



Resting in Peace: the Work of Mourning in *Six Feet Under* by Allan Ball*

DESCANSANDO EN PAZ: EL PROCESO DE DUELO EN SIX FEET UNDER DE ALLAN BALL

DESCANSANDO EM PAZ: O PROCESSO DE LUTO EM SIX FEET UNDER DE ALLAN BALL

José Duarte**

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Resumen

El presente estudio analiza la serie televisiva *Seis palmos bajo tierra* (2000-2005) de Allan Ball desde el punto de vista de autores como Philippe Ariès o Jessica Mitford, que consideran la muerte en Estados Unidos un negocio y el ritual funerario un evento que ha perdido su sentido. Por eso, el proceso de duelo no tiene lugar. Esta es, según los autores, “*The American Way of Death*”.

Con todo, la casa funeraria Fisher & Sons es más que un negocio, una vez que en ella aún es posible hacer el duelo y, al mismo tiempo, celebrar la vida. Esto es algo que revela la importancia de la serie como un elemento visual que contribuye para la catarsis emocional del individuo y de la nación, principalmente en el caso de los ataques del 11 de septiembre en Estados Unidos, como queremos comprobar.

Palabras clave: muerte, negocio, ritual funerario, duelo, estudios culturales, nación.

Palabras clave descriptores: Estudios culturales, Muerte, Ritos y ceremonias fúnebres, Costumbres funerarias - Aspectos sociales – Estados Unidos.

* This an essay based upon the author’s MA thesis. It is an extension of that same research where he tries to address some old and new subjects.

** MA in North-American Studies (FLUL), he is a researcher at ULICES (University Lisbon Centre for English Studies). He teaches at the Faculty of Letters, University of Lisbon FCT/ULICES/CEAUL, Lisbon, Portugal. joseaduarte@gmail.com.

Abstract

The present study analyses the way in which *Six Feet Under* (2000-2005) created by Allan Ball is a visual account of the so-called 'American way of death'. Following some of Mitford's (1963) ideas concerning the funeral as a non-event, while commenting on the particular evolution of the funerary ritual, as stated in Ariès' (1981) works, this study tries to illustrate these theories with various scenes taken from *Six Feet Under*. On the television show Allan Ball criticizes the American funerary industry, depicting it as an example of commercialized death where there is no place for the living to mourn the dead.

However, the *Fisher & Sons* funeral home is a place where rituals have not yet become sterile and empty. Therefore, in *Six Feet Under* it is still possible to grieve and mourn, which contributes to the healing process not only of the individual, but also of a nation, especially after the 9/11 attacks, as we shall see.

Keywords: Death, Business, Funerary Ritual, Mourning, Cultural Studies, Nation.

Keywords Cultural studies, Death, Funeral rites and ceremonies, Mourning customs – Social aspects – United States.

Resumo

O presente estudo pretende analisar a forma como a série Sete Palmos de Terra (2000-2005) de Allan Ball apresenta a morte como um negócio e o ritual funerário como um evento desprovido de qualquer sentido, não dando lugar ao processo de luto. Partindo de autores como Philippe Ariès ou Jessica Mitford este artigo analisa a "American way of Death" como ela é vista na série. Contudo, este estudo também tenta mostrar que, apesar de em Sete Palmos, a morte ser vista como um negócio, a Fisher & Sons é mais do que uma casa funerária comum, uma vez que aqui há lugar para o luto e para a celebração da vida, o que mostra a importância da série como um elemento visual que contribui para o processo de catarse emocional individual e colectivo, especialmente no que toca aos atentados de 11 de Setembro nos Estados Unidos, como iremos comprovar.

Palavras chave: morte, negócio, ritual funerário, luto, estudos culturais, nação

Palavras chave descritor: Estudos culturais, morte, Ritos fúnebres e cerimônias, Costumes de luto - Aspectos sociais - Estados Unidos.

Rabbi Ari: *You must be really scared.*
Nate: *I'm going to die.*
Rabbi Ari: *Yeah, me too.*
Nate: *Really? What do you have?*
Rabbi Ari: *A body.*

Six Feet Under, "Back to the garden", 2:7

'I hear my father still, these long years since he died. 'We serve the living', he was fond of saying, 'by caring for the dead'.

Thomas Lynch

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary American television series are becoming more and more popular everyday and there are many types of shows: comic, tragic, detective fictions, sci-fi, among others. They feature almost every possible subject, and, as Mark Lawson comments, it is almost tempting to 'conclude that television no longer has any taboos' (2005, xvii). Yet, it seems that, as the author comments, there is one subject that continues to be extremely sensitive for contemporary television: death. In the news, for example, dead bodies are referred to as 'casualties' or 'people beyond help'.

However, the most popular dramatic genres are the series featuring detectives and pathologists, and these consequently, usually also involve dead bodies. Series like *CSI* (2005-), *Crossing Jordan* (2001-2007), *Bones* (2005-), *E.R.* (1994-2009) or *Dr. House* (2004-) are some of the most well known, for example. But even in these shows the corpse is just a means of finding the murderer and the question of mourning and bereavement is somehow minimized/redeemed by the solution of the killing, as Lawson argues: 'Death in such programmes was deliberate, rare and more or less conquered by the optimism of finding someone to blame in the final frame' (Lawson, 2005, p. xvii).

This is the central distinction between *Six Feet Under* and the series above mentioned. While the former present the dead body as forensic proof, as a part of a giant puzzle that will help the detectives solve the crime, *Six Feet Under* is completely original in the sense that it places death and the dead body as the major character, as can be seen in the opening credits with the image of the body on the gurney: we know that the corpse will drive the story.

It is clear that from the beginning, Allan Ball is challenging television's primary taboo, death. *Six Feet Under* keeps the body in shot, especially since the Iraq War, when the Bush Administration prevented television coverage of the bodies. Not only does *Six Feet Under* put the dead in everyday life, but it also challenges conventions and the funeral industry that objectifies the body, as we shall further see.

Six Feet Under (2000-2005) by Allan Ball has played an important role in portraying the funeral industry in the United States, criticizing the way big funeral corporations

operate within the country, and by putting the dead and death at the center of people's lives. Beginning each weekly episode with a cadaver, *Six Feet Under* presents us, as Lawson (2005, p. xx) claims, with one of the 'primary's mainstream television taboo': death, one of humanity's major issues. We are always avoiding being confronted with death, as Kashdan comments:

Death can be terrifying. Recognizing that death is inescapable and unpredictable makes us incredibly vulnerable. This disrupts our instinct to remain a living, breathing organism. So what do we do? We try to manage this terror. Generally, when reminded of our mortality, when the potential to experience existential anxiety is heightened, we are extremely defensive. Like little kids who nearly suffocate under blanket protection to fend off the monster in the closet, the first thing we try to do is purge any death-related thoughts or feelings from our mind. (2001, p. 1)

This vulnerability is expressed in twenty-first century America not only in the way the theme of death is avoided, but also in the way funerary rites have come to be performed. Turnock (2005) points out that the transition from a traditional to a modern approach in funerary rites has not been easy; without a cultural structure to 'socialise mortality', death becomes a meaningless event. Ceremonies are formalized through codes of behavior, concerning conceptions of dignity and propriety, and containing all demonstrations of unrestrained emotion, preventing people from fully mourning.

This paper aims at giving an account of the so-called 'American way of death' following some of Mitford's (1963) ideas concerning the funeral as a non-event, while commenting on the particular evolution of the funerary ritual, as stated in Ariès' (1981). This work tries to illustrate these theories with various scenes taken from *Six Feet Under*¹ (in which Allan Ball criticizes the American funerary industry, depicting it as an example of commercialized death), and seeks to prove that the *Fisher & Sons* funeral home is a place where rituals have not yet become sterile and empty, thus contributing to the healing process not only of the individual, but also of a nation.

Fisher & Sons may be a business, but it is also the funerary house of a family who has lost their father, and who is going through a similar situation as the other mourners. Despite all attitudes towards death, the Fisher family and Rico, the restorative artist, are there to alleviate the relatives in their mourning. To help them cope with the pain of losing someone, they listen to the bereaved, hence easing their mourning process. In fact, by presenting a 'living-memory' of the deceased, they contribute to ease the stages of grief and, as a result, facilitate the living deal with death and their own dead. From this point of view, mourning may be characterized as a process of obsessive recollection, where the mourner hangs onto loving remembrances of the lost 'subject' (Moglen, 2007).

THE AMERICAN WAY OF DEATH

Jessica Mitford in *The American Way of Death* (1963) argues that death in the American society has become both a taboo and a business. For Mitford, funeral directors

and, consequently, funeral homes have become part of the 'capitalization of death', basing their industry on profits and marketing, and taking advantage of the loved one's relatives in order to increase their income:

When the bell tolls for them the practical essentials – selection of a casket and all the rest – will be in the hands of close relatives who will, it is statistically certain, express their sense of loss in an appropriately costly funeral. (Mitford, 2000, p. 130)

Mitford's statement alerts us to the fact that funeral rituals in the United States have become sterile, without any feeling, especially for those who are left behind. This is all attributed to the fact that in the American society death has gradually been hidden from the public's eye, as Heller comments:

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 reminders of the body's inevitable demise. American capitalism mobilises vast resources in an effort to defer, deny and disguise death. (2005, p. 71)

It all began when people stopped dying at home, as Philippe Ariès points out in *The Hour of Our Death* (1981). The process of dying was transferred to the hospital, a place for therapeutic failure, or, in other words, '...the scene of the normal death expected and accepted by medical personnel' (Ariès, 1981, p. 585). This is also one of the many reasons why, in the twenty-first century, death has become a silent matter.

With death hidden within hospital walls another need emerged: hiding the traces of death on the body, in order to prevent discomfort when looking directly at the decadence of the deceased, as mentioned by Turnock:

In sociological terms the removal of the cadaver, which is both physically and metaphorically polluting, is a key function of funerary rites. Not only does the physical breakdown and decay of the corporeal body present aesthetic, aromatic and hygienic problems, but also the corpse is a symbolic reminder of the disruptive potency of death – both personal and social. Death happens to us all, and this is potentially terrifying in and of itself for the living. (2005, pp. 40/41)

Thus, the funeral home became the perfect place to deposit the cadaver and the funeral director gained importance for it was he who mediated the dialogue between the living and the dead almost like a stage director who controls everything.

As a matter of fact, the power over the corpse allowed the funeral director to redefine the funeral ritual, as well as discover a new way of expressing one's feelings towards their loved one. This is achieved through the creation of a therapy that helped the living to mourn the dead, 'providing the culturally-appropriated rituals that have transformative powers in individual lives' (Laderman, 2003, p. 141). The several changes the cadaver underwent created an image of life in death, or, more precisely, 'a living memory', as Laderman comments, which helped relatives to better deal with the death of a loved one.

Unfortunately, this was also a strategy of 'killing death', distancing it from the public's eyes, and transforming the funeral ritual and the mourning process into something rational, hiding its true emotional nature:

Evisceration of intensity, not passionate judgment either by self or others, was now the goal as twentieth-century American culture sought to combine emotional control with avoidance of excess even in defence of proper standards. (Stearns, 1994, p. 147)

As an example of the 'emotional control' suggested above, consider the following statement by Mitford when she considers the language used by funeral directors:

[...] 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, 2000, p. 17)

By using this kind of terminology and by keeping the reality of death 'hidden behind a grotesque mockery of cheap surgery and cosmetic artifice' (Laderman, 2003: 4), funeral directors managed to create an atmosphere where it is impossible to release the emotional tension during the ceremony.

Ultimately, death means business, as can be seen in the first 'Pilot' episode of *Six Feet Under* where commercials about the funeral industry are presented. The opening sequence of this episode advertises products 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 'Franklin Funeral Supplies': 'We put the fun back in funeral' ('Pilot', 1:1). Ruth, the matriarch of the family, further comments, 'I have seen too many corpses in my life and they're work.' ('Pilot', 1:1).

These advertisements highlight not only the commercial nature of death, but also the new funeral ritual as opposed to the old traditional one, which will also be an issue between Nate and David's characters. In the first episode, Nathanael (the patriarch of the family) is the victim of a car accident and the Fishers have to deal with the loss of their father. As an outsider, Nate, the 'prodigal son' who returns for his father's funeral, does not agree with the way the funerals are arranged, whereas David, his brother and funeral director, follows the norms of the 'death care industry'. At the funeral service, Nate sees David ushering their mother Ruth away, when she starts sobbing, after having seen her dead husband, and he questions Claire (his sister) about where David is taking Ruth:

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 the display of grief and mourning in public is almost forbidden and the funeral is seen as being an artificial ritual. This is contrasted with what is done in Europe, as Nate comments with Claire:

When I went backpacking through Europe after I quit school, I went to this island off the coast of Sicily, this volcanic island. And on the boat over, there was this pine box. Somebody from the island who was being returned to be buried there, and there were all these old Sicilians dressed up all in black, waiting, just lined up on the beach. And when they got that coffin to the beach, these old Sicilian women just went apeshit, screaming, throwing themselves on it, beating their chests, tearing at their hair, making animal noises. It was just so—so real. And at the time, it gave me the creeps, but now I think it's probably so much more healthy than—this. ('Pilot', 1:1)

Nate and David's approaches towards funeral rites reveal two very different perspectives, as Turnock suggests²:

David's sense of professional propriety – his dour reserve, controlled demeanour, respectful silence – can be read as speaking about commercialized and secular attitudes towards death. By contrast, Nate's description of a Sicilian funeral in the same episode indicates from him the importance of catharsis to heal the community and help the bereaved to grieve the dead. Such public demonstrations of unrestrained grief and out-of-control hysteria appear to him as 'probably much more healthy' than the restrained American way. (2005, p. 46)

It is for that reason that Nate is against this new way of dealing with death at his father's funeral and he refuses to go on with the (secular) ritual:

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)

After listening to this, Ruth kneels and sobs and cries violently (similar to the Sicilian women), throwing a fistful of real dirt into her husband's grave, getting her hands dirty, hence, making it feel real, and finally, being able to truly mourn her dead husband, presenting her 'real grief – the untidy business of anger, love, guilt, pain and loss' (Lynch, 2005, p. 214).

Nate's character is, of course, criticizing the evolution of the funeral industry in the United States. All the instruments used for the preparation of the funeral create a cer-

tain atmosphere that prevents the living from truly mourning the dead. Not only does the funeral director take any opportunity to explore the bereaved person, but he is also responsible for creating a particular environment, which avoids contact with all manners of expressing the reality hidden behind this show. The funeral service is based on mass production without any regard to the feelings of those who have lost someone, especially, when some of the funeral homes belong to large corporations. However, *Fisher & Sons* has a different perspective concerning the way the funeral ritual and mourning should be accomplished. They resist the big corporations that want to buy out their family business (a normal procedure from the 90s onwards as Laderman (2003) notes in his book about the cultural history of death and the funeral home). They do not want to surrender to a more industrialized way of dealing with the funeral rites, in other words, they do not want to transform people's loved ones into 'Human MacNuggets' as Nate comments, when he refuses to sell the family business to Khroener, one of the representatives of the 'big business'. Nate, David and also Rico understand that what they are supposed to do is to help those most in need.

SIX FEET UNDER AND THE WORK OF MOURNING

Six Feet Under is a good portrait of how the industry deals with the dead, preventing the living from fully mourning. By creating an atmosphere where the emotional release is somehow restricted, some funeral directors define 'a triumph of accessories over essentials, of stuff over substance, gimmicks over the genuine.' (Lynch, 2003, p. 212). However, as Lynch suggests once more, what appeals in *Six Feet Under* is in the fact that they bring the bodies back to the space of the funeral ritual. This is very important, since the body becomes the visual vehicle for the possibility of recollecting lost things that help us to complete the process of mourning and, consequently, reinforce our relationship with what we have lost:

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, 1993, pp. 1-2)

The visible intact body, without any traces of death, is an important mnemonic device that triggers a sense of stability and meaning, thus easing the pain of losing someone. The funeral director achieves this by using several techniques, in particular the embalming of the corpse, which will allow the dead body to be portrayed as if in a 'continuous life', as Meiwald argues:

The embalming and cosmeticizing of the corpse, on the other hand, perpetuates the image of life, making the body a symbol of continuity rather than finality. [...] What is involved is the symbolic transformation of a threatening, inert image (of the corpse) into a vital image of the eternal continuity (the soul). (2007, p. 4)

By presenting the body without 'any traces of death', funeral directors are, in a certain way, easing the pain of those who continue alive. If mourning provokes, as Penélope Deutscher argues, 'the question of what the other we have lost has been to us' (1999, p. 1), then this way of displaying the body avoids a certain crisis when dealing with death, since someone's loss is experienced as a loss for the self (Deutscher, 1999, p. 1). At the same time, they are also perpetuating the image of the loved one, thus allowing the family to remember him/her as in life. This plays an important role in the process of mourning because it helps the living to better cope with their pain, providing a visual catharsis that contributes to the healing process.

In *Six Feet Under*, this process of visual catharsis is experienced in episodes such as 'The Foot' (1:3) and 'An Open Book' (1:5). In the first episode, Mr. Romano dies chopped to pieces in a dough mixer, and the family requests the body be complete, in order to have a viewing with open casket. This poses an issue for Rico, since one of his feet is missing. However, he manages to solve the problem, and when the family comes to see Mr. Romano, Nate seems astonished with the fact that he is complete. So as to grasp what actually happened, Nate inquires Rico on what measures he took to solve the situation:

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)

Although it may seem very grotesque to the audience who is watching and knows the truth, ultimately what matters is that it is a convincing solution. The family seems pleased with the job Rico performed on the body. In the latter episode, 'An Open Book', this is stressed, and becomes obvious, because those who are there to view the deceased comment on her features. Porn actress 'Viveca St. John' dies electrocuted in her bathtub. When Rico receives the body he needs to align the actress' breasts and, in order to do so, he puts cans of cat food under each breast. Once again, when Nate asks him how he accomplished that task, Rico comments:

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)

Here again, the body is grotesque but it also seems to fulfill its role: to help the living cope with their grief. It also helps them come to better terms with mourning their loved one. The recognition of the other, preserving the best memory and enhancing a certain visual catharsis, unburdens the pain of losing someone and increases the possibility of better dealing with the loss. The confirmation comes from one of Viveca's friends, when she comments that Viveca's breasts have never looked better.

Of course, as a critique to the industry, *Six Feet Under* exaggerates in the presentation of the bodies in order to show that the aesthetic prevails over the solemnity of the situation. Nonetheless, even if what matters is that the body looks spectacular, what is shown here is that this funeral home distinguishes itself from the others, when it is time to help the living going through the mourning process. This may seem like a paradox, but the Fishers are, in fact, different for several reasons. First of all, they care about the loved one's relatives. Given that they lost the patriarch of the family in the first episode, this fact launches them on a new journey towards self-realization and genuine mutual understanding (Rahilly, 2005). In addition, as Turnock comments, 'their personal experience erodes their separation and detachment from the business of caring for the dead' (2005, p. 44). They have something in common with their clients, placing them at the same emotional level, which will facilitate the process of dealing with the several situations that come from working in this business. Furthermore, the Fishers themselves are also mourning in their own specific way and, therefore, they understand their clients' needs, and are open to all kinds of requests (even the most awkward ones) in order to help others mourn as well.

Fisher & Sons funeral home offers everyone the opportunity to express their beliefs, hence representing the multicultural community that resides in the United States. The way in which this business is structured is their largest asset, as Turnock suggests:

[...] 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. (2005, p. 44)

Even if they do not know how to perform the ritual they do not refuse people³, as in the case of the episode entitled 'Familia' (1: 4), where the Fishers have to arrange 'Paco's' funeral, a member of the Mexican community and also of a gang. The Fishers manage to please both the parents and the members of the gang as for the most appropriate way to hold 'Paco's' funeral. At the end of the episode, the Fishers are invited to join them in the final prayer and it is curious that they themselves are included in the prayer:

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)

Apparently, both families are here united by common feelings. As Rahilly (2005, p. 81) suggests, it is grief and loss that unite the Fishers and the Bolins, despite their main differences.

By accepting to perform this funeral ritual the Fisher & Sons is not consigning itself to the profits of business, they actually care about the people and their feelings. This propels the funeral house as a place where ritual can be performed according to the rhythms and needs of each customer and, therefore, it is 'an open, public site of intimate cross-racial, cross-ethnic, multicultural encounter and negotiation, an archive of different bodies and rituals [...]' (Heller, 2005, p. 80).

Something like this would be impossible in a funeral home that blindly follows the commercial and rational view of death. *Six Feet Under* reflects an attitude of comprehension towards the evolution of the funeral ritual, contributing to the understanding and acceptance of death in the twenty-first century, as Turnock argues:

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. (2005, p. 48)

RESTING IN PEACE

Six Feet Under also brings forth another important aspect in American society: the importance of collective mourning. