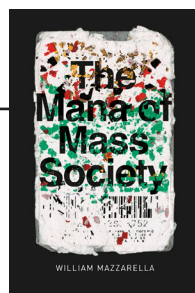


NEW RELEASE BOOK REVIEW

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William Mazzarella, *The Mana of Mass Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017. 224 pp.

The deepest questions, perhaps, animating the anthropological imagination are those about the motives that make people act, so consistently and recognizably over time, in all those ways that are, inadequately, called “cultural.” What forces give form and objective reality to the repeated, seemingly rehearsed, and yet ever-new and vital performances of everyday life? In the late 19th century, such questions were asked especially about apparently irrational magic, fetishistic attachments, carefully observed taboos, and all the panoply of practices that for self-consciously civilized Europeans escaped the grasp of positive, materialistic, scientific explanation. How could such beliefs and practices—as they may be found in “Australia, Africa, and Scotland” (Frazer 1994:28)—be compatible with the dignity of the human intellect (to say nothing of the salvation of the soul)?

The term *mana* is a hardy survivor of this history, as both an item of “native” belief and a scholarly analytic. The missionary Robert Codrington, author of the Victorian compendium *The Melanesians* (1891), is usually credited with introducing it into anthropology as the Melanesians’ own term for a magical “force altogether distinct from physical power, which acts in all kinds of ways for good and evil” (as quoted in Tomlinson and Tengan 2016:3). In fact, this definition was already in circulation among Europeans from 1877, as a “native” explanation of magic, when the Sanskritist Max Müller quoted it from his correspondence with Codrington. In the hands of the French ethnologues Marcel Mauss and Henri Hubert, *mana* was recast not as an item of native belief, but as the very intellectual foundation of magic, “a completely universal affirmation of magical

power” (Mauss 2001:155). Shortly thereafter, more literal-minded scholars began to question its general applicability and even its local presence in this or that community of practitioners of magic. Exhausted by such empirical niceties, the high point of mana’s popularity had already passed by 1950, when Lévi-Strauss (1987) demoted it to the status of an empty signifier floating atop a reservoir of semiotic powers, a fundamentally non-scientific concept that took on the cast or coloring of whatever it happened to come near. Since then, however, the term with all its shifting coloration and wide resonance has never ceased to exert a fascination. It has remained available for use by any anthropologist who wants to allude to some animating force, some vital principle, some excessive power inherent in things or practices, and to do so with both ethnological specificity and general reach. A scholar like Marshall Sahlins can thus write that “the *mana* of the social contract lies in symbolism itself” and trust that he will be understood to be making a point about aspects of Fijian kingship *and* one about fundamentals of social and political life (1983:74).

In his new book, *The Mana of Mass Society*, William Mazzarella turns back to the archive of anthropological speculations about mana, in just this spirit of comparison. This book is the latest entry in Mazzarella’s career-long task of developing a “political anthropology of mass publicity” in order to understand “the place of affective intensities in modern mass democracies” (2013:3–4, 2003). A line of comparative thoughts and evaluations links “primitive” magic and mana to mass democracy and mass marketing, he observes. Most anthropologists will know that Durkheim compared the power of the “primitive” totem to that exercised over citizens by the national flag, and that Malinowski compared Trobriand beauty magic to the “advertisements of modern beauty specialists,” seeking parallels between “modern and primitive savagery” (as quoted in Mazzarella 2017:33–34). Such parallels, Mazzarella notes, were seldom meant to flatter anyone, and they have hardly disappeared from our contemporary political discourse. Current allusions to tribalism and magical thinking are as close as the latest op-eds and headlines. But Mazzarella wants to show that such comparisons and the judgments they provoke constitute a kind of diagnostic of mass society itself, and the conditions of subjectivity within it. Thus, he asks: “Are there nonprejudicial ways of thinking magic and mass publicity together?” (35).

The Mana of Mass Society is divided into two parts, of two chapters each, along with a longish introduction which situates its interventions in

relation to contemporary affect theory, the new materiality, and other currents in anthropology and beyond. The first part examines the many uses to which mana has been put in anthropology, as “an alternative anthropological genealogy for contemporary debates around the place of affect in social life and theory” (65). The second turns to a close engagement with critical theory, especially the work of the Theodor Adorno and the Frankfurt School. Mazzarella’s argument, however, tacks back and forth across these two parts, linking them together with constant anticipations of and returns to the terms of the other.

In the first part, he describes with verve the anthropological settlements that treated mana either as a name for some general features of “primitive” or “magical” thought, or as a local, indigenous concept responding to particular social and historical conditions. He calls these, respectively, the “primitive” and the “empiricist” settlements, and shows how they both tried to restrict the powers of mana to one side of an opposition between culture, which *they* have in full, and alienated mass society, where we live. As the routine comparisons made by Malinowski, Durkheim, and many others indicate, anthropological knowledge could never sequester itself from either its own context of production or the alluring difference of non-Western analytics like mana. Mazzarella notes in his introduction, however, that the ambition remains; contemporary anthropology has continued to isolate native magical practices in closed worlds, as the sign of their distinct ontologies and radical difference, while critical theory still constructs stories of a universal destiny of regimentation and soulless instrumentality (17). Mana disrupts these settlements, old and new.

In his second part, Mazzarella explores the specific restriction operative in critical theory’s uses of mana. “Having borrowed the concept [of mana] from Mauss and Hubert” (122) for the purposes of understanding modern societies, the Frankfurt School cabined its real power within the work of art, opposing the latter to the “commodity fetish”—that is, the rank ideological illusion and social control they identified with the circulating images of mass publicity. Mazzarella calls this their “aesthetic settlement.” Here again Mazzarella’s foil is present-day theory: now, the turn to affect as a non-cognitive, immanent energy that shapes the subject of mass society (that is to say, all of us, consuming advertisements, gazing at devices, and mimicking the styles and gestures of cinema icons). As we will see, the Frankfurt School’s account of the work of art provides him with a pointed critique of affect theory.

Mazzarella's task is distinctly a genealogical one, however, not an intellectual history or a "reactionary appeal for a return to anthropological fundamentals" (25).¹ Throughout, his conceptual exploration is many-threaded and tightly woven, with mana serving as a lure, a symptom, a "red thread" or a repeating pattern leading our eye constantly back to its stakes for understanding mass society. Overall, he wants to shift debates about mass publicity and the routines of mass democracy alike away from questions about "adequate ways of knowing" (65)—that is, whether and how the "magic" of advertising and political rhetoric, or the fetishism of the commodity, might mislead people or dupe them. We cannot understand mass publicity, he insists throughout, while leaving aside the knowing subject and his or her critical faculties. Mazzarella thus challenges us to think beyond disillusioned, and disillusioning, critique of forces of production, as well as narrow attention to affect or materiality, insofar as these approaches both evade problems of interpretation and subjective meaning. Mana and its circulations also "need to be considered from the side of the subject" (19).

Let us go back to the beginning, and follow now across these two sections Mazzarella's alternative "dialectical vitalist" account of the subject of mass society, one in which mana will play a constructive role as a name for both the source of social powers, and the critical energy to know them. He begins his counter-attack with the ontological claim that "*encounter is primary*" (5, emphasis in original). There is no subject *and also no object* without a mutually determining encounter in which these two emerge and are differentiated as such. He borrows the term "constitutive resonance" (5) from Peter Sloterdijk to describe this mutual relation, and further posits that the material and subjective layering of these encounters results in a "mimetic archive" available for analysis and critique ("mimetic archive" is Mazzarella's more affectively rich and processual alternative to "culture"). This archive is "embedded not only in the explicitly articulated forms commonly recognized as cultural discourses but also in built environments and material forms, in the concrete history of the senses, and in the habits of our shared embodiment" (8). But, crucially, the relations sustained to this "archive" are themselves *not* purely affective, embodied, or non-cognitive.

Mazzarella buttresses this first argument by making repeated returns to Durkheim's discussions of collective effervescence and ritual participation. These encompass under a singular description what other philosophies would treat as contradictory impulses toward life and order:

the self-cancelling energetics of affective participation in a collective or a crowd, on the one hand, and the sense of social form granted by a structuring consciousness, a critical intelligence, or simply a self-distancing gesture, on the other. Building on Durkheim, Mazzarella puts the affective appeal of advertisements or political rhetoric in conversation with the necessity—if they are going to do their work—that lots of people engage with them from different perspectives and points of view. He brands his method a “dialectical vitalism” (14–15, 69), insofar as it involves attending to *both* the circulating object or affective impulsion and the subjective grasp of the conditions of its production. He stipulates, building on Žižek, that it is often enough our very critical, self-conscious relation to the products of mass publicity that allows us to enjoy and even participate in the potentials that inhere in them: “my supposedly immunizing critical skepticism allows me to resonate in good conscience” (119).

A telling moment which reveals the stakes of this method for both anthropological and theoretical critique comes about two-thirds of the way through the book. Mazzarella makes passing mention of Raymond Williams, saying that despite Williams’s nuanced critiques of ideological forms he still held out hope for a more “sensible relation” to advertisements in which people would finally accept that “a beer is really just a refreshing drink that might make you a bit tipsy, not a virility enhancer” (117). For Mazzarella, this leaves no room for irony, mockery, or simple lack of interest, and situates the consumer as someone naively adhering to images and their enticements, much as the “primitive” was once thought to believe in magical forces connecting things across space and time. Moreover, Williams insists that escaping this circuit of persuasion demands a disillusioned materialism. “Williams accuses consumers not of being too materialistic but of not being materialistic *enough*” (117, emphasis in original).

This rather pugnacious observation—Williams *accuses*—summarizes the lesson that Mazzarella derives for contemporary anthropology and critical theory alike, fascinated by the mana of materiality and “thing theory,” from his journey back in time to the mana moment, proper. If the reduction of advertising and mass publicity to pure ideological suasion is inadequate, positing some real relation to things (whether via Marx or via Deleuze) is no better. Materialism can only take us so far. Neither demystifying critique nor a purely descriptive accounting of the materiality and circulation of the goods of modernity can capture what is at stake in encounters between thinking, feeling subjects and the objects that animate

their passions. Neither offers any way to examine the actual efficacy of marketing or mass communications, their distinctive mana.

Through his close reading of Adorno, finally, Mazzarella tries to draw the two seemingly parallel lines of his own critique together: the one oriented against the “paranoid style in mass cultural analysis” (104), which sees creeping illusion and alienation everywhere, and the other oriented against the “non-dialectical” vitalism of contemporary affect theory, which celebrates immanent, emergent potential inherent in non-cognitive attachments and impersonal affective pulsions. He finds purchase for this effort of overcoming and moving-beyond in a surprising place in Adorno’s work: his vigorous defense of the (Kantian) autonomy of art against the (Hegelian-Marxist) subordination of art to history.

Adorno’s account of the autonomy of the artwork stands in dialectical tension with the very possibility of the autonomy of the subject. It would be a mistake, Mazzarella says, to take these mutual autonomies as the reciprocal illusions of a certain historical and ideological moment—as merely projections of an alienating mode of production, for instance. For Adorno, the autonomy of art, as a critical precept, serves a necessary dialectical purpose, one that starts from the work of art’s own contingent materiality and historical conditions of emergence, but opens up to the subject’s critical grasp of those conditions: “art is the social antithesis of society” (as quoted in Mazzarella 2017:131).

Adorno, thus, should not be read as simply carving out a special domain for art, independent of the wider social conditions of subjectivity. Rather, he is engaged in a conscious extension of “Kant’s human ethics to our human relations to objects” (123). This further involves asserting the “primacy of the object” in a dialectical process that unwinds both within the subject and between it and its objects. Mazzarella explains that Adorno’s claims for the autonomy of art rested on a highly modernist account of artistic creation as an encounter between a subjective intention and the given materials that are to be transformed, which have their own historical and social determinants (125). If for Adorno only the art-object can serve the critical function or sustain this primacy in a world of mass-produced commodities, for Mazzarella the point needs to be extended to embrace all the media and circulating images produced by mass society.

