrupts the funereal silence, calling out: “Heroes of the war and martyrs of the revolution!” “Present,” they answer. “To whom does Italy belong, to whom Rome?” “To us,” they answer. But the chorus of voices is no longer isolated. Black shirts shout out “to us” from all sides of the auditorium and stage. Led by a truck convoy, they parade out across the landscape and converge over the horizon line, where their silhouettes vanish into the light. Act 2 has ended; the March on Rome has begun.

The final act of 18 BL concerns one of the centerpieces of fascist domestic policy: the draining of the Pontine marshes, the reclamation of marshland for purposes of farming, and the construction there of fascist new towns. Since these events project the action of 18 BL ten years forward, Blasetti devised a second interlude to mark the shift from the early 1920s to 1932 during which a squadron of airplanes overflew the crowd and dropped broadsheets celebrating the principal accomplishments of fascist rule. Act 3, scene 1. The lights drop and a heroic dance music sounds. The stage is aswarm with children, who wend their way up over the horizon following furrows cut into the land by peasants, whose tools are in view. The children are followed by one hundred athletes in formation, who perform a gymnastic dance with lances and bows: emblems of the “human reclamation” accomplished by fascist education. Scene 2. Off in a hollow to the left, a swamp comes into view under a faint greenish spotlight. Filled with reeds and
bubbling with mud, it emanates froglike croakings intermingled with voices of rumor and doubt. As the gymnasts depart one mutters, “Billions spent to uglify the race! Violent and ignorant generations are being fashioned, hungry for war, slaughter, and excess…” The rumor-mongering continues until, atop the highest point on the stage, a monumental figure on horseback appears in profile against intersecting beams of light: the Commander. He utters two steely words: “Qui. Colmata.” (Here. Landfill.) A legion of trucks roars up and begins to fill in the swamp. The Commander rotates 180 degrees and issues an order to a squadron of bulldozers on the other side of the stage: “In three days, the road to Littoria will cross this void. We will work all night.” Scene 3. The entire stage is lit. On the left, the filling operation continues; on the right, the bulldozers and trucks carve out a highway. Here and there packs of workers can be seen tilling the land. A factory whistle sounds, marking the end of the night shift. The trucks head back to their sheds as revolutionary songs are sung. The stage is left empty except for a few stragglers whose banter is overheard as they await a ride from Mother Cartridge-Pouch, now rebaptized Old Cartridge-Pouch. Still driven by Ceseri, she arrives from offstage right, battered and torn. Although able to transport them
halfway across the stage, her motor is blown and soon begins spewing smoke. All efforts at revival fail and, instead of abandoning her, they decide to push her up to the lip of the first swamp. As she wobbles toward the precipice, trucks filled with workers arrive on the scene. They surround her and shut off their engines. The left hillock is now ablaze “in the mode of dazzling transfigurations or the head of Moses” amidst the dead silence. Ceseri stands at the center of this funereal composition and proclaims: “She has fought the war, the revolution, and the battle of land reclamation. Now she will support the highway to Littoria.” The old truck is pushed over the precipice and buried, as Ceseri prophecies her return: “In three days she will return to her duties anew, my old lady. Forever!” The trucks depart and pass above her, barely visible, as the sound of marching drums is heard, blended with music. White buildings flicker in the distance as Italy marches off toward the city of the future: Littoria, first of the fascist new towns. A trumpet call heard off in the distance echoes back with redoubled force.

War, revolution, reconstruction: these were the three great themes of 18 BL’s theater of and for the masses. However crude its unfolding of these themes may sometimes seem, the spectacle aspired to elevate contemporary history to the status of myth by means of a hybrid stagecraft merging hyperrealism with allegory, and even political caricature. In an era when the transition from silent to talking films was being completed, it tried to adapt to the stage the use of layered soundtracks, cinematic lighting tricks, and editing techniques such as montage and the rapid crosscutting of scenes. But, for all its attempts to transport cinematic sensations to the stage, 18 BL also set out to transcend the cinema and forge a hallucinatory new dramatic form. It set out to achieve a higher, more distinctively fascist form of tragic pathos, “to embody the real and the symbolic simultaneously, creating a kind of actualized mystical experience . . . of a heroic subject matter.” In the words of Corrado Sofia, one of 18 BL’s authors, it sought to reawaken the same enthusiasm expressed by crowds in sports arenas and perhaps to succeed in being more seductive than the cinema, because actual voices and human figures and the open air that surrounds the stage, are all sources of instinctual attraction. The cinema thrusts the spectator into a dark room. On the screen it presents flat and colorless figures. By its nature it is tied to documentary and scientific forms, rather than to an imagination capable of enveloping facts in mystery.

Sofia’s theorization is exemplary inasmuch as fascism’s attitude toward the film medium had been ambivalent from the start. On the one hand, fascism celebrated cinema as the state’s “most potent weapon”; on the other, an aversion toward the medium itself prompted fascism to single out the theater as the privileged fascist art and to place theatrical values at the center of fascist politics. Film, Sofia suggests, is by its very nature a decadent medium. It attenuates the bond between spectators’ and performers’ bodies, reducing the world to a series of flat and colorless projections meant for silent and solitary contemplation. The theater of
masses, on the contrary, restores to the body its central role and in so doing forges a transformative, mutually seductive relation between representation and reality, art and life. The mass audience and mass performers leave behind the cloistered interiors of the old theater and cinema in order to stand before one another in actual time and space, under the open sky. Within this natural setting an “instinctual attraction” between them can break down the barrier between auditorium and stage, provoking the sort of healthy contagion fostered by athletic events or mass rallies. And the spectacle itself is designed to excite such primordial passions. Plot is stripped down to its minimal constituent elements: hero versus antihero, black versus red versus white. Actions are simple, readily accessible, and anchored in the historical present. The poetic word is subordinated to the mysterious play of images and rhythms.74 Physical actions, optical tricks, acrobatics, magic, fireworks . . . in short, external effects and affects occupy the place of honor once held in the theater by the values of individuality and interiority.75 And the end result toward which this complex of techniques strives is the forging of a charismatic community, a microcosm of the fascistized Italian nation: “the fusion of thousands and thousands of souls within a single framework of ideas and events.”76

Such at least was the theoretical matrix within which the creators of 18 BL were operating: a modernist matrix indebted to Bontempelli’s notion of “magic realism” and to his writings on theater and sport.77 Unfortunately for Blasetti and his collaborators, 18 BL fell short of fulfilling these ambitions. The new theater of the masses was applauded, praised for its audacity and patriotic sentiments, but it was just as often dismissed as a resounding flop. To make matters worse, the latter verdict was trumpeted by Corrado Sofia, who launched a series of fierce attacks against Blasetti from the pages of Quadrivio.78 Already in the months preceding the performance there had been hints of rivalry.79 Now Sofia came out into the open and accused Blasetti of a long list of “treasonous” acts: of having been a poor director to start with; of having needlessly destroyed the lead 18 BL truck; of developing the spectacle around machines and mechanized voices when Italians were “staunch enemies of machine-worship”;80 and of having wanted “to revolutionize everything in little more than a month” when “revolutions must be prepared carefully in even the most minimal particulars.”81 Blasetti responded angrily in La tribuna, accepting blame for 18 BL’s failings but calling attention to Sofia’s volte-face: only weeks before Sofia was taking full credit for the spectacle; now he pretended to have been disaffected from the start.82 A counterattack followed several days later and featured such accusations as that Blasetti’s true ambition in 18 BL had been to gain for himself a government pension.83 This in turn provoked yet another furious rejoinder, as well as intercessions on Blasetti’s behalf by Leo Bomba and Gherardo Gherardi.84

As might have been anticipated, technical problems contributed their share to the mixed reception that greeted 18 BL. The vast stage had diminished the

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audience’s ability to participate in every action. Able to hear but unable to see, many spectators would feel no “instinctual attraction” toward the mass of protagonists on stage. Instead of being transported into an unstable realm where the threshold between reality and some magical/mythical domain appeared permeable, they would be left, like Bontempelli himself, with a lingering “sense of emptiness, depression, and coldness.” Visiblity problems were aggravated by the discontinuous nature of the narrative, and by the often awkward synchronization between the soundtrack and the events on stage. Not least of all, there was the performance’s finale, which Blasetti had not been able to rehearse. In a near-disastrous Pirandellian twist, Mother Cartridge-Pouch had changed her mind about being buried at the last moment and for several tense minutes the combined forces of a dozen actors proved insufficient to roll her over into the swamp. In the end they did succeed, but only after Blasetti switched off the lights and summoned a second truck. When the lights came back on Mother Cartridge-Pouch was in her grave, but many spectators had already departed and the intended tragic effect had been buried long before the truck.

Technical deficiencies there were, but at the heart of the controversy surrounding 18 BL loomed the deeper question of whether a machine was a fitting hero for the fascist theater. Some young members of the crowd thought not, greeting the event’s conclusion with cries of “What the hell do we care about a truck?” The objection would be repeated often in the ensuing months of debate, always in tandem with criticism of the collective drafting of 18 BL’s script. (For the fascist imagination mechanization and collectivization were indissociable.) In the words of the novelist Ugo Ojetti, “The idea of making a machine into a hero, whether that, as some say (but I doubt), of Mussolini, or instead of Marinetti or Pavolini, is a stupid idea. . . . Art is man. Machines without men are soulless wood and metal; and they are mass-produced as equal, nay, identical.” Ojetti’s aversion to mechanical heroes is motivated by the fear that they summon up the specter of a soulless mass society: a society founded not on the values of nationalism but on those of internationalism. Such a society had a name, and other commentators would prove less reticent regarding its identity: mechanical heroes “are well suited to peoples for whom the machine has become a religion. . . . To draw near to such mentalities makes it more difficult to uproot the error committed by those who, after a cursory look at our affairs, would liken our Revolution to the Russian revolution.” For these and other like-minded viewers, the recourse to a mechanical protagonist and the collective authorship of the script raised grave doubts about fascism’s specificity. Like its enemy twin, fascism was committed to building an industrial mass society, which is to say a society dependent upon the close interconnection between machines and human beings. Yet fascism also claimed to stand in opposition to Marxist materialism, utilitarianism, and collectivism, and in favor of values associated with vague terms such as soul, spirit, beauty, heroism, individualism, and Latinity. Could such values, however
defined, be fully reconciled with mechanization and industrialization? Perhaps not for a cultural conservative such as Ojetti, but for committed modernists like the creators of 18 BL the answer was affirmative.

The spectacle’s detractors were right in at least one important respect: 18 BL was indeed haunted by Soviet antecedents. The machine as protagonist of mass actions had long been one of the heroic themes of Soviet culture, a fact amply documented in René Fülöp-Miller’s Il volto del bolscevismo, a contemporary best-seller that had devoted two chapters to the Soviet revolutionary theater. It claimed that under socialism “the imitation of machines has been raised to the status of a sacrament, comparable to the imitation of Christ,” and discussed at length Soviet experiments with collective authorship.90 The Soviet interest in developing modernist forms of epic founded upon the interaction between machinery and human masses would also have reached Blasetti and his cohorts via the cinema. Eisenstein’s theoretical writings were available in translation and, by the early 1930s, Italian cinema clubs had started to exhibit his silent films, from The Battleship Potemkin to the quasi-documentary The General Line, whose final parade of tractors was a probable source for 18 BL.91 But an even more direct source of inspiration were the Soviet revolutionary festivals, avant-garde experiments in mass pageantry that had stimulated great interest in Italy during the cultural debates of the early 1930s.92 Among these, the most immediately pertinent is perhaps The Storming of the Winter Palace, a collectively authored reenactment of the events of October 1917 cast in the same hyperrealist yet allegorizing mold as 18 BL. Performed in Petrograd’s Palace Square in 1920 before a public of nearly 100,000, this multimedia spectacle surrounded its 8,000 protagonists with gunfire, artillery, rockets, and a panoply of lighting effects.93 And as can be seen in several contemporary drawings and photographs, its climactic episode featured a white truck carrying the fleeing Kerensky government with a platoon of Red Army trucks in hot pursuit. Other parallels could be cited from works such as Yuri Annenkov’s The Mystery of Liberated Labor and Meyerhold’s History of Three Internationals, the latter involving, in Fülöp-Miller’s account, “200 cadets from the cavalry school, 2300 soldiers, sixteen cannons, five airplanes with reflectors, ten mounted reflectors, armored trains, armored cars, motorcycles, field hospitals, etc., not to mention various military bands and choruses.”94 (The proletarian theaters of Erwin Piscator and Ernst Toller, also well known in fascist Italy, could also be cited in this regard.)95 But, however considerable the direct impact of Soviet precedents might have been, it is essential to emphasize that the “haunting” of 18 BL is more than a simple question of influence. The drama is built upon a series of binary oppositions that betray similarities between fascism and its Bolshevik twin, even as they attempt to institute differences. (Elided by this binarism is fascism’s true historical nemesis, liberal democracy.) The red strikers parade, fight, and chant choruses just like their black-shirted counterparts.96 The metallic howl of their voices echoes the mechanical roar of the fascists’ trucks. Both groups
are presented as undifferentiated collectives, and both constitute themselves in a choral dialogue with a leader’s mechanized voice.

This said, it makes a substantial difference whether the voice in question consists of a wind-up barrel organ playing the tune of Salome’s Dance of the Seven Veils, or instead issues forth from a living equestrian statue in the form of metallic orders. What I mean is that while the detractors of 18 BL may have been right about the work’s Soviet resonances, they were blind to the contrast it was attempting to enforce between fascist and Bolshevik attitudes toward machinery. For purposes of simplicity, I will term this a distinction between mechanization and metallization (even though it must be noted that the distinction is hardly absolute, due to an increasing cultural and political convergence between fascist Italy and Stalinist Russia during the 1930s). Mechanization had been one of the driving forces behind the Soviet revolutionary theater. It was identified with an effort to strip the stage bare and disclose its most intimate workings. Instead of a factory of seductive myths and illusions, the proletarian stage would thereby become both an instrument for the demystification of contemporary society, and a place where alternate futures could be staged and produced: in short, a factory in which the efficient interaction between mechanized actor/workers, working machines, and a transparent scenic apparatus would exemplify the communist society of the future. Since the actor-worker represented the ideal citizen of this future republic, contemporary dramatists such as Meyerhold sought to transform him or her into a utopian subject identical to the classless and sexless economic subject the revolution was attempting to forge. Inspired by their economist colleagues, they found in the motion efficiency studies of Taylor and others a model for the reduction of “the work of acting” to a series of biomechanical functions: a machinelike discipline whose objectives were economy, rhythm, and deliberate-ness. This “mechanico-technological reconstruction of man’s daily life” was viewed not as dehumanizing or deindividualizing but, on the contrary, as emancipatory. Mechanization was the means to a utopian end: the creation of a body without fatigue (the robot) and of a society freed from the burden of alienating work (communism).

The creators of 18 BL were also striving to shape a new society within and outside the confines of the theater, and for them, no less than the Soviets, the production process was just as integral to the revolutionary spectacle as the final product. Yet, committed to the fascist ideal of an absolute theater that would collapse the boundaries between the real and the ideal, they viewed Soviet-style mechanization as the foe of a theatrical “imagination capable of enveloping facts in mystery.” The function of mass theater as they conceived it was at once ritual and inaugural: “ritual” to the extent that by having actors too young to have participated in the March on Rome reenact the battles of their fathers, it hoped to bridge the gap between the pre- and post-revolutionary generations; “inaugural” to the extent that the spectacle was organized in such a way as to offer a preview
of a future fully “fascistized” society. Accordingly, the production of *18 BL* was organized along strict military lines. The two thousand actors, mostly members of the GUF and Fasci Giovanili (although soldiers, Balilla, and Giovani Italiane participated), were divided into armylike units, each assigned a number and placed under the leadership of a war veteran. And their training as Thespians was indistinguishable from military training. The director, functioning as a surrogate *Duce*, oversaw these war games as if a field commander, linked by wiring to the entire expanse of the stage:

In a central cabin containing a network of telephone controls, bells, and variegated signals, the “director” will, like a commander, have the spectacle’s fate firmly in his grip. From time to time, depending on the unfolding of the action, portions of the landscape or details on the stage will be illuminated: a position, a communications trench, a hilltop. The “vision” will thus be unbroken and synthetic.97

The authority, omniscience, and ubiquity granted the director by the network of cables was not limited to the stage. Strictly figurative “wires” joined him to the city authorities, the military, and the PNF, all of whom made a show of contributing resources, manpower, and technical assistance in order that “the vision” be realized without impediment.98 And from the start Blasetti had made clear his demands for absolute authority: “Nothing that I have requested can be diminished in scale or granted without full cooperation. . . . The execution of production orders must be absolutely military, which is to say immediate, without hesitation or need for discussion.”99 Heroic acts of the collective will were the order of the day and, whether actual or imagined, constituted a spectacle in and of themselves. Rehearsals carried on late into the night. In an ostentatious display of fascism’s revolt against the life of ease and comfort, the stage and auditorium were completed after weeks of continuous day and night shifts by a construction crew designed to embody the ideals of discipline, class collaboration, and national mobilization. Similar ideals extended to the audience, segments of which arrived on special trains under the aegis of the fascist youth and after-work organizations. Even in the domain of ticket sales there were to be no “inopportune contradictions or privileges.” *18 BL* would inaugurate a genuine mass art form, so no complimentary tickets were distributed.100 Visibility would be comparable from all sectors of the auditorium in order to ensure that one perspective alone would emerge by the spectacle’s end: a unified collective vision ordered and organized by a single director/dictator.

Within the setting of this society in a state of perpetual mobilization, machines are not just tools to be used by human protagonists. Their function is a higher one, that of serving as idealized doubles of both the collective and its director/commander. I employ the word “doubles” because, contrary to Soviet practice, two parallel dramatic universes coexist on stage in *18 BL*: one human and one mechanical—one involving the interplay of men with their leaders; the other that
of Mother Cartridge-Pouch with her “chorus” of fifty trucks. Like their human counterparts, machines are treated as irreducible entities in 18 BL. They are mechanical “individuals” who can be organized into larger collective groupings or totalities (or placed in the service of a totality as prosthetic devices), but who cannot be broken down into a series of interchangeable functions or parts. This principle of irreducibility permits fascist machinery to take on human attributes such as age, gender, will-power, and courage. It also ensures that any mingling of man and machine will assume the form of “identification” and not the exchange of parts or functions. Within this economy of identification, machines stand for an ideal: not that of a body without fatigue or of a society without alienation, but instead the distinctively fascist ideal of constant exertion and fatigue coldly resisted… in other words, “metallization.”

Metallization is a paradoxical concept whose tentacles extend deep into contemporary mass culture, but whose crucial importance to fascism I will now limit myself to sketching out in some final remarks. Unlike the sexless stage machines of the Russian theater, the mechanical hero of 18 BL is neither an emblem of an atemporal utopia nor a specimen of advanced engineering. She is simply a mother truck: a plain, utilitarian vehicle destined for obsolescence, a carrier “pouch” for young soldier-“cartridges” that will eventually be used up. The first mass-produced Fiat truck, she embodies the fascist masses, even when singled out with respect to the other trucks. Her mass identity is confirmed by two further signs: her gender—the masses were always feminized in contemporary propaganda—and by her placement under a relay of male governors extending from Ceseri to Blasetti to Mussolini. But if feminized, why then should she be a mother? A clue is provided by the sole other female presence in 18 BL: Salomé. Temptress and decapitator in Oscar Wilde’s play and Richard Strauss’s opera, Salomé is conjured up in order to forge a symbolic link between the menace of decadent sensuality and Marxian materialism. Her dance, garbled and parodied by a barrel organ, becomes a strip-tease akin to the denuding of Soviet stage with its false promises of a techno-mechanical utopia. Against such seductive illusions imported from England, Germany, and Austria—indeed against sexuality as such—I8 BL elaborates the chaste metallic countermyth of the Latin mother truck: an autocarro tipo normale whose norm is heroic service, dedication, and incessant work. Able to bear the feverish exploits of 1917, 1922, and 1932 with icy coolness, she succumbs in the end only to be transfigured into a symbol of national sacrifice. Like her figurative “sons,” the soldiers of World War I and the March on Rome, Mother Cartridge-Pouch lays down her body in a final gesture of self-offering that literally paves the way to future glory.

18 BL thus ends on something of an elegiac note. The vehicle that had come to personify fascism’s resistance to fatigue submits to nature’s iron law of degeneration over time via an act of fruitful sacrifice. And this at the culminating moment of a work in whose tableaux the promise of a transfigured national col-

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lectivity is always shadowed by the menace of dissolution and loss. Fascism never ceased reflecting upon decline, whether in the domain of the body or the history of peoples. Having little faith in the ability of science or technology to decisively alter humankind’s temporal predicament, secular and anticlerical at its origins, the movement tried to practice what it called “realism,” a skeptical anti-idealist turn of mind with ties to Bergsonian phenomenology. This said, it was deeply fearful that “realism” could lead back to a sense of sadness and fatigue, in short, back to the ethos of decadentism and materialism that the revolution claimed to have overthrown. National skepticism, melancholy, and mourning were symptoms of the liberal-democratic/socialist paralysis that had preceded the March on Rome, and against them fascism preached a gospel of constant activity, cheerful self-creation, and eternal youth, even going so far as to invent secular otherworlds for the preservation of its martyrs. It was in this spirit that an early version of the


**FIGURE 9** (right). R. Bertelli, Continuous Profile of Mussolini, wood, early 1930s. Photo: collection of Paul Sullivan.
script for 18 BL had proposed that Mother Cartridge-Pouch be resurrected after three days of burial. But in the final version of the spectacle, the perils of ending on an elegiac note were evaded by means of a less bathetic device: a swift shift in focus away from the burial scene toward fascism's present achievements and future promise. The mother truck may have passed away, capitulating to the inexorable reality of aging, but fascism is always already on the move and the ideal of metallization she once embodied has been fully transposed into the human realm by il Duce.

The viewers of 18 BL did not need to have this final transposition explained to them. The most fleeting allusions would do. A metallic voice heard over loudspeakers, an equestrian profile, and a slogan or two were enough to insinuate that Mussolini was the spectacle's secret protagonist. Such economy of means was possible because by the mid 1930s fascism had begun to fill its ideological voids with a totalitarian cult. This was not a traditional cult of personality but rather a modernist cult of the dictator's metallized body as missile, as axe, as man of the crowd, as hero with a thousand faces, as helmet, as mask, as head with a 360-degree gaze (figs. 8 and 9). In this vast proliferation of images, fascist artists decomposed and recomposed fascism's most original though paradoxical creation: the myth of an individual who could stand at the center of a reconstructed universe; a being, at once hyperphallic and hyperchaste, who might reconcile man with machine, individual with mass, matter with spirit; a deus ex machina for the gigantic theater of modern revolution.

Notes

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4. Quoted from Lynn Mally, Culture of the Future: The Proletkult Movement in Revolutionary Russia (Berkeley, 1990), 125.
6. Platon Kerzhentsev, Creative Theater; cited in ibid., 45.


10. Due perhaps to his own affinities with fascism, Georges Bataille’s theorization is often stronger than that of the Frankfurt school. As a point of entry see “The Psychological Structure of Fascism,” in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, ed. Alan Stoekl (Minneapolis, 1985), 137–60.


12. These plays, entitled *Campos di maggio* (1930), *Villafranca* (1931), and *Cesare* (1939), are reprinted in Giovacchino Forzano, *Mussolini, autore drammatico* (Florence, 1954). De Felice comments: “There can be no doubt that . . . the three historical dramas resulting from Mussolini’s collaboration with Forzano bear witness to Mussolini’s tendency to projectively identify himself and his actions with history’s solitary man who is conscious not only of his great mission but also of having to accomplish it amidst the incomprehension and moral inadequacy of those who surround him and ought to have been of assistance; conscious also of having to act by capitalizing on and exploiting every opportunity in a more dramatic race event even than that against death: the race against ‘cyclical recursion’”; *Mussolini il duce, vol. I, Gli anni del consenso, 1929–1936* (Turin, 1974), 32.

13. On at least one occasion, Mussolini even found the time to make suggestions for the revision of a dramatic text: the tragedy *Simma*, by Francesco Pastonchi, to whom he offered the thought (borrowed from Anatole France): “Caress your sentence: she will end up smiling back at you”; cited in *Opera omnia di Benito Mussolini*, eds. Edoardo Susmel and Duilio Susmel (Rome, 1978), 42:92.


15. The best source on the history and teachings of the Filodrammatiche is *Il teatro filodrammatico* (Rome, 1929), edited by the “Ufficio Educazione Artistica della Direzione Centrale dell’OND,” but largely authored by Antonio Valente.

16. The philodramatic celebrations of political anniversaries were particularly criticized by the advocates of a modernist fascist theater. A case in point is Augusto Consorti: “These re-evocations (which can hardly be referred to as ‘representations’) ought to be harmonized with the same criteria that have guided the organizers of the
18. All the cited figures are from Scarpellini, Organizzazione teatrale, 249.
21. A complete technical overview of the Thesopian cars is found in Carro di Tespi, a pamphlet published by the Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro in 1936. Also worth consulting are Mario Corsi, Il teatro all'aperto in Italia (Milan, 1939), 263–88; and Orano, I Carri di Tespi.
27. Ibid.
28. As noted earlier, open-air spectacles were hardly invented by fascism. Following the lead of theorists such as Edward Gordon Craig and Sheldon Cheney, Ettore Romagnoli had, for instance, revived the Greek theater of Siracusa earlier in the century. But it was under fascism that open-air theater received a full consecration and governmental support (on which subject see Corsi, Il teatro all'aperto in Italia).
29. Scarpellini, Organizzazione teatrale, 67.
30. Cited in ibid., 149.
31. SIAE speech, Rome, 28 April 1933; Mussolini, Opera omnia, 44:51.
32. Ibid., 44:50.
36. Cited from page 9 of a letter addressed to Mussolini by Achille Starace, dated 19 March 1935, and written in response to a proposal by Cesare Maria De Vecchi, Minister of Public Instruction, that the GUF and Littoriali be placed under the supervision of his ministry; Benito Mussolini, personal papers, microfilm 815, reel 230 #1222, University of Chicago Library.
37. Starace to Mussolini, 19 March 1935, p. 4; in ibid.
38. Pavolini, “Fascisti giovani al lavoro,” Il bargello, 1 April 1934, 1.
39. Ibid.
41. Berta, son of the owner of the Berta foundries, was slain for appearing in a black shirt before the population of San Frediano (Florence's main proletarian neighbor-
hood) right after the fascists' murder of the communist leader Spartaco Lavagnini. Immortalized as a "martyr of the revolution" in fascist song, Berta would still figure in the central episode of act 2 of 18 BL, in which a commemoration of the fascist dead is accompanied by the singing of "Hanno ammazzato Giovanni Berta," a ballad promising faith in Mussolini and the defeat of Lenin.

42. The source for this idea may have been "Il vecchio camion" by Leo Bomba, published in the midst of L'italia vivente's campaign for a revolutionary fascist theater. Bomba, a fascist squadrist, had fondly recalled and, indeed, humanized the squadrons' trucks: "It's impossible to disentangle the memory of days past from that fast and noisy carcass which we never viewed merely as a means of transportation"; L'italia vivente 3, no. 18 (28 October 1933): 6–7.

43. See, for instance, Mario Sironi's collages The Yellow Truck (1919) and Urban Landscape with Truck (1920–23).

44. Corrado Sofia describes the compositional process in "Il parere di uno degli autori: TRADIMENTO!," Quadriovio, 6 May 1934, 3. In his tirade against collective authorship, Sofia subsequently claims that he produced a full screenplay of his own, even though the script preserved in the BA contains only five of the nine tableaux referred to in its title 18 BL: Mistero in 9 quadri.

45. Many decades later, Blasetti would assert that Mussolini had personally chosen him to direct the spectacle: ["Mussolini] imagined a show for a crowd of 20,000 spectators and he wanted me to direct it. I made a show called 18 BL, the name of a truck. . . . It was the biggest fiasco in the history of international theater. This was . . . the only time Blasetti received the congratulations of Mussolini. . . . He said: 'This has demonstrated a power of initiative, of force, of resistance, of steadfastness. Extraordinary'; cited in Elaine Mancini, Struggles of the Italian Film Industry During Fascism, 1930–35 (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1985), 113. Archival records indicate, on the contrary, that it was Pavolini who organized 18 BL and made the key personnel decisions.

46. The scripts preserved in BA are those of De Feo, Lisi, Melani, Sofia, and Venturini—the latter two serving as Blasetti's main sources. The degree to which Blasetti took it upon himself to introduce elements from his prior films into the final screenplay is hard to determine. In any event, the key modifications of the various scripts resulted from the practicalities of staging 18 BL.

47. The quotation is from Alberto Boero's first screenplay, cited from Sole: Soggetto, sceneggiatura, note per la realizzazione, ed. Adriano Aprà and Riccardo Redi (Rome, 1985), 27.


49. As Pavolini describes it, the enterprise was carried out with city and military help; "Fascisti giovani al lavoro," 1.


52. Ruggero Orlando, "Che cos'è '18 BL,'" La tribuna, 20 April 1934, 3.

53. Blasetti, "Prime considerazioni e proposte," typescript, March 1934, BA.

54. From an anonymous article, "Per lo spettacolo di masse," Il bargello, 4 March 1934, 3. Much of the post-performance polemic would hinge on the links to Eisenstein: "Blasetti wanted all the figures to be profiled against the sky, that is, in his usual manner, he imposed the cinematographic mannerism of viewing things from down
below à la Eisenstein . . . treating the spectators like the geese that inspired Eisen-
stein’s passé cinematic style”; Sofia, “Il parere di uno degli otto autori.” 7.
56. In an unsigned article published before the spectacle, Sofia had already expressed reservations:

The impact of such an innovation on theatrical and musical practices is hard to foresee. Given the exceptionally large number of spectators, Corrado Sofia, one of the creators of the ‘mystery play,’ had wished instead to nor-
malize the highlighted voices; several newspaperboys would have com-
mented upon the action as if the chorus in an ancient Greek play; events of cap-
ital importance would have been announced by means of a town crier; in the most allegorical and stylized scenes—the parliamentary banquet, for example—the banqueters would have employed megaphones to communi-
cate with the spectators. . . . The director decided instead to transmit even the choruses over loudspeakers by means of records, hoping to achieve an emotive force equivalent to that possessed by live voices and songs: an aim which, if successfully attained, will constitute a notable precedent.

“No clima dei giovani,” Il lavoro fascista, 28 April 1932, 3.
57. Blasetti, “Prime considerazioni e proposte: Parte sonora,” 2, BA.
59. Sergio Codelupi, “Un teatro per ventimila persone a Firenze,” Il telegrafo, 1 April 1934, 7.
61. General audience tickets cost 3 lire; reserved seating tickets cost 10, 25, or 50 lire. No free tickets were distributed, and the only discount available was for dopolavoristi, who could purchase 10 lire seats for only 8 lire.
62. Records concerning the makeup of the audience are lacking. Press reports note the presence of Florentine city leaders as well as Renato Ricci, Giacomò Paulucci di Cal-
boli, and Arturo Marpiciati. A note from Pavolini to Blasetti had promised that Edda Mussolini would accompany her husband Galeazzo Ciano to the performance.
63. Original plans were for a double boat bridge, as indicated in Mannucci and Tempes-
tini’s drawings and in documents contained in the BA; Blasetti to Giovanni Poli, protocol #39, p. 1. The dearth of boats ensured the adoption of a single bridge solution.
66. The first movement of Squilli e danze per il 18 BL is designated as a solenne, consisting in a series of trumpet calls accompanied by tam tams and slow drumming. Massari-
ani’s score was published in 1937 by Edizioni G. Ricordi in Milan.
67. In the original script (published in Gioventù Fascista) and in drafts preserved in the BA the truck was named Mamma Gloria and not Mamma Giberna. Sometime in late March, Blasetti must have decided to shift to the latter name.
68. The original plan was for two air squadrons to overfly the crowd. For reasons that may have to do with the one-week postponement of the performance (due to rain), these two squadrons were reduced either to several airplanes or to a single one. Blasetti’s notes read as follows: “The airplanes, criss-crossed by the multicolor beams of the photoelectric projectors, will scatter broadsheets from the Popolo d’Italia . . . for a given time, after which they will rapidly depart toward the left and right sides

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of the stadium. When they are far away, the stage lights will be relit and athletes will appear preceded by a lively orchestral prelude"; "Prime considerazioni," 2, BA.


70. It is worth noting that 1930s culture in Italy, whether fascist, apolitical, or antifascist, was haunted by the conviction that the future of art would hinge upon a resurgence of myth. In Bontempelli's words, "The most urgent task for our art is to forge new myths"; L'avventura novecentista (Florence, 1974), 261. 18 BL's revolutionary myth is thus part of a spectrum that extends from Bontempellian magic realism to the metaphysical corpus of Giorgio De Chirico and Alberto Savinio.

71. In a pre-performance interview, Blasetti would declare: "Movies have accustomed spectators to seeing things on a grand scale; they have habituated them to a sense of realism, to rapid shifts between scenes, to a vastness of spaces and horizons that that can offer those sensations to the public"; (Cipriano] G[iachetti], "I preparativi del teatro di masse," La nazione, 12 April 1934, 5.

72. The statement is again Blasetti's, from ibid.


74. In a contemporary debate, the director Anton Giulio Bragaglia had declared the paucity of words the defining attribute of the new mass theater: "Blasetti indicated to me that the words required for his spectacle will be few. And that perhaps many will be transmitted by loudspeaker, which means that even the tenuous residue of theatrical values will be mechanized. . . . Given the fact that the drama of every era has averaged twenty to thirty thousand words per play, this dearth will ensure that the Spectacle for Masses will be fundamentally distinct from the theater as we have known it"; "La parola nel teatro 'per ventimila'," Il giornale d'Italia, 28 April 1934, 3.

75. Earlier in the essay Sofia writes: "No stage, no stars, no dialogues encased within the usual three-sided walls. Not that the traditional theater ought to vanish . . . but we hope that the new theater will permit passions to be shared by the mass of spectators and the young actors who will act them out"; "Verso i Littoriali," 3.


77. Bontempelli's writings were later collected in L'avventura novecentista, 223-69; 270-94. It goes without saying that historical precursors were also invoked by 18 BL's creators. Sofia does not hesitate to define the work as a mystery play: "With modern means . . . we are attempting to compose a sacred representation that would place side by side on stage the passions of a people and its political faith"; "Verso i Littoriali," 3. Pavolini would reject all links to Roman and Renaissance pageantry but affirm that the "great theater of the ancient Greeks" was a worthy ancestor; "Fascisti giovani al lavoro," 3.


79. See, for example, "Verso i Littoriali," where Sofia states: "I am coordinating with Sandro De Feo the ideas put forward by a committee of squadristas, writers, students, and set designers" (3). The manuscripts contained in the BA suggest, to the contrary, that the roles of De Feo and Sofia in the drafting process were not unique.


81. Ibid., 4. Sofia also claimed that critics were guilty of a cover-up.


84. Blasetti’s response, “Ancora sul 18 BL,” appeared in La tribuna (15 May 1934): 3. It was preceded by Bomba’s “Tradimento . . . tradimento!,” which was followed by a brief final blast from Sofia; “Ultimi bagliori del 18 BL,” Quadrivio 2, no. 30 (20 May 1934): 4; and by an even-handed essay by Gherardo Gherardi, “Difendo Blasetti,” Il resto di carlino, 26 May 1934: 3.

85. Bontempelli, L’avventura novecentista, 265.

86. The best description of the closing moments is that of Giuseppe Longo: Men push together, but their combined strength is insufficient. Blasetti sends reinforcements but to no avail. Then he turns off the lights in order to conceal a cinematographic trick from the public (but it remains visible): Mother Cartridge-Pouch is being pushed by another truck. The trick was unrehearsed, but little does it matter since nearly three quarters of the audience members have already departed. At last the other trucks appear and cover the carcass with loads of dirt.

“18 BL a Firenze: Non è nato il teatro di massa,” Gazzetta di Messina, 4 May 1934, 3.

87. The anecdote is reported by Silvio D’Amico in “Teatro di masse: 18 BL,” in Cronache del teatro 2 (1964): 285. Such hostility does not seem to have been prevalent, however. In a letter to the author dated 14 April 1992, Luigi Preti (who at the time was a teenager) reports: “The young people were in large measure enthusiastic about 18 BL because of Blasetti’s excellent directorial skills, even if most didn’t understand it fully.”

88. Ugo Ojetti, I taccuini, 1914–1943 (Florence, 1954), 435. Cf. Giuseppe Longo: “It is not without danger that one places at the center of a heroic enterprise an inanimate being. . . . For reasons of temperament we Latins are not predisposed to exalting machinery”; “18 BL a Firenze.”


90. René Fülöp-Miller, Il volto del bolscevismo, trans. Giacomo Prampolini (2nd ed.; Milan, 1931), 20–21. Published with a preface by Curzio Malaparte, Fülöp-Miller’s book was reprinted several times during the late 1920s and early 1930s.

91. Eisenstein’s films never underwent general distribution, but their influence was, nonetheless, considerable judging by the films exhibited at the fascist Littoriali. As for his theoretical writings, L’Italia letteraria, for instance, ran a two-part essay entitled “Della forma cinematografica” in its 28 May 1934 (p. 5) and 4 June 1934 (p. 5) issues.


93. A detailed eyewitness account of the spectacle can be found in Huntley Carter, The New Theatre and Cinema of Soviet Russia (New York, 1970), 106–9; but see also Fülöp-Miller, Il volto del bolscevismo, 96–97, who notes that “a writers’ and directors’ collective worked on it and developed it” (96).

94. Fülöp-Miller, Il volto del bolscevismo, 97.
95. For a comparative study of mass theater in Soviet Russia, the Weimar Republic, and Nazi Germany, see Hannelore Wolff, Volksabstimmung auf der Bühne?: Das Massentheater als Mittel politischer Agitation (Frankfurt, 1985).

96. This doubling extends even to the spectacle’s songs. “Hanno ammazzato Giovanni Berta,” for instance, would have been familiar to the audience of 18 BL in both black and red flavors. In the soundtrack its first verses were:

They have killed Giovanni Berta
a fascist among fascists,
revenge, yes, revenge
shall befall the communists.

In the communist version it would have opened:

They have killed Giovanni Berta
son of a war profiteer:
long live the communist
who stomped on his hands.

Cited from Canti dell’Italia fascista, 1919–1945, ed. A. V. Savona and M. L. Straniero (89–90). Such doublings are endemic: “The fascist repertory distinguishes itself far less than it would have liked from the contemporaneous antifascist and democratic repertory. Indeed, it often adopts the same tonalities and the same linguistic clichés, and on occasion even had recourse to the same songs, which underwent only minimal modification” (5).


98. Since Florentine municipal records for this period are incomplete, it is difficult to establish the precise contribution made by city authorities. The Azienda Autonoma di Turismo di Firenze contributed at least 100,000 lire to the budget of the Littoriali, according to documents found in Florence’s Archivio di Storia. The Comune of Florence also covered the electrical bill at the Parterre San Gallo, and allocated 35,000 lire for “the preparation of some segments of Argin Grosso, Mortuli, and Isolotto streets” (quoted from a document, dated 2 March 1934, signed by the Podestà Paolo Pesciolini, Archivio di Storia, Florence Prefecture, General Affairs, series 2, 1934, file 87, envelope 2202).

99. Cited from “Prime considerazioni e proposte: Ufficio,” BA.

100. Orlando, “Prove di 18 BL,” 3.

101. The metaphor of “metallization,” central to Marinetti’s writings, is cited in the epilogue to Walter Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”: “War is beautiful because it initiates the dreamt-of metallization of the human body”; Illuminations, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York, 1976), 241. The metaphor also figures prominently in the writings examined by Theweleit in Male Fantasies and in works such as Ernst Jünger’s In Stahlgeschirren (aus dem Tagebuch eines Stosstruppführers) (Berlin, 1931).

102. One contemporary press account presents the 18 BL as the founding ancestor of Italian mass transportation; C[urio] M[ortari], “Teatro di masse: Lo spettacolo di stasera a Firenze,” La stampa, 29 April 1934, 4.

103. Salomé is identified with the so-called donna crisi to be contrasted with the donna madre/truck, on which subject see Victoria de Grazia, How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy, 1922–1945 (Berkeley, 1992), 212–13. De Grazia notes: “To respond to the aesthetic mayhem unleashed by commercial culture, the fascist propaganda machine, with
Mussolini's approbation, championed its own standards of female beauty: one ideal, the 'crisis woman,' was negative; the other, whom we might call 'authentic woman,' was positive" (212).

104. In 1860 Blasetti had employed this same principle to even greater effect. Garibaldi, the true protagonist of the film, appears in only a handful of frames and, when he does, his presence is fleeting.