

Six Feet Under: “Better Living Through Death”

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The future is just a fucking concept that we use to avoid living today.

Six Feet Under – “It’s the most wonderful time of the year”, (2:8)

(...) there’s one thing in this world which you don’t have to worry around after a person to get him to pay for. And that’s a coffin. Undertaking? – why it’s the dead-surest business in Christendom, and the knoggiest.

Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi*

1. Introduction

Six Feet Under by Allan Ball (2001-2005) is a television series that depicts a hidden reality within the American society. The series is set in a funeral home, where the Fisher family works and lives. This strange scenario is the background for an ongoing story that allows the viewer to be confronted with some aspects of the American society that, most of the times, are hidden or ignored. I mean, of course, the common handling of death. However, as I shall argue, death is more than the core subject of this series, death is the vehicle for an enhanced talk about life.

This text aims at discussing three important aspects in *Six Feet Under* and, as such, it has a three-partide structure. The first part deals with death as a business and a spectacle, the way in which the series illustrates the evolution of the funereal ritual and American society deals with death. The funeral home is, after all, a business, therefore, when someone dies, it treats the whole process of handling the dead body in a

rational and economy-oriented way. Moreover, one might even make the argument that this feature overwhelms all others, since the amount of cosmetics that the industry uses to cover up the “real” appearance of death in order to simulate life transforms the whole funeral into a space where there is hardly any room for real grieving, thus making death an almost meaningless event.

The second part explores the way in which humor seems to be the appropriate means to not only criticise this “American way of death” (Mitford 2000), but also to face death itself as much as the sorrows of life. Comedy is a strong feature in the television series, which allows for and invites different perspectives in *Six Feet Under*. Moreover, humour in *Six Feet Under* is visibly foregrounded by the bizarre deaths occurring at the beginning of each episode. The viewer is always confronted with someone about to die, followed by the actual dying, and may laugh but not forget that he or she might find him or herself in that same situation. There is a sort of recognition that prevents the viewer from fully comfortably laughing. To a certain extent, the spectator laughs, but then, once becoming aware of a shared human condition, cannot help but to smile at the irony of it all. Furthermore, the funeral home in this series is far from being a common one. Strange things happen; the dead (mostly the father of the family who has the odd privilege of dying right in the first episode) appear and talk to the living. This almost surrealist kind of proximity between the dead and the living serves its purpose: the dead, as it will be discussed, appear to the living to challenge them to live a better life, to help them to solve their issues and, above all, to defy them to live according to the lives they have always wished for.

The third and final part develops the analysis of the series, focusing on some of its more controversial aspects. If it can be argued, at first, that death has become merely a show and a business, one finds that, after all, the Fisher House (both funeral and family home) is the perfect locus for the coming together of all the difference that makes up the vast territory of the United States. The bodies that circulate there, dead or alive, compose a body of humanity that seems to challenge or even contradict, after all, the notions presented in the first part of this study. As I shall argue, one discovers that, for example, the use of “make up” to cover the true nature of death can actually help those who are in pain. Furthermore, it is possible

to argue that the changes operated on the dead bodies can function as a catalyser for the grieving process, because the last image of the loved one is an important piece in the puzzle of understanding how to deal with life and death. The Fisher House may thus be viewed as a frontier in the American sense, an in-between space where life and death may meet and create something together. One might even go further and see the house as a metaphor for the USA, itself a house of many rooms where all sorts of differences and divergences are trying to live in a peaceful place and find new ways to solve old problems.

2. Death as business and spectacle

Death has always been one of the great challenges for the living. And nowadays, despite all the images that appear daily on television of war, death, and catastrophes, we still find it extremely hard to think of the fact that all of us, as human beings, are going to die. That is why, throughout the years, death and especially the funeral ritual, have become more and more hidden from our eyes. This is particularly true in a society like the American where the discourse of the eternally young prevails over the idea of inescapable bodily decadence, as referred by Heller:

The mass culture of the United States is a culture that trembles in the face of the inevitable decay of the body, marketing all manner of youth and pleasure-extending commodities and shunning all contact with cigarettes, fat, disease, or other reminder's of the body's inevitable demise. American capitalism mobilises vast resources in an effort to defer, deny and disguise death.

(Heller 71)

Indeed, with the availability of great technological advances, modern society starts investing more in the idea of preservation and durability, as if it were possible to ultimately have control over death: organ transplantation, plastic surgery, and "resurrection" machines are mere examples of such an investment. And the odd thing is that this is not only true for living bodies, but also for dead ones, as shall be seen.

According to Philippe Ariès, in his book *The Hour of Our Death* (1981), this happens due to a revolution in the handling of death and funeral rituals, linked with the fact that, mostly living in an increasing urban environment, people almost stopped dying at home to die in hospitals:

By a swift and imperceptible transition someone who was dying came to be treated like someone recovering from major surgery. This is why, especially in the cities, people stopped dying at home—just as they stopped being born at home. (...) The hospital is no longer merely the place where one is cured or where one dies because of a therapeutic failure; it is the scene of the normal death, expected and accepted by medical personnel.

(Ariès 585)

This is the ideal setting for the institutionalized hiding of death. Inside the hospital, where the medical context prevails, death can be considered as a disease that needs treatment. This new space emphasizes a perspective on death from a clinical discourse point of view. The reluctance in discussing mortality seems to be one of the main characteristics of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Thus, death becomes no more than a loose thread in the social universe, something that you never desire and the inevitableness of which you wish to disavow. There seems to have been a “revolution of mortality”, in which the “event” death cannot be seen or commented. It may be visible but it is, at the same time, invisible. As previously mentioned, this new tendency gains more poignancy in the United States of America, where there is an enhanced general tendency to create strategies to “kill death”, making it simultaneously distant and confined to a much more private (hidden from the view) sphere.

This is what happened when the funeral industry took the “responsibility” of the funeral ritual¹. This industry brought a whole new concept of looking at the way the ritual must be performed. The funeral

¹ For more information about the history of the funeral home see, for instance, Laderman, Gary. *Rest in Peace: A Cultural History of Death and the Funeral Home in Twentieth-Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

director became a mediator between life and death and, at the same time, the stage director of the funeral ritual, controlling and designing the way it is done. This strategy involved the use of a new language (a "jargon of death"), as well as new instruments that redefined the structure of the funeral, making it look like a more rational business-like enterprise and hiding its true nature, as Mitford comments in her book *The American Way of Death* (2000):

...a whole new terminology, as ornately shoddy as the rayon satin casket liner, has been invented by the funeral industry to replace the direct and serviceable vocabulary of former times. 'Undertaker' has been supplanted by 'funeral director' or 'mortician'. (...) Coffins are 'caskets'; hearses are 'coaches' or 'professional cars'; flowers are 'floral tributes'; corpses generally are 'loved ones', but mortuary etiquette dictates that a specific corpse be referred to by the name only – as 'Mr. Jones'; cremated ashes are 'cremains'. Euphemisms such as 'slumber room', 'reposing room', and 'calcinations – the kindlier heat' abound in the funeral business.

(Mitford 17)

Six Feet Under presents this idea in the first episode "Pilot" (1:1) by using, for instance, in a meta-fictional reference, commercials about the funeral industry. The opening sequence of this episode offers commercials like "Wound-Filler": "She looked her best every single day of her life. Don't let that horrible disfiguring accident change that." ("Pilot", 1:1); or, to mention just another example, the commercial of "Franklin Funeral Supplies," which has a most telling catch line: "We put the fun back in funeral" ("Pilot", 1:1). The importance of the body and its beauty is here highlighted, in as much as pain is erased. Furthermore, this same episode makes it clear that there is a marked distinction between the ways of looking at the death business by the several members of the family running the funeral parlor – a family that is composed by Ruth (the mother), Nathanael (the father who dies in this first episode), David, Nate and Claire (the sons and daughter) and Rico (the employee). Nate, the "prodigal son" who returns, but is still an outsider, does not agree with the way funerals are being conducted. While David, the son who stayed to work with their father, follows the norms of the "death care industry", Nate seems to face this event

in a very different way. At their father's funeral he asks Claire why David is taking Ruth away from the casket when she starts showing her grief:

Nate: What? She's sad, so he has to get her out of sight?

Claire: They always do that. The second someone starts to lose it, they take them off into that room. It makes the other people uncomfortable.