To suppose that the mana of the materials out of which mass cultural products are made will be completely regimented once it enters

into public circulation simply because it has been subordinated to an instrumental logic during the production process grants an entirely implausible degree of totalizing power—I would like to say magical power—to the commodity form. (133)

By generalizing aesthetic distance and object primacy, or what Benjamin calls the “aura” of the work of art, as a property of all object-subject encounters, Mazzarella wins at last the ability to claim that there is a kind of “mana” inherent in the objects of mass society. But he also loses by the same token, I think, much of the necessary ground for making the kinds of distinctions that he explicitly wants to be able to make, namely distinguishing between “good” and “bad” object primacy (125), or “why certain encounters cause us to resonate and not others” (20). That is, my concern is that Mazzarella’s sweeping generalization of mana to mass society also seems to involve the loss, or the abjuration, of the capacity to make any aesthetic distinctions at all. In fact, nowhere in this entire book does Mazzarella engage at any length—scattered examples aside—in the description or interpretation of a specific object, advertisement, or work of art. Mazzarella acknowledges that “of course both Adorno and Benjamin have plenty to say about particular works of art” (123); but for himself, he seems to think that this exercise is a detour, a dead end even, insofar as it involves treating art, image, or cultural product as either a fetish or an end in itself—that is, either interpreting it away or taking it at face value. Perhaps these are not the only alternatives, but we would have to undertake some close interpretation to find out.

Without any specific work to do, the mana of mass society remains only a generalized resonance, a general dialectic between energy and form, between (collective) subject and mass object. Mazzarella refuses any distinctions between objects—all are equally available to, and primary in, resonant encounter—and ultimately leaves both halves of his dialectical account (the political and the aesthetic) in tantalizing, and productive, suspension, still awaiting any worldly demonstration of the sort that mana, paradigmatically, always demands (magic may be self-confirming, and mana might be the principle of that confirmation, but the trick has to be performed, nevertheless).

In his closing chapter, Mazzarella does shift toward a more evaluative, more judgmental register, exploring the role of mana in mass politics as a way to understand “appallingly routinized spectacles of mass violence

in the name of piety and patriotism" (141). The point of reference is not further specified, but we might note that charisma and the intermittent activation of resonant potentials in mass publics are, of course, starkly at issue in the US today, as well as in India and across Eastern Europe. "Modern" democracies have not for some time teetered so close to chthonic sources of untamed power. As we grapple with our own mana moment of populism, proliferating political ritual, and digital mediation, Mazzarella suggests that we should think more deeply about the historical particularity of a mode of governance that comprises—we have perhaps only begun to realize in what unstable proportions—"a form of self-determination that is at once corporate and anonymous, collective and distributed over vast distances" (162–163).

Here, mana comes into its own, anew, as an analytic—as opposed to charisma or fetish. Through his theoretical account of mana, Mazzarella provides us with an important tool for moving beyond standard laments about modern "tribalism" and the loss of a sacred or transcendent political community (as in recent broadsides against "identity politics"). Focusing instead on what he calls the "fractalization" (159) of affective intensities, Mazzarella indicates that our contemporary communicative impasses are inherent in techniques of mass publicity that cultivate fractures in the body politic while at the same time and through the self-same techniques achieving a totalizing, simultaneous address across them (or at least, the effect of such address). Important as this kind of insight remains, a different kind of analysis from Mazzarella's—dare I say, a more cultural one—would not rest content here, and might go on to explore the *interpretive* problems of legitimacy and efficacy that the mass-democratic mana-relation raises, as particular resonant potentials are activated in specific performances, and as these legitimate new orderings of power and authority. Identifying the historical particularity of mass democracy might involve, that is, making some formal distinctions—between parts and wholes—and identifying divisions across which and through which mana does its work. Indeed, it is a key point of Mazzarella's reading that mana both animates and blurs distinctions between community and polity, sacred and profane, and "primitive and modern savagery," but the collective judgments involved in making these distinctions in the first place are themselves integral to the work of mana.

The nub of the problem, I think, with both Mazzarella's aesthetic and his political claims, can be found in his close theoretical attention to "encounter,"

which keeps him tied to an individualistic account of subjectivity. There is surprisingly little mass, and no structure, in his account of mass society and its mimetic archives. His contribution, quite self-consciously, lies entirely in the focus he directs to the mutual constitution of subjects and objects. How they are ordered, and reordered, and the efficacy of the forms they assume, slips from view. That is, Mazzarella foregrounds questions of *urgency* rather than coherence (65); as for instance when he writes that an encounter “prompts *me* [not ‘us’] to exclaim ‘this speaks to me!’” (154, emphasis added). Further, what he calls “the social dialectic between historically layered, sensuously resonant potentials and their renewed...actualization in discourse, built form, and social practice” (147) can only appear as “contingent” if viewed as an individuated encounter between object and subject (154). If *mana* cannot be directly experienced (as Mauss stipulates), the occasions it animates, the matter it shapes, and the performances it allows to be “pulled off” (and those it does not), must still be named and described.² *Mana*, as Mazzarella very well knows, is a principle of *efficacy* (158, citing Hocart), and in the absence of any evaluation of occasions when it does work or *does its work*, the analysis remains incomplete.

Of course, Mazzarella is less interested in criticism (in the evaluative, connoisseurial sense of that word) than in the social-theoretical work, the negative dialectic, that the very notion of the “primacy of the object” can set in play in relation to the fiction of the autonomous subject, and how this can guide us to understand the making and unmaking of “worlds.” He even calls this potentiating dialectic the “mana of the primacy of the object” (135). Such social-theoretical labor may well be the particular vocation of contemporary anthropology; on these terms Mazzarella successfully argues that mass society has a *mana* of its own, and that the affective resonances between its subjects and objects deserve more specific attention. These resonant experiences need not be pleasant, eudaimonic ones—the attachments produced in and by capitalist mass culture can often be cruel (Berlant 2011). But it is important to be reminded that the aesthetic phenomena of late capitalism are not exclusively—as so much critical theory inadvertently can imply (see, e.g., Parr 2013)—*consequences* of destruction, displacement, and dispossession, but also involve *constitutions* of subjectivity and of environments. Mazzarella has given us good grounds for thinking more about the constitutive resonances of capitalist aesthetics.

A final observation about how this all stands in relation to the ongoing history of anthropology. Mauss closed *The Gift* (1990) with a litany of the

domains of social life that were knit together by the circulating, magical objects of the Trobriand *kula* trade and the institution of the ceremonial gift—law, economy, religion, etc. He went on to say, moreover, that “these [gift] institutions have an important aesthetic aspect that we have deliberately omitted from this study” (1990:79). No total social fact, Mauss insisted, can be understood without understanding the “aesthetic emotion” which it incites, and yet he omitted that aspect from his study and even neglected it in his conclusions (perhaps because “aesthetics” seemed too psychological for a treatise on economic interest and the social contract). Mauss’s relative caution about exploring the aesthetic “side” of the gift was likely also, in part, an attempt to avoid notions of primitive, pre-logical “participation” or magical vulnerability to the mysterious powers of things, such as those that marked so many “mana-moment” ethnological comparisons.³ Whatever his motivations, Mauss thus skirted in this essay any extended consideration of the aesthetic dimension of collective life. It is perhaps for this very reason that *The Gift* has been so foundational for anthropology as a science of culture. Mazzarella has well begun the work of returning that dimension to primacy. ■

Endnotes:

¹If anything, he makes too little of the contrast that mana and those anthropological fundamentals offer to the critical notion of the commodity fetish (82–86).

²I am thinking, by way of contrast, of Parvis Ghassem-Fachandi’s (2012:170) argument that a consumerist imperative to *Enjoy! Enjoy!*, first an advertising slogan for Coca-Cola in India, served also to legitimate anti-Muslim violence in Gujarat, as it was sutured together with a sequence of other enticements and incitements.

³See Mauss (1990:104 n.54) distinguishing Levy-Bruhl’s notion of “participation” as based in “confusion and muddle” as opposed to Mauss’s own description of “legal identifications and communal procedures.” Mazzarella’s second chapter, his genealogy of the “primitive settlement” worked out around mana and its exclusions, could be understood as a long defense of “participation,” on Levy-Bruhl’s terms, as an integral part of the experience and analysis of mass society.

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