

The House of Usher and The House of Fisher: Towards an Architecture of (Dis)comfort

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nothing is more exactly terrible than
to be alone in the house, with somebody
and with something

e. e. cummings, IX, *xix poems*

Six Feet Under, created by Allan Ball, is a television series influenced in several aspects by Edgar Allan Poe, from the opening credits that remind us of the poem 'The Raven' (1845) to the constant presence of phantom figures. Furthermore, it has influences from the gothic narrative that the series displays mostly through the choice of sceneries and objects in the house. Both houses, the Usher house in 'The Fall of the House of Usher' (1840) and the *Fisher Funeral Home* in *Six Feet Under* (2000) are symbolic spaces of death and, consequently, places of transition from one state to another.

Surely, though influences of the Usher house may be detected in the Fisher house, they present themselves as significantly different places. While one inflicts terror and discomfort, the other, which seems to accommodate the characters that inhabit it, presents a tentative solution for the discomfort felt in the presence of objects of death. This paper will foreground the different effects accomplished by both narratives, and particularly the significance of *Six Feet Under*'s subversion of the echoes it brings forth from Poe's seminal text in order to reconcile both character and viewers with the passage into the reality of death.

The reader knows beforehand, from the title of the tale *The Fall of the House of Usher*, that the house is going to be destroyed and, along with it, presumably also those who live there. The fall of the house is due

to its physical condition as well as a certain evil that supposedly inhabits it and from which neither Roderick (who seems to accept that condition) nor his sister, who seems to be free from it, can escape. This is because the fall of the house not only regards its physical destruction, but also the moral fall of the family itself.¹

The only person who survives to tell us the story is the narrator, but he, too, recognizes a certain architecture that causes in him a particular discomfort, a feeling that is passed along to the reader with the description of the house:

...with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit. [...] I looked upon the scene before me – upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain – upon the bleak walls – upon the vacant eye-like windows – upon a few rank sedges – and upon a few white trunks of decayed trees – with an utter depression of the soul which I can compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the after-dream of the reveller upon opium – the bitter lapse into every-day life – the hideous dropping off of the veil. There was iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart – an unredeemed dreariness of thought which no goading of the imagination could torture into aught of the sublime. What was it – I paused to think – what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher? (Poe 397)

Even though the narrator is trying to find a rational explanation for this desolate vision of the Usher house and tries to avert its image, he sees the tarn that reproduces the inverted image of the house, thus highlighting the idea of emptiness, as Spitzer comments: 'When the visitor who is telling us the story receives his first glimpse of the decaying mansion, he turns, in order to divert his attention from the sinister sight, toward the tarn, only to see, with growing anguish, the dreary building reflected on its waters...' (59).

¹ Mere existence is a torment for Roderick.

The tarn mirrors the threatening architecture of the house, and this house appears as a 'real half' precisely because of its reflection. This reflection in turn forms the other half. It is a symbolic one that, in a certain way, informs the reader that the house is destined to doom because the tarn is a dead lake where nothing grows. Thus, water is transformed into a mirror of premonition for the fall of the house of Usher.² Although water is a symbol of life, this tarn seems to reflect quite the opposite: its water is still and symbolizes death. The tarn is a symbol of the subterranean realm and, therefore, of the grave where the Ushers are going to be buried.

Together with the tarn and the wasteland which surrounds the house there are external elements in the house's façade that are important in order to understand the atmosphere of horror, sadness and melancholy caused by a strange place. It should also be noted that the incorporation of what is strange increases the feeling of discomfort that, at the same time, makes the reader more aware of feelings of fear. It is this fear that allows one to anticipate the terrible events and because readers are permeable to objects causing fear the house's frightening features seem to consume the mind of the reader. The two elements referred to above are the windows and the crack that divide the house. They are symbols that dissolve the clear-cut distinction between the inside and the outside. The windows resemble two large eyes transforming the house into a place that almost resembles a face. It is a place with a soul, which seen from the outside seems empty and from the inside inaccessible, thus contributing to a sense of the grave-like structure of the house.³ Furthermore, the windows are linked to the figure of Roderick Usher, whose light in the eyes is weakening. The other element is the crack that divides the house, a symbol of the evil consuming the family and representing the division between brother and

² It is important to note that the story is built in halves. This idea of division is shown in a symbolic way by the crack that divides the house in two. When Madeline really dies (her brother being the other half) her brother also dies, and with them the two halves of the house that is swallowed by the tarn.

³ Note that both the windows and the crack are not only signs of inside/outside divisions but also often connote the body (ex: the windows as the eyes of the soul), as reinforced by the allegorical reading of the poem 'The Haunted Palace'.

sister (Roderick and Madeline). This leads to the final collapse of the house of Usher in both architecture and lineage, leaving only the blood red moon shining over the ruins of the house.

The atmosphere of terror is also felt inside the house. Poe suggests an internal atmosphere that allows the reader to accept the growth of ideas of terror in one's conscience. Terror is induced through the decadence of things that belong to the house: the furniture that seems to express the (un)natural order of the human presence, the changing colours, the silence (more than one situation being characterized by its stillness), the noises (the house itself sounds as if it is moaning, echoing '[the] singular perversion and amplification caused by the morbid condition of [Usher's] ... auditory nerve.' (Poe 405-406) and, above all, the connection between the decrepitude of natural things and human beings, this way eroding borders between inanimate and animate realms. In addition, Roderick's body, a cadaveric body as the narrator tells us, is gradually being possessed by the atmosphere of the house: he cannot bear loud sounds, except for those of the instrument he plays, and he is sensitive to the touch of fabric and light. He is also the one who does not want to fight against the fall of the house, because he is attracted towards a more subterranean realm, similar to the crypt where he buries his sister.

Besides these factors, there is also the canvas that Roderick paints and the reading of the poem 'The Haunted House'. The painting represents what is going to happen when Roderick buries his sister and, like the rest of the story, it is related to the idea of death and depicts the final destiny of the Usher family. As for the poem, the haunted house that is presented to the reader is, like the house of Usher, consumed by a pre-existent evil and, therefore, completely doomed without a chance for redemption.⁴ This condemnation reveals that from the beginning of the story there was no possibility for the prolongation of life, a situation which Vidler has underlined as constituent of the twins' fate:

⁴ Almost all the objects are like a mirror for a larger story, as if there was an implicit duplicity in the continuity of all things. For example, Roderick is the mirror of Madeline, the narrator is the mirror of Roderick and the atmosphere (inside and outside the house) is the symbol of the final condition of the twins and, of course, the house.

... the family itself was almost extinct, doomed by a history that lent the ace of the tomb, the family vault, to this once living abode. The house, then was a crypt, predestined to be buried in its turn, an event prefigured in the “barely perceptible fissure” that ran vertically from roof to foundations. (8)

The haunted house had been a repository for centuries of memories and traditions like a museum full of objects that oscillate between life in death and death in life. Ultimately, death takes over the family when they fall along with the stones that were part of the house and everything is transformed into ruins. The fall of the house, therefore, symbolizes a double fall: that of the family and all the surrounding space.

Likewise, the house in the television series *Six Feet Under*, created by Allan Ball, has a very special atmosphere and there are manifold influences from Edgar Allan Poe.⁵ As previously mentioned, the opening credits present a raven that seems to be based on Poe’s well-known poem and the allusions to a gothic atmosphere are plentiful, as Turnock reminds us:

Pervaded by an overwhelming aura of death, the opening credits of *Six Feet Under* draw on both romantic and Gothic images with shots of hands parting, a time-lapse sequence of wilting lilies, and images of gravestones intercut and framed by those of a black crow. (39)

The opening sequence offers the viewer a macabre body which incorporates grotesque features, including the enigmatic (the raven) and the mystic (the light at the end of the tunnel when the gurney carries a dead body in the corridor). The hearses, dead bodies, gravestones and other objects contribute to the enhancement of a gothic atmosphere in the series. The central figure of the series is the dead body, the maximum symbol of decadence. The house, on the other hand, is the place that harbours the corpse; it is, in a certain way, representative of a place that symbolizes the decay of the body and because of that a place of death featured in its multiple Gothic elements, as Merck also notes:

⁵ The name itself is based on the belief that the dead should be buried at a safe distance, but we shall see some of them linger in the house until they are buried.

The multi-gabled building, with its mullioned windows, pointed arches and stained glass around the doorway, is patently ... Gothic ... with its ground-floor interior ... with dark panelling, floral wallpaper, sconce lighting, pelmeted curtains, mahogany furniture and potted ferns. ... What is clear from the outset is another patently Gothic motif: the location of death underground, where corpses are embalmed, reconstructed and cosmetically enhanced. In the floor above are the sombre public rooms, in which mourners are received and services conducted. ... Thus the historicised topography traditional to the Gothic novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the horror films of the twentieth – the quotidian present over the buried or ‘encrypted’ past – is revived for a twenty-first-century family firm in its third generation. (62)

Every episode begins with a death which most of the times is bizarre and grotesque. A fact that it is also offered to the viewer due to the treatment of dead bodies in a room called the *slumber room*. One of the deaths, for instance, occurs when a man falls into a dough spiral mixer and gets chopped up. When the funeral directors are trying to reconstruct the body they discover one of the feet is missing and, because they (the Fishers) do not know where it is, they replace it with a lamb’s hoof. This odd animal part, once covered by a sock and shoe looks like the original foot and pleases the bereaved family. Another case is the death of a porn-star actress whose breasts become misaligned as a result of her being electrocuted. In order to align them, cans of cat food are placed under each breast. Moreover, so as to reinforce the idea of a grotesque situation, there are phantoms that wander freely through the house.

Although the series may cause some discomfort, it is very different from the one caused by Poe’s story. Both families are very different. On the one hand, in the *Fall of the House of Usher*, space is depicted, both in the family and in the house, as one of doom. In *Six Feet Under*, on the other hand, it seems to represent quite the opposite: even if the house is a place of death, the television series displays it as something else. An example of this may be found in the episode ‘Familia’ where ‘Paco’, a gang member, dies and the Fishers are faced to deal with his funeral, as well as with the other gang members and his parents. The issue here is

that they do not have the necessary experience to organize a funeral involving gang members and members of the Los Angeles Mexican community to which 'Paco' belongs. This is a problem because, as Nate notes, they do not know how to organize a Mexican funeral: 'We are so white. If we step in, we will be totally fucked up.' ('Familia', 1: 4). The two brothers fear that their lack of knowledge of the Mexican culture will bring trouble with Paco's parents, but mainly with the other members of the gang. However, the potential conflict is solved by Paco's ghost itself, since he guides David in directing the funeral and especially in teaching him how to face life like a real man. As 'Paco' notes: 'Come on, David. You've gotta stand up. You gotta step up.' ('Familia', 1: 4).

At the end of the episode what follows is the discovery of a space where everybody is in communion. A space, as 'Paco' comments, without guns or rival gangs, that is, just like in any other funeral. These are the images that we see: David with 'Paco', Rico overseeing the funeral and Nate speaking with 'Paco's' mother soothing her pain by saying that God doesn't choose who he wants to take and that his family understands the pain of loss too because their father had also passed away recently. This is an episode, as the title indicates, that celebrates the importance of the notion of family and union in difficult times. It is because of this, that, at the end of the episode, the Fishers are invited to pay homage to 'Paco', which is something they didn't expect at all. During the homage, the gang leader prays for 'Paco' and the Fishers and their recent loss:

Merciful Jesus, please bring rest and peace to our fallen brother, son, friend, Manuel 'Paco' Bolin. May he live with you forever in your light and truth, Almighty Father. We also want to thank the Fishers who lost a father and husband. The Lord brings peace to them in their grief as you have in ours. ('Familia', 1: 4)

In the end what truly matters is the family. In fact, what makes this house different from the one in Poe's story is that in an hour of grief the Fishers try to offer some comfort and the possibility of redress. In addition, one should also not forget the rhyme between the protagonists' names in both narratives – Usher and Fisher. Usher symbolizes someone who lets one in or leads one in. The narrator is 'ushered' into the house, first by the strange servant and then by Roderick himself. The name also means doorkeeper.

This way, Roderick opens the door to a frightening world because he unlocks his dark private thoughts to the reader and narrator creating an ambience of inevitable doom. The Ushers, therefore, create a certain effect of suction (as suggested by the sound of the word) upon them and their house.

The Fishers, as their name indicates, are fishers of people (an explicit reference to the Fisher King that later on assumed a Christian symbolism reminding us of Christ, the saviour of souls and men) and, contrary to the Ushers, this is a house where difference is accepted and even celebrated, and the survival of the community is paramount. This is a place where the cathartic process is taken to the limit and death is faced as a natural fact of life. The Fishers' house represents a place of availability and possibility, and the house itself is a sort of geography of resistance before a concept and reality of which we are afraid. Although it features an architecture of (dis)comfort, influenced in many ways by Edgar Allan Poe's literary atmosphere, the purpose of the house is exactly the opposite. Where one would presumably find discomfort, and even almost touch it because it is a funeral home, the Fishers try to provide a certain type of solace. They are open to explore different forms of co-existence between dead and living bodies, and search an authentic way of life among every single body. They live according to their own rhythm, even if it implies challenging society and questioning the way society regulates itself, as Turnock notes in *Reading Six Feet Under: TV to Die For* (2005):

Six Feet Under articulates an ongoing shift in funerary culture. It shows that the evolution from 'traditional' forms of ritual to modern, secular ones has not been an entirely happy one. Instead, it offers a blend of the traditional *and* the modern, to reflect a more postmodern attitude – one that seeks a return to older values in conjunction with the new. These more postmodern values offer the possibility of better coming to terms with death and bereavement in the contemporary (Western) world. (48)

If, for Poe, who lived in an America that asserted the importance of manifest destinies and that was confident in the power of individual action, i.e. it was important to go against the flow of national optimism, in our epoch of generalized deconstruction and social and individual fragmentation, it is important to work on something quite different. The series, therefore,

offers itself as a challenge to the architectonic reconstruction of living bodies, even if it does so by means of the art of re-composing dead ones. A reference to Poe's emphasis on composition highlights that the grotesque achieves its full effect in an imaginative assembling of apparently incongruous parts. But whereas Poe aimed for control and preciseness, the characters in *Six Feet Under* opt for resourceful adaptation – all too often clumsy, but never careless.

In the end, the space involving the Fisher's Funeral Home is one which reveals that the mystery of life is not what we are all in fact inevitably destined to be, buried six feet under. It is rather the much more difficult one of learning how to live and accept that everything changes, as Brenda tells Nate:

Nate: – What am I supposed to do with my life?

Brenda: – Living it. You can't control things, no one can. Only one thing is certain, everything changes. ('The Foot', 1:3).

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ABSTRACT

Six Feet Under (2000-2005), by Allan Ball, is clearly influenced by Edgar Allan Poe's stories, from the opening credits (a reference to the poem 'The Raven') to the presence of ghosts and the gothic atmosphere displayed by most objects in the television series, especially the house.

Both houses, the *Fisher Funeral Home* and the house of Usher in the story 'The Fall of the House of Usher' (1840), are symbolic spaces of death and, consequently, liminal spaces. If the Usher's house, like its owner, is an isolated space representing the decadence and fall of the human being; the Fisher's house, naturally a place of human finitude, seems to represent the opposite: albeit being a funeral house it offers some comfort. In this way, my aim is to analyse Poe's story and the episode 'Familia', (1:5, 2000) from *Six Feet Under* in order to not only present Poe's influence in the series, but also to compare both houses so as to show this architecture of (dis)comfort.

KEYWORDS

Poe, *Six Feet Under*, House, Architecture, (Dis)comfort.

RESUMO

Six Feet Under (*Sete Palmos de Terra*) de Allan Ball é uma série televisiva que, claramente, vai buscar muitas das suas influências a Edgar Allan Poe, desde o genérico inicial que nos relembra "The Raven" (1845), à constante presença de figuras fantasmagóricas e, obviamente, pela própria narrativa de influência gótica de que vivem a maior parte dos objectos e atmosfera começando pela própria casa.

As casas, tanto a dos Usher em *The Fall of The House of Usher* (1840) como a *Fisher Funeral Home*, (2000) são ambos espaços simbólicos de morte e, consequentemente, um *topos* fronteiro. Se, por um lado, a casa de Usher, à semelhança do seu dono, é um espaço isolado que representa a decadência e decrepitude das formas humanas, por outro, a casa dos Fisher, que naturalmente é um espaço de finitude humana, parece representar o espaço oposto: embora seja uma casa

funerária é um espaço que oferece um certo consolo e possível conforto. Desta forma, o presente trabalho pretende, através da análise do conto *The Fall of The House of Usher* e do episódio “Família”, (1:5, 2000), de *Six Feet Under*, fazer uma análise comparativa desta arquitectura do (des)conforto para perceber de que forma, através da influência de Edgar Allan Poe, *Six Feet Under* abraça o projecto casa de uma forma distinta manifestando “a nossa atitude e posição face a nós mesmos e ao outro.” (Pinto, 2005: 5).

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Poe, *Six Feet Under*, Casa, Architecture, (Des)conforto
