

University of Helsinki
Social and Cultural Anthropology Visiting Seminars 2015-16
14:15 – 15:45 on Fridays
Unioninkatu 35 Room 114

25.9.2015 Professor William T.S. Mazzarella (Professor of Anthropology, University of Chicago):

‘The Mana of Mass Publicity’

Advertising has frequently been called a kind of modern magic. But what if we were to take the metaphor literally? In this paper, I suggest that classic anthropological theories of magic and magical action are not only ‘good to think with’ when it comes to understanding the making and circulation of forms of mass publicity like advertising and propaganda. Rather, I demonstrate that these anthropological theories of magic – in their concern with the relation between religion and sorcery, the sacred and the profane, and ritual and technique – are in fact inseparable from parallel attempts to understand the emergence of mass publicity: for example, the anthropological invention of ‘primitive ritual’ is incomprehensible without reference to the contemporary sociological concern with containing crowd energies. Along the way, I explore the possibility that there is something to be recuperated in that speculative moment of anthropological thinking which, following the professionalization of the discipline under the sign of ethnographic fieldwork, has too glibly been dismissed as ‘armchair anthropology.’ As such, this paper attempts a reanimation of classic anthropological terms via critical-theoretical takes on the political aesthetics of consumer capitalism and the public sphere. At stake across these domains is how we understand the incitement and containment of the potentials of collective energy.