(“Pilot”, 1:1)

It is clear that for the industry the act of public grieving is almost forbidden and the funeral is something properly constructed, artificial, a situation which Nate wants to see transformed, as voiced at his own father's funeral:

Nate: I refuse to sanitize this anymore.

David: This is how it is done.

Nate: Yeah, well. It's whacked. What is this stupid saltshaker? What is this hermetically sealed box? This phony Astroturf around the grave? Jesus, David, it's like surgery. Clean, antiseptic, business.

You can pump him full of chemicals, you can put makeup on him...and you can prop him up for a nap in the slumber room...but the fact remains that the only father we've ever gonna have is gone! Forever. And that sucks. And it's part of life, but you can't ever accept it without even getting your hands dirty.

(“Pilot”, 1:1)

This difference of outlook becomes even more obvious when Nate tries to prevent their funeral home from being sold to a funeral director who represents a bigger industry. What is more apparent is the use of language by both sides: “Factory of embalming” becomes “preparation for visitation” and “hearses” become “fleet of vehicle”; Nate himself ends up by calling the dead, due to the way they are treated, “Human MacNuggets”, attacking capitalism and globalization, in other words, mass production devoid of any actual feelings.

What matters is that the body, as a final product, be “spectacular” and complete, without any traces of death. Indeed, what *Six Feet Under* bears evidence for is that the funeral ritual has become a stage where feelings are contained by the show “directed” by the funeral director who takes every chance to explore the relatives of the loved one. Even Ruth comments:

"I have seen too many corpses in my life and they're work." ("Pilot", 1:1 – my emphasis). The idea that corpses are work resulting from a service contract in which the customer is in an unusually fragile position, is clearly stated by Jessica Mitford in her book *The American Way of Death* (2000):

The sellers of funeral service have, one gathers, a preconceived, stereotyped view of their customers. To them, the bereaved person who enters the funeral establishment is a bundle of guilt feelings, a snob, and a status seeker. Funeral directors feel that by steering the customer to the higher-priced caskets, they are administering the first dose of grief therapy.

(Mitford 20)

However, Ruth's comment does not necessarily entail the idea of an inappropriate business approach, since the *Fisher & Sons* will prove to have a different way of viewing the funeral ritual, as will be discussed further on. The fact that they continue with their father's family business and do not sell their funeral house to a larger corporation when hard pressed to do so is a sign of that much. Either way, it is obvious that not even this specific funeral home escapes the basic demand of this business, that the bodies need to be "spectacular" and more beautiful than ever in order to aptly perform their stage duties, an aspect which will lead to the next point I want to argue here: death can also be seen as fun.

3. Laughing is the best Medicine

When talking about death people cannot avoid feeling a certain fear since it is simply an unavoidable part of the human condition. In a certain way, one of the things that allow us to survive the sorrows of life is laughter. *Six Feet Under* articulates comedy with drama, using this mixture to create a specific atmosphere. Comedy here seems to have a double purpose. It may be seen as an instrument for corrective thinking and questioning, somehow aiming criticizing the industry, but also as a relief device which allows us to temporarily escape what is painful, as Andrew notes: "(...) comedy (...) allows us to stand back and look upon human misfortune from an emotional distance, sometimes even deriving great pleasure from it" (Andrew 12). Thus one can find in the series two types of comedy according to its source, e.g.

one that derives from the social gesture (the unexpected, clumsy, situations) and the other from the absurdity of life (the grotesque and bizarre).

The first type of comedy comes from discrepancy, arising from the fact that the funeral ritual is the stage for the most strange commentaries and situations. It may be the place where people discuss the importance of music in the staging of a funeral, as for example, in the first episode: "**Tracy:** I've been to three funerals this year, cancer, stroke, pediatric leukemia...and the music is always the same sad organ" ("Pilot", 1:1); or it may be surprising food for the wordplay used in the advertising business of the products related with the funeral industry: "For a body that's firm, yet flexible. For skin that begs to be touched. For the velvety appearance of actual living tissue...top morticians rely in "Living Splendor" embalming fluid. Living Splendor: only real life is better" ("Pilot", 1:1), and also "Franklin Funeral Supplies": "Ashes to ashes and dust to dust...is easy as pie with Franklin's new leak proof earth dispenser. Say goodbye to soiled fingers forever. Only from Franklin Funeral Supplies. We put the fun back in funeral." ("Pilot" 1:1). To put the "fun back in funeral" is, after all and very literally, what these situations do for this television series. There are also revelations that help increase this comic dimension, for instance, at the family's patriarch's funeral, when Ruth tells Nate something about the past:

Ruth: I'm not fine. I'm a whore! I was unfaithful to your father for years! And now he knows. He knows. I met a man at church, when your father didn't come with me. He invited me for coffee... he said he liked my hair. He's a hairdresser, a widower.

