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## **Entertaining the Gods, Appeasing Ourselves: René Girard's Theories of Sacrifice and Reality TV's *America's Next Top Model***

by  
**Claire M.C. Blackstock**

[T]here is...hardly any form of violence that cannot be described in terms of sacrifice.<sup>1</sup>

*America's Next Top Model* is one of the more popular reality television programs to have hit the scene since the rise of reality TV beginning in the late 1990s. The program is currently in its ninth cycle, having run on UPN from 2003 to 2006, and then on the fledgling network, the CW, since 2006.<sup>2</sup> The show follows a familiar format: a group of ten or so contestants are chosen and whisked away to a private house where they will live together, exposed to the camera's eye for the duration of the contest. Each episode details "challenges" the models must undertake—competing to see who will do the best photo shoot, give the best interview, or shine in an acting class. At the end of the episode, usually one model is eliminated by a panel of judges. The last model standing at the end of the cycle wins. At first glance this show seems a veritable piece of eye- and brain-candy: it requires no thinking and the contestants are very pretty to look at. But as a cultural consumer I can't leave it at that. The way these women—their bodies and their lives—are being violently used, and the way American viewers eat up this programming without so much as batting an eyelash, is truly disturbing. This performance must satisfy something more than simple voyeuristic desires.

The working premise of this paper will be that it is impossible to entirely separate culture from religion, and religion from culture, even in avowedly secular parts of American culture such as prime time television. With the advent of reality TV, it would seem that we've made a religion of the personal, and the sacred is now the "truth" of reality. While some scholars have

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<sup>1</sup> René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (New York: Continuum, 2005) 1.

<sup>2</sup> *The CW*, The CW Television Network, 2006 <<http://www.cwtv.com/shows/americas-next-top-model>>.

undertaken an analysis of reality TV in terms of itself, of turning ourselves into spectacles,<sup>3</sup> only a few have ventured to question the sacrificial nature of many of the programs, and the religious undertones that this provokes. *America's Next Top Model* (ANTM) is a prime example of a sacrificial system that is alive and well within our media culture. Through the lens of René Girard's theories of the sacrificial crisis, mimetic rivalry, and the "monstrous double," I suggest that this program in particular feeds a sacrificial system that allows Americans to isolate and distance ourselves from the threatening Other, creating a way to deny the abject self. In essence, I contend that Girard's impulse that the violence of the founding murder never fully disappears is correct. While Girard believes that society can "evolve" from "primitive" ritual to the "rationale" of the modern justice system,<sup>4</sup> I suggest (for the moment taking on Girard's own mindset of seeking basic forms) that these "primitive" tendencies for ritual sacrifice have instead dissipated into other realms of society and culture: namely, popular entertainment.

The most succinct critique of this nature comes from a recent political cartoon for the *Houston Chronicle*, showing a scrawny young man being eaten alive by two ferocious lions in a coliseum-type setting. Above the ring hangs a sign that says, "American Idol Tryouts." One spectator in the audience says to another, "Do you ever stop and wonder what this says about our society?"<sup>5</sup> The cartoonist evokes a well-worn image in our popular cultural lore: that of the martyr being thrown to the lions. Here, the sacrificial violence of reality TV is cleanly exposed, and we laugh! But if it is true that something more sinister is going on here, then we must ask, What is the purpose of this performance? For whom or for what does reality TV perform? For a sacrificial ritual to be considered just that, there must be something divine to whom the performance is dedicated, and it must create and order the cosmos. Who is the god of our secular TV culture, and what kind of cosmological order does it create?

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<sup>3</sup> For example, see Jonathan Bignell, *Big Brother: Reality TV in the Twenty-first Century*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 16-17.

<sup>5</sup> Nick Anderson, cartoon, *Houston Chronicle* 19 Jan. 2007. View this cartoon online in Nick Anderson's cartoon archives at <<http://blogs.chron.com/nickanderson/archives/2007/01/>>.

At the end of *Violence and the Sacred*, René Girard alludes to a "crisis" that is to soon plague modern society, and invites those who've got a grasp on his theory of the surrogate victim<sup>6</sup> to "expose the role played by violence in human society."<sup>7</sup> While Girard contends that the surrogate victim is the basis of all religious systems, and can be "scientifically" traced throughout all "primitive" religions, he also, at the conclusion of this work, claims that as secular institutions evolve, people gradually draw away from violence. However, as he ominously concludes, violence can stage a comeback. My claim is that the violence of the sacrifice of the surrogate victim is alive and well, whether this "comeback" is in the process of waxing or waning; only, at this point it is non-centralized. We can find it in the current "war on terror," the justice system, and of course on reality TV.

ANTM stages such a sacrifice of the surrogate victim, prettily clothed in the glamour of high fashion and TV celebrity culture. In helping us understand the importance of this sacrificial structure, Susan J. Douglas outlines how the boom of reality TV directly corresponds to the media's response to 9/11 and its aftermath:

After 9/11, when one would have expected the nightly news programs to provide a greater focus on international news, attention to the rest of the world was fleeting, with the exception of the war in Iraq. After a precipitous decline in celebrity and lifestyle news in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 catastrophe, a year later the percentages of these stories in the nightly news were back to where they had been pre-9/11. In 2004, despite the war, the percentage of stories about foreign affairs on the commercial nightly news broadcasts was lower than it had been in 1997.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 83. "The surrogate victim stands in for the community in ritual sacrifice. A single victim can be substituted for all the potential victims, for all the enemy brothers that each member is striving to banish from the community; he can be substituted, in fact, for each and every member of the community. Each members' hostility, caused by clashing against others, becomes converted from an individual feeling to a communal force unanimously directed against a single individual."

<sup>7</sup> Ibid 336.

<sup>8</sup> Susan J. Douglas, "The Turn Within: The Irony of Technology in a Globalized World," *American Quarterly* 58.3 (2006): 619.

Reality TV allows Americans to turn within ourselves, rather than examine the outside world, let alone our relationship to it. Douglas continues:

The preferred discourse of the whole genre is one that celebrates a determined isolationism, a luxuriant self-absorption. It was the discourse of reality TV in particular that legitimated, after the initial aftermath of 9/11, a preference for the microscopic rather than the telescopic properties of communications technologies.<sup>9</sup>

The ritual structure that reality TV implements is one of a closed community that believes itself to represent the entirety of creation, or at least the center of the universe. This is the key to understanding a secular institution or practice as religious.

Because we have turned within as a response to violence, Americans have also looked to the inside community for the Girardian scapegoat. True, we have pursued Osama bin Laden, and, in a confusing turn of events supported by dexterous reasoning, succeeded in capturing Saddam Hussein and celebrated his execution, but these two figures have come up surprisingly lacking in playing the role of scapegoat. As Girard rightly informs us, "When unappeased, violence seeks and always finds a surrogate victim. The creature that excited its fury is abruptly replaced by another, chosen only because it is vulnerable and close at hand."<sup>10</sup> But we are a modern people, not the primitives that Girard discusses! Thus, our sacrifice is veiled by the operation of entertainment, a diaphanous but effective cover-up of the ritual and religious nature of our games. In addition, figures like bin Laden and Hussein are too distant from our internal musings. Humiliating would-be supermodels is a much more satisfactory and titillating enterprise.

Girard writes that

any community that has fallen prey to violence or has been stricken by some overwhelming catastrophe hurls itself blindly into the search for a scapegoat. Its members instinctively seek an immediate and violent cure for the onslaught of

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<sup>9</sup> Douglas 633.

<sup>10</sup> Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 2.

unbearable violence and strive desperately to convince themselves that all their ills are the fault of a lone individual who can be easily disposed of.<sup>11</sup>

It is the "loneness" of the individual that is the subject of reality TV programs like ANTM. As the program portrays the "story," each model is in the contest for herself; she does not know who to become friends with, who will be her enemy. They live together like sacrificial doves in a vendor's cage beside the temple. The victim—the model who gets eliminated from the contest at the end of each show—is somewhat arbitrarily chosen by the panel of judges. The "contest" is only a prescribed form to allow for the catharsis of the sacrifice. The violence of the sacrifice, however, does not actually take place at this ending judgment; the length of the show itself is one, slow, torturous descent of the sacrificial blade, each model innocently quivering beneath its tip, not knowing who will be the lone victim. Lest nonintimates with the show suspect exaggeration on my part, the following is a list of scenes involving pain, violence, and death, whether real or implicated, from just one recap episode:<sup>12</sup>

- A film crew followed one contestant, suffering from a toothache, into the dentist's chair where she endured the extraction of a wisdom tooth. The scene included close-ups of her bloody tooth and her convulsed, tearful face.
- During a makeover, one model was given a hair-weave that lasted over eight hours. At the end, the show's creator, former Victoria's Secret model Tyra Banks, decided that the weave wasn't working and ordered it removed, which entailed cutting the weave way, along with the model's natural hair. The model looked and sounded miserable, weeping at the loss of her hair (sometimes the key to a model's paycheck).
- Another model with a successful hairweave later tearfully described the pounding headaches created by the tight, pulling stitches on her scalp.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid 84.

<sup>12</sup> "Episode 10, Cycle 8," *America's Next Top Model*, created by Tyra Banks, produced by The CW Television Network, 28 Feb. 2007.

- During one hair-and-make-up session before a photo shoot, a model's ear was badly burned by a curling iron; the cameraperson made sure we saw the scorched skin.
- One model got painful, purple frostbite on her fingertips after posing nude while clutching scoops of ice-cream. She said nothing during the shoot for fear of inciting anger or being thought weak.
- The show included several verbal fights between the contestants, which, although not resulting in physical combat, still constitutes a form of violence.
- Perhaps the most disturbing was the "Fashion Crime Scene" photo shoot, where each model was made up to look as if she'd suffered a violent demise. Noteworthy was the model in a black evening gown photographed as if she'd been shot through the head against a wall in a parking garage. Another appeared to have been strangled and thrown down a fire-escape, her limbs draped listlessly through the iron bars. Ironically, this was the model who lost the photo-shoot challenge for failing to give the camera "sparkle." Apparently she failed because she looked too dead.
- At the end of each episode in cycle eight, the viewer sees a still group photo of all the contestants. One by one, each model that has been eliminated slowly fades then disappears. Not only does this disappearance connote a symbolic death, but the costumes of the models, which consist of thin strips of gauzy fabric wrapped strategically around their breasts and hips, evoke thoughts of bandages, perhaps the wrappings of mummified bodies, as well as bondage.

I think that the fact that these violent images and incidents are a general focus of the program is telling. The writers and producers choose what to play up and what not, often at the demand of popular opinion. The American viewer's real need to expel violence is leaking out in small amounts in shows like these. The sacrificial victims of ANTM work because they satisfy Girard's requirements. These victims are substitutes "for all the members of the community, offered up by the members themselves. The sacrifice serves to protect the entire community

from its own violence; it prompts the entire community to choose victims outside itself."<sup>13</sup> The models are effective substitutes because at one and the same time they are both like their viewers, but enough unlike them to constitute a sacrificial victim. In order to be an effective sacrifice, the victim must represent the community, but in order for the community to be able to accept the sacrifice, the victim must be sufficiently alien. By virtue of being on TV, the models both implicate themselves to viewers as being "just like you"—because any girl next door could audition for the show!—and also distance themselves by accepting the celebrity status that accompanies being shown on television.

Once this relationship is established, the individual viewer accepts the sacrificial violence as something "on TV," as just entertainment, while the machinery of it allows the viewing nation as a whole to exact the sacrifice as one done by themselves, for themselves, and upon themselves, resulting in the cathartic expulsion of one pretty surrogate victim at a time. If I hold this thought against the scope of Girard's theory, it seems paltry and small compared to his bold statement that "humanity's very existence is due primarily to the operation of the surrogate victim. ... There is no society without religion because without religion society cannot exist."<sup>14</sup> This one example of sacrifice in reality TV is one drop in the lake of social cues we could take to affirm that ours is a society swimming in religious attitudes, despite our attempts to separate the political and the religious. Only one simple sweep of the veil reveals it to be so.

What Girard terms the "sacrificial crisis" is the paradox that the victim "must both resemble the human community and not be too like it."<sup>15</sup> It is the destruction of distinction that leads to violence, as when the pupil overtakes the master in skill and suddenly the master has a rival rather than a student. Sacrifice is supposed to create order and distinction, often by distancing. If, in turning in on ourselves as Douglas suggests, we are forced to pull the surrogate victim from within the closed confines of our own ranks, this action may instead perpetuate sameness. Now *this* is a sacrificial crisis! As Douglas writes, "American isolationism is nothing new, but it is striking that during this particular period, when technological capabilities and geopolitical exigencies should have interacted to expand America's global

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<sup>13</sup> Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 8.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid* 233.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid* 52.



vision, just the opposite occurred."<sup>16</sup> The structure of reality TV shows like ANTM facilitate this turn within by preferring personal reaction and feeling over true social critique. At any time, the contestants can go into a room that is set up with a camera and record their thoughts and complaints about the other models. This footage is later edited and used as material to guide a story-line throughout the program. The destruction of difference occurs when the internal turn is so complete and we become so self-absorbed that we don't notice the others around us. In that vein, complete isolation and complete distance from the Other are the same. There comes a point when another is too far away to distinguish difference.

It is ironic that at the same time that the "turn within" of the American consumer has resulted in searching for the surrogate victim within our own ranks, reality TV being the present example, we are also creating distance from those who helped us spark the flame of violence. In this way, the confrontational violence and the urge for vengeance caused by the attacks on 9/11 has been mostly contained in the minds of the American people. A majority of the American public feel under-informed about the goings-on of the "War on Terror" and the U.S. presence in Iraq.<sup>17</sup> The details of this under-information are beyond my scope here; I shall suffice it to say that when we should be making amends, instead we sit in front of our television sets, blithely tracing our personal boundaries smaller and smaller. The sacrificial crisis for us is that we have so distanced ourselves from the Other that we no longer regard them as in our sphere of influence.

As American viewers we hold ourselves at a distance from the objects of media scrutiny. We see

furious protestors, masked guerillas, soldiers, or grief-stricken victims. They are 'tribal,' masses of them gather in the streets shaking their fists, screaming and chanting; they chop each others' limbs off; they are mute, poverty-stricken victims; they wear too many clothes, or not enough. They are anti-modern... These were

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<sup>16</sup> Douglas 621.

<sup>17</sup> *Pollingreport.com*, 2007, <<http://www.pollingreport.com/iraq.htm>>. A CBS News/New York Times Poll, held on April 20-24, 2007, asked 1,052 adults if they felt what they heard from the media about the war in Iraq was accurate. 40% said mostly accurate, 48% said mostly not accurate, and 12% were unsure. When asked the same question about the Bush Administration, 28% said mostly accurate, 62% said mostly not accurate, and 10% were unsure.

all snapshots, flipping one after the other, and not contextualized... Why turn outward, toward them? There is nothing to understand, much to reject.<sup>18</sup>

How are the models on ANTM any different for us than those "foreigners" on TV we either pity or hate? At present the models are different from *them*, but they are not entirely different from *us*, just enough for the objectification of a TV show. But this is our downfall: our sacrificial victims are too much like us; we are tending toward conformity when what we need is difference. When I look at the finished photos of the models, all I see are pretty faces sculpted to reflect each other. In the conformance of their faces, I see the destruction of the self.

Reality TV creates an outlet for the denial of the abject self and the destruction of the self, which I believe to be intimately connected to Girard's theory of mimetic rivalry. The key to mimetic rivalry is that the "rival desires the same object as the subject, and to assert the primacy of the rival can lead to only one conclusion. Rivalry does not arise because of the fortuitous convergence of two desires on a single object; rather, *the subject desires the object because the rival desires it.*"<sup>19</sup> This is a self-destructive move on the part of the subject because the object can never be won. In fact, it is not the object that is the important part of the equation, but the influence of the rival, and the provocation of desire. The subject looks not toward fulfillment but toward a consuming, continued struggle that abjects the subject—the subject must displace something of the self to continue pursuing the desired object. The "objects" of ANTM are of course the models themselves, and it is in society's desire to own them as a community owns its sacrificial victim that we at the same time abject ourselves. Jan Jagodzinski, in his article "The Perversity of (Real)ity TV: A Symptom of Our Times," writes that when

kept at the right distance, we can condemn all those in Television Land for being immoral, bigoted, intolerant, and prejudiced. By not identifying with them, by not recognizing that they are indeed a reflection of ourselves—that 'we the people' are the abjected Other which we refuse to recognize within ourselves, but nevertheless are willing to accuse others of such behavior—enables the vicious circle of

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<sup>18</sup> Douglas 631.

<sup>19</sup> Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 154-155.

violence to continue. (Real)ity TV masks rather than exposes this fetishistic split that lies at the core of our being.<sup>20</sup>

It is because of the abjected status of the contestants on ANTM that we can witness the perversity of the show and be entertained, that we can believe somehow it is acceptable to make the personal struggles of these young women everyday gossip, to make their lives and their bodies consumable *things*.

The abject is what a subject rejects from the self, but what is at the same time necessary for the cohesion of the self. The sacrificial victim is necessary for the unity of society, yet it is in its very nature "sacrificeable." By voyeuristically consuming the beauty and pain of the models, viewers abject *from* ourselves what would make us *like* the models, what would make us abject as well. In Cycle One, Episode Five,<sup>21</sup> the storyline evolved around one model, Elyse, whom the other models suspected to have an eating disorder, even though she denied it. At one point in the episode, Elyse is in an interview with a publicity instructor, talking about the very fact that the other models gossip about her thin body, while just that is happening in the other room. Elyse became for the other models the abject Other on whom to pin their fears. In another example of abjection, the photo-shoot for this same episode included posing with a football star. The models were dressed in form-fitting jerseys, which were then cut to pieces (I remember especially one designer approaching a model with a pair of scissors; he sliced down the front of the jersey, which split to expose her cleavage) and laced together again in provocative ways. The cutting and ripping, then binding together again over a gash of exposed flesh—I think this closely parallels the models themselves being torn apart then stitched together again in the process of the show. This process reaches its peak, the point of sacrifice, at the end of the episode with the "elimination" (even the choice of this particular word by the show's writers supports my argument), the final abjection of one model. One by one, the models are critiqued—shredded—on their personalities, professionalism, performance, and look. The

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<sup>20</sup> Jan Jagodozinki, "The Perversity of (Real)ity TV: A Symptom of Our Times," *Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society* 8.2 (2003): 325-326.

<sup>21</sup> "Episode 5, Cycle 1," *America's Next Top Model*, created by Tyra Banks, produced by UPN, 20 May 2003.

model who is eliminated—the abject Other who coheres the self—is sacrificed for the continued cohesion of the entire group, and, at some level, for that of the inward-turning viewer.

Mimetic desire runs parallel to the abjection of the self. While we believe the abjection of the other creates wholeness, it does not. While we believe the obtainment of the desired object creates wholeness, we know it will not. "Mimetic desire thinks that it always chooses the most life-affirming path, whereas in actuality it turns increasingly toward the obstacle—toward sterility and death. Only what seems implacably indifferent or hostile, only the doors that fail to open when we knock, can awaken this desire."<sup>22</sup> Paradoxically, while desire for the impossible and the perversity of abjection *tend toward* death, they do not actually result in death. They result in the perpetuation of desire, which in effect is a turn toward life.<sup>23</sup> This makes sense in regard Girard's claim that violence never entirely leaves a community and is indeed the cornerstone of society and religion,<sup>24</sup> which is why periodic ritual sacrifice is necessary to regain the balance of different and same, and continue the cycle of communal life.

The "monstrous double" appears when the oscillation between antagonists of mimetic rivalry results in the blurring of subject and rival; they become a hideous chimera, "a formless and grotesque mixture of things that are normally separate."<sup>25</sup> At this point in *Violence and the Sacred*, Girard acknowledges an important turn, because in the creation of the monstrous double he finds the basis of collective violence, and in the "crisis" of mimetic rivalry he finds the means to understand humanity's impulse for peace. I will quote the passage in full:

In the collective experience of the monstrous double the differences are not eliminated, but muddied and confused. All the doubles are interchangeable, although their basic similarity is never formally acknowledged. They thus occupy the equivocal middle ground between difference and unity that is indispensable to

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<sup>22</sup> René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1978) 415.

<sup>23</sup> Girard, *Things Hidden*, 413. "Because he does not understand the automatic character of the rivalry, the imitator soon converts the very fact of being opposed, frustrated, and rejected into the major stimulant of his desire. ...desire tends toward death, both the death of the model and obstacle (murder) and the death of the subject himself (self-destruction and suicide)."

<sup>24</sup> Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 92. "If the generating spark of religion itself and the transcendental force that characterizes it are in fact the product of violent unanimity—of social unity forged or reformed by the 'expulsion' of the surrogate victim—then even more momentous matters are at issue."

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid* 169.

the process of sacrificial substitution—to the polarization of violence onto a single victim who substitutes for all the others. *The monstrous double gives the antagonists, incapable of perceiving that nothing actually stands between them (or their reconciliation), precisely what they need to arrive at the compromise that involves unanimity minus the victim of the generative expulsion.* The monstrous double, all monstrous doubles in the person of one—the "thousand-headed dragon" of *The Bacchae*—becomes the object of unanimous violence.<sup>26</sup>

In the heat of crisis is the seed of resolution! Only through crisis is the compromise able to be realized, the victim decided upon and expelled. This image of the "monstrous double," the chimera, can also be seen in the proliferation of reality TV shows available at the push of a button. Program after program—they all are so similar, they do indeed seem to blur into one. And while the contestant models do differ greatly in personality, goals, and beliefs, etc, models are, at base, equipment of an industry, and this industry depends on their conformity to a certain type and form. However, the muddled mess of reality TV has yet to define one victim. It continues in its cycle of small, artificial sacrifices.

I think our monster depends on the unrequited search for the final victim. Only if we consider ourselves, the viewers, as faces blurred among faces of the monstrous double can we understand the impulse toward ritualistic and violent sacrifice so obviously a part of a program like ANTM. We must keep the monster alive and fed because it can never die; we can never draw away back into difference because isolation does not work like that; we can only look for but never identify a true victim because a true victim would explode the façade we've created. We have mystified ourselves into thinking that we are separate, when in actuality we depend for coherence on this monstrous and continued doubling. What reality TV performs for us, and what we perform for ourselves when we watch and endorse it, is a contiguous, unified community that believes it can operate in isolation from the rest of the world. By keeping ourselves in a perpetual state of crisis, always seeking but never finding the sacrificial victim, we create and order a cosmos that finds structure in the idea that doom and destruction are always just around the corner and just barely held at bay. We have found a kind of stability in

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid 170-171. My emphasis.

our instability. The fact that a "terrorist" could be anyone in a crowd, or nowhere to be found at all, as well as the use of devices like the Homeland Security Advisory System, with its color-coded "terror alert" scale, point to a national mindset of constant potential victimhood, and it is only through the grace and mercy of our god that we live another day. The god we worship, whom we appease with our wretched and rotten sacrifices of living flesh through false TV images, is this violently tendered interim peace we covet, closing our eyes to the blur of doubles that might reveal us as intimately connected to those who threaten us. It is this ritual and sacrificial structure—a nation seeking stability through the perpetuation of the sacrificial crisis—that reveals our secular TV culture as highly religious.