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Millions For Your Mortification

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Like so much of our culture these days, game shows are getting mean.

I was watching *Deal or No Deal* the other night - fine, I'll try to get out more - and I started wondering whether I was watching a game show of a finely tuned act of public humiliation.

As I watched one of the contestants throw herself on the floor in agony over the choice she was presented - with the pneumatic-breasted case bearers watching from their stadium seating, family and friends shrieking, and Howie Mandel presiding over it all with his imp of Satan grin, I started to think about the Middle Ages.

There was nothing like a neighbor in the stocks to give the family something to do on a rainy afternoon. The event was held in the most public place in town, and throwing refuse was strongly encouraged.

Of course, *Deal or No Deal* is really just a variation on the recent trend of mean TV.

What is the draw for *The Apprentice*? Is it watching those who succeed, or is it squinty-eyed Donald screwing his face into a parrot's beak and saying: "You're Fired." What is the best part of *American Idol*? Is it the talent or the withering scorn meted out by Lord High Executioner Simon Cowell?

Televised humiliation may have moved to a new intensity - agony, actually - with the show *Moment of Truth*. While attached to a lie detector, the young wife of a New York City policeman told 8 million viewers she slept around and really wanted to wed an old boyfriend. The young husband said they came away with no money, their lives exposed, and a broken marriage. That is a pretty steep price for your 15 minutes and a shot at some cash.

Sometimes the cynicism is breathtaking. A memo circulated in the offices of ABC's *Extreme Makeover - Home Edition* was obtained by [The Smoking Gun](#). It is a shopping list of ideal people to feature on the show: a family with multiple children with Down syndrome; a child with a rare condition that causes rapid aging and death and a mom who has been diagnosed with ALS. The producers, as The Smoking Gun put it, were "not content with humdrum poverty, heartache and distress."

But there is a special kind of malice at work on *Deal or No Deal*'s sound stage of dreams. Riches are dangled before the contestant's eyes; grasped for an exhilarating life-changing moment, then snatched away by the unforgiving, unseen "Banker"-retribution for the contestant's own greed and failure to calculate the most basic of odds.

I might be overstating the need to calculate odds. One critic compared the skill level to "Guess how many fingers I have behind my back."

It's Americans being American. It might be a useful requirement for those studying for their citizenship test to watch five episodes of *Deal or No Deal*. It's all there: the brief tango with fame, the fast-money dream of rolling up to work in a Benz to telling the boss where he can put those accrued vacation days, and for the multitudes watching, the elevation that comes with the right to say: "You couldn't pay me enough to do that."

There are certainly redemptive moments of acceptance and forgiveness. After making an incredibly stupid decision against the screaming, pleading advice of the family, there is a tearful embrace and assurances they are loved and appreciated for doing their best. I wonder what it's like on the ride home.

My curiosity aroused about *Deal or No Deal*, this prime time pageantry and pathos, I did a little digging. There are places where you can go for tips on how to make the grade. Hey, if you want a B-list TV personality, Vegas comedian and the former voice of Gizmo in *Gremlins* to mess with your head in front of the world, you gotta work for it.

It takes a video of you and your on-camera supporters, plus passing a 50 question test. Some actual publicized tips from the producers: dressing like a gorilla won't help. Neither will filming naked. Make sure you are actually on the tape - apparently they get videos of people who film their lives, but neglect to include themselves.

Another suggestion from the producers: watch the shows and see what there is about yourself that is similar to the contestants who made it on.

That would include very large shaved-head man in a kilt; a high school teacher who brought along the school's cheerleaders; an Eskimo who brought snow; roller skating sisters and one man who tended to erupt in a stream of curses in his native Italian.

Said host Mandel in an interview: "This is the rawest, purist form of humanity that can be seen on television."

What scares me is: I think he might be right.