("Pilot", 1:1)

The funeral is thus also always the focal point for several things other than the ceremony itself. Aspects that provoke laughter in the viewer are for example strange confessions such as these within a place harboring such a serious situation, as Heller comments:

As the series opens with the shock of Nathaniel's death, the Fishers' secrets begin coming to light and their characters gradually emerge as oddly out of sync with the social values and norms that they would, on the surface, appear to represent.

(Heller 75)

In a certain way it is interesting that the dead are often completely ignored here, confined in a box, while all the rest becomes the main story of the series. It is more than obvious that in it death is mostly the canvas that makes possible the painting that illustrates the life thriving around it.

Moreover there is also something else that reinforces comedy in the series as already mentioned above: the absurdity of life itself, the body playing the important role of representing the bizarre and the grotesque. The deaths shown at the opening of each episode are fit symbols of a chaotic world where the grotesque tragedy awaits at each corner. Nevertheless, in this series the grotesque tragedy is easily transformed into a grotesque comedy. Consider for example the episode "The Foot" (1:3), where a man dies in a dough mixer being cut into pieces. When the body is in the slumber room at *Fisher & Sons*, Nate panics after he inadvertently drops the body parts which spread all over the ground:

Nate: I don't know if you notice but I'm really busy right now swimming in a man's guts. I don't know what this is. I'm picking up a part of a person, and I don't even know what part this is.

("The Foot" 1:3)

Claire takes this opportunity to steal a foot in order to avenge herself against her boyfriend² and when the body is finally assembled Nate notices that a foot is missing. The use of the grotesque as a way of destabilizing the natural order of things, hence unleashing laughter, be it as a warning or a way of accepting the unacceptable, against our taste, is precisely one of the main features of the series. That laughter and the grotesque go together is fairly well known. As Thomson comments:

What will be generally agreed upon, in other words, is that 'grotesque' will cover, perhaps among other things the co-presence of the laughable and something which is incompatible with the laughable.

(Thomson 3)

² She will use the foot to put it in the locker of her boyfriend who had told everyone she had sucked his feet, thus having everybody at school start calling her "toe slut".

This is made visible in the episode “The Foot” since this missing foot brings the comic element into the realm of the grotesque. First, it unleashes the free and inhibited laughter and, second, a defensive laughter (what Thomson calls “something which is incompatible with laughter”) due to the fact that the viewer sees this situation as something that can actually happen to someone under similar circumstances. Rico will eventually solve the problem of the missing foot using a lamb’s hoof to replace the real foot:

Nate: Rico, you gave him a foot?

Rico: Yeah. Yeah. I thought it was for the best. Remember that leg of lamb that your mother had...in the back of her freezer for forever?

David: Okay, stop.

Rico: Embalmed, wrapped in latex and duct tape.

(“The Foot” 1:3)

The body in this situation becomes interconnected with horror, a place of fascination and, at the same time, a laughable “object”. The juxtaposition of both the horror and the comic comes from the ability that the human being has of laughing at himself, as is highlighted by Borch-Jacobsen: “To laugh at oneself, to laugh at the relativity of this ‘whole’ which is the self, implies going beyond ourselves, in the most impossible excess of ourselves” (Borch-Jacobsen 739).

This notion of “excess” (of ourselves and of the characters, alive or dead) is even more important in the case of the episode “An Open Book” (1:5), in which a porn actress dies electrocuted. In this particular case the comic comes from two situations, one that is visible and the other that may be considered invisible. The first one is due to the introduction of the issue of sex in the funeral ritual. All of Viveca’s colleagues (the name of the porn actress) are there paying tribute to her, casually talking of their relationship (both professional and non-professional) with her:

Larry: Hey. I’m Larry Wadd. I met Viveca St. John before she even did her first video. Yeah, she was...she was the fluffer on the set of *Dirty Larry 3*. She was friendly. She was eager. I can honestly say I’ve never received a better blowjob in my life. And nobody was ever filming it.

(“An Open Book” 1:5)

Once again, a non-normative discourse that bends standard social rules (what I consider to be the visible part) is introduced. This is also another example of how comedy is used as a form of relief. Similar to Mr. Romano's case, from the episode "The Foot", Viveca will likewise suffer a transformation. She will need her breasts put in a perfect position and Rico will again solve the problem:

Nate: How'd you get her breasts synchronized? Some sort of industrial epoxy?

Rico: Would you ask Colonel Sanders for his secret recipe?

Nate: Oh, come on, I'm not gonna tell.

Rico: I stuck a can of cat food under each one. My sister-in-law did a cat food commercial. We've got like 10 cases.

("An Open Book" 1:5)

As in the episode "The Foot", the invisible part is the one in which only the spectator has access to what is really happening. He/she is aware of the subversion of the rules and, at the same time, of the fact that the aesthetics will prevail over the solemnity of the situation. For Viveca's friends what really matters is that she appears spectacular. This will be confirmed when one of the porn starlets comments that Viveca's breasts have never looked better, which is, of course, a source of laughter for the spectator who is conscious of what is really happening. This is another aspect worth mentioning. Besides the language, the bizarre and the grotesque situations, there is also another side to *Six Feet Under*, which is the fact that the spectator of the series is asked to have both an active and a passive role. By laughing, the spectator is somehow freed of a sense of proximity to the inevitable element in the human condition, that is, its own demise, consequently postponing the sense of an impending end; but it is not long before laughter demands a self-reflexive mood and makes the viewer realize that, by looking at another person's death he/she is also looking at his/her own condition, and also that the seemingly unusual situations depicted in the episodes do after all approximate the spectator to the characters in the series. This way the television series is hiding the tragic in the comic situation, because, after all, there is always some comic aspect in the tragic: the anxiety of man before his finitude.

Six Feet Under finds in the body a way of communicating with the

spectator, but also with the characters that inhabit the house. The comic, as above shown, plays an important role in bringing the absurd into the program in order to promote the (un)natural order of the world. Similarly, these comic aspects reveal a side of the funeral industry that is criticized here through laughter, a laughter that is, at the same time, “compassionate and pungent” (Gonçalves 91 – my translation). I am talking, for instance, of the bodies that suffer grotesque transformations in order to become “spectacular” (as referred in “An Open Book”, 1:5). These alterations are criticized throughout *Six Feet Under* to show how the industry might operate in order to please costumers at all cost which, of course, will increase their income.

Although all this may be awkward for the spectator, it is impossible to deny that the bodies do fulfill their function: to help the living to cope with the pain caused by the loss of a cherished one. Moreover, this function is performed not only by the dead (both when they are in the coffin prepared for the final viewing and when they appear to the living almost but not quite as ghosts), but also by the Fishers’ and their funeral home. This dimension, allied with the manifold presences in the funeral parlor, transforms this particular funeral house in a symbolic space, a meeting point for the several cultures of the United States and also a place for the celebration of difference. One discovers that, despite the fact that the business of dealing with the dead is still a business, after all, the members of the family, as shall be argued in the last section of this article, are there also to help people and to act as carriers of a often forgotten message: death is a natural part of life.

4. “Better living through death”

In the first part of this article it was mentioned that death was a show and a business. In fact, it is impossible to deny that the way the bodies and the relatives of the deceased are treated shows a certain tendency of the funeral industry to apply and dictate the rules for conducting a funeral. This industry is more often than not cruel, cold and, above all, interested in the maximum of productivity with the fewer expenses. On the other hand, as we have also seen, *Fisher & Sons* is a different funeral home, acting in many ways contrary to the ways of the larger corporations that confront

it. This small business, managed essentially by the two brothers (and in a sense also Rico), represents a geography of resistance to larger industries like Khroener. As a matter of fact, the members of this family business, because of the loss of the patriarch in the first episode, are launched on a new journey towards self-realization and genuine mutual understanding (Rahilly) since this loss puts the Fishers in the same shoes as their costumers, which will help them to deal with every different situation they will face with a new sense of what it entails.

This renewed geography of the self-in-business, helps explaining the relevance of the possible readings for the practice in dead-body handling in *Six Feet Under*. Paradoxically, in the series the treatments undergone by the body may be interpreted in two ways: (1) as the creation of a fallacy through the visual and physical changes that are operated on the body or (2) as necessary operations to help people cope with death, since they allow the viewers/mourners to see their loved ones as they remember them.

This is due to Rico and David's work. Both of them work on the body in a personalized way in order to dissimulate any aspect related with death. Hence the reason why the bodies in *Six Feet Under* are considered beings in performance, sometimes even works of art, albeit too transient an art, as Rico mentions of one his works:

Rico: The husband got fired, flipped...shot his wife in the head and shot himself next (...) See this...Like the bride and the groom on top of the cake. And then we cremated them. What a fucking waste of time.

("Pilot" 1:1)

The transformed bodies³ represent the work that is done for the good of the community, because it allows for the perpetuation of the memory and identity of the loved one, this way enabling the recognition of the self and

³ Sometimes all this work seems a waste of time, as Rico mentions above, but it is a very important work. For instance, in the case of Mr. Romano ("The Foot" 1:3), it is this work that permits an open casket funeral, something of great importance for the family. This way, Rico is more than someone who just re-creates the body; he is, as a matter of fact, the artist that, with his chisel, creates a renewed identity for the dead.

of the other. That our identity only exists when we are recognized by the other is clearly emphasized by Synnott in the following comment on the social relevance of the attributes of the body:

Like the organs and parts of the body, the attributes of the body are eminently social. Our age, gender and colour roles are principal determinants of our lives and our social identities, the focal point of our self-concepts and group-concepts. Similarly, our unique attributes of beauty and unattractiveness, height and weight, physical handicaps if any, not only affect social responses to the self, they also affect our life chances. The body, therefore, is the prime determinant of the self.

(Synnott 1-2)

Thus, the biggest asset of *Fisher & Sons* is that they can reinforce the social self of every dead body by changing it according to the expectations of family and friends and, more than that, because they can do it better since they are willing to engage in cultural dialogue and understand the expectations of people with different cultures. As a character comments in one of the episodes, “(they are) more open to accommodating certain requests” (“Nobody Sleeps”, 3:4). Their capacity of control over the demands of their business together with their versatility of approach to it puts this funeral house as the first place to go when death comes around in the broader community it caters to. Although they are worried about money (a necessary means of survival), they are also preoccupied with all that is necessary for the services they provide, as Turnock highlights:

....they (*Fisher & Sons*) have a deeper sympathy for their clients, both deceased and living. Rico cares for the corpse, Nate comforts the bereaved and David attends to the funerary rites with his knowledge of appropriate rituals for the different faiths.

(Turnock 44)

And in this “deeper sympathy for their clients” and understanding of the deeper connections of life and death it is important to also consider the role of the dead. They do not simply become corpses, passive elements in the series, but talk to the living, challenging the laws that govern their world while, at the same time, helping them solve their issues.

This supernatural aspect in the series is of great importance, since in here the dead go on "living" in a liminal state (where the differences normally accepted in social intercourse are often de-emphasized or ignored), which allows them to challenge the living and, at the same time, provide the spectator with information about the characters' past⁴. All the members of the family talk to dead people and face their problems with their help, a feature that is foregrounded, for instance, in the episode "Familia" (1:4).

In this episode the Fishers have to deal with the funeral of a Mexican gangster without any idea of how a Mexican funeral is traditionally done. As Nate mentions: "We are so white. If we step in, we will be totally fucked up" ("Familia" 1:4). It is Rico who is asked to talk to the family and the other gangsters in order to choose the funeral they wish. While David is working on "Paco" (the dead gangster's gang name), he appears to him:

Paco: This is some fucked up way to make a living, you know. So, how was your day, man?

David: You don't wanna know.

Paco: You ever see sunlight? Or you gotta avoid it? You're checkin' out my dick.

David: I was not.

Paco: I was just fuckin' with you, man. (*Seeing the blue suit he will be dressed with*). What is this shit? Oh, hell, no! No. How come you don't call your bone daddy? Still pissed at him, right? Yeah, I'm feeling you, man. What gives him the right to get up in your world? To be so fuckin'—

David: So fucking self-righteous.

Paco: That's what I'm saying. You didn't call him nothing, but he went off on you. Yeah, I think he's got a problem with that stress-management shit. Hell, maybe he's one of them rageaholics. I mean, that boy went off.

David: I know. Just because some kid calls him a fag. It's so unnecessary.

⁴ This is an aspect of the gothic narrative. The dead appear to the living as a form of helping the narrative flow, but, at the same time, they also disrupt it in interesting ways.

Paco: But he called you a fag too.

David: So?

Paco: So what'd you do?

David: Nothing.

Paco: Mm-hmm. When Peter stood and warmed himself, they said therefore unto him, 'Art thou one of his disciples?' He denied it and said, 'I am not.'

David: John 18:25.

Paco: No wonder he went off on you, man. You know? (*now dressed in the suit*) Hey, bury me naked, please.

("Familia" 1:4)

"Paco" is now challenging David in order to live according to his own identity. David is a homosexual and he is afraid of revealing his true identity to his family. "Paco" plays a central role in this episode. He helps David to tell the truth when his mother asks him why he has lately not been with her to church. David answers that he has been going to church with his boyfriend. By saying this he just follows "Paco's" advice: "You've gotta stand up. You've gotta step up" ("Familia" 1:4).

This is only one of the many examples throughout the series. In this particular funeral, "Paco" also helps David choose the music that better suits his own burial, and thus organize the best service possible for "Paco's" family. At the same time, Nate is helping "Paco's" mother cope with the death of her son, telling her that he himself had also lost a father and that God does not choose who He wants to take. This is the main reason why the Fishers, to their own surprise, are invited and included in the final prayer for the loved one Manuel "Paco" Bolin:

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 bring peace to them in their grief as you have in ours.

("Familia" 1:4)

While "Paco's" family is leaving, he comments with David that the funeral was wonderful, with no guns, no violence, and with everybody united in spite of their differences. This is because *Fisher & Sons* is the structure that

allows for a rewarding connection between the living and the dead, playing an important role as a place of memory and becoming also a metaphor for something bigger. Located in Los Angeles, the house may indeed not only represent the city, but also the difficult task that the United States have in solving the problems of their own history, as Heller suggests:

Los Angeles, which – not insignificantly – means ‘the angels’, provides a fitting location for Fisher and Sons Funeral Home, itself a border station between the world of living and the dead. As the origin of Hollywood legend and lore, and as an infamous gateway to hope, youth, success and prosperity, Los Angeles would seem to contradict (...) decay and terror. However, Los Angeles’s culture of the hyper-real and its glorification of celebrity narcissism provide a sinister and mysterious setting for interrogation of the American Dream.

(Heller 76)

The Fisher house itself stands thus metaphorically as a sort of way out for the country dealings with their dead, but also with their living. To understand this house and the family is to better understand a country more aware of its own reality as a space of different cultures, capable of surpassing the problems and finding paths of dialogue for a common understanding. More than anything, this house is the place where difference is celebrated as well as the survival of the multiple communities that compose the vast territory the United States.

Here people may learn how to deal with death, here it is possible to personalize the funeral ritual according to the beliefs of each community (porn stars, Mexican, Italian), making it meaningful rather than socially aseptic. This clearly shows an attitude of comprehension towards the evolution of the funeral ritual, which helps to understand and accept death in the twenty-first century, as Turnock comments:

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.

(Turnock 48)

5. Conclusion

I tried above to show how death as a business and a spectacle was depicted in *Six Feet Under*, how this series strives to discuss the ways in which the death industry works in the United States and also point out that the transition of ancient to modern ways of dealing with the dead and their burial has not been the best. This is especially true in a world which promotes the cult of the body and youth and does not want to think of death as an inevitable part of the human condition, considering it almost a taboo and hiding it from everyday living.

The funeral homes take advantage of this situation and use it for their own profit, dealing with death in a strictly business manner. Furthermore, this business uses all kinds of products to promote the idea that a dead body needs to seem to be alive. The theatricality of the funeral ritual thus hides the hard reality of death, using a psycho-sociological cover, thus showing that, more than providing a needed service to the community it is quite simple business – a dimension foregrounded in *Six Feet Under* through the use of commercials, and also of characters who criticize the industry and the way it works.

Using comedy as one of its biggest weapons, the series tries to simultaneously criticize the attitudes of the industry and relieve the spectator of the burden of his/her own human condition through laughter, while, at the same time, making the spectator aware that he/she cannot dissociate the deaths occurring in the series from his/her own. In a certain way, comedy only allows a temporary relief before the very real presence of death, where tragedy always seems to linger.

This aspect of the series is highlighted through the use of the grotesque together with the comic and the tragic, mixing not only horror and comedy, but also sex and death, as in the episode “An Open Book”, (1:5). What I tried to demonstrate is that the comic here functions in two ways, one that allows the suspension of the norms of reality, contributing

to some bizarre and awkward situations, and the other that comes from the fact that laughter only temporarily frees the spectator of anxiety over death. Also, as shown above (parts 2 and 3), the body plays an chief role, as does language, in all this, a feature that can be observed in some of the examples that were given in order to illustrate the invisible and visible comedy of the series. After all, the body and the way it is approached is the key to *Six Feet Under*.

As suggested in the third part of this article, it is also through the body that the cathartic process is possible. This brings forth somewhat of a paradox in the series. If the (dead) body is seen as work and business, something to be handled in the most money-profitable way, how can it be also be the solution to the problem of grief and loss? The answer lies in funeral homes like *Fisher & Sons*, where, as I tried to explain, bodies (both dead and alive) are trying to find their own rhythm in life – strange as it may seem to talk about the life of the dead. In fact, one of the main differences of this house when compared to larger corporations is that the owners learn how not to treat people or dead bodies as “Human MacNuggets”, but rather as beings who have a past and whose present still promotes a future. Here, the dead appear to those living in order to help them to cope with their own lives but also with death. The funeral house becomes then more than just a business. It is the place where difference is understood, a place of possibility, of productive life, as the episode “Familia”, (1:4) illustrates.

After all, what a series like *Six Feet Under* shows is that the big mystery of life lies not in the fact that we will eventually be placed six feet under. It lies in the fact that life has become the great riddle of humanity. As the title of this article indicates, sometimes living through death allows very definitely for a better living, that is, for a clearly more humane and alert kind of life.

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims at analysing the way in which the American society understands death. For this purpose, I will use the television series *Six Feet Under* by Allan Ball (2000-2005) as an excellent portrait of the funeral industry that sees death as a business and as a spectacle. However, the series also presents other important issues, for instance, that before death, laughing is the best medicine, something that the viewer may find in several episodes. Furthermore, it shows that the Fisher's funeral home seems to be different from the rest of the industry, since they try to find meaning in life through death. This is something that can be seen in the way they treat the living, as well as the dead. The *Fisher Funeral Home* is the place of understanding between the living and the dead, and a metaphor for the path that looks for the equilibrium between past and present, in order to improve the future.

KEYWORDS

Death, Spectacle, Laughter, Society, Understanding.

RESUMO

O presente trabalho pretende, a partir da série de televisão *Sete Palmos de Terra* (2000-2005) de Allan Ball, analisar a forma como a sociedade americana encara a morte. O artigo traça uma evolução da forma como a morte foi encarada ao longo do tempo nos Estados Unidos. A série sobre uma família de agentes funerários é um excelente retrato de como a indústria funerária olha para a morte como um negócio e um espetáculo. Contudo, esta obra não apresenta apenas uma crítica à indústria. Ela também mostra que, perante a morte, rir é o melhor remédio, algo que é frequente nos vários episódios analisados. Para além disso, a casa funerária dos Fisher parece ser um pouco diferente da restante indústria, uma vez que eles procuram, através da morte, encontrar uma resposta para a vida. Isso é visível na forma como eles tratam tanto dos mortos como dos vivos. A *Fisher Funeral Home* é o local de compreensão entre vivos e mortos e uma metáfora

para o caminho que procura o equilíbrio entre o passado e o presente de forma a melhorar o futuro.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Morte, Espectáculo, Riso, Sociedade, Compreensão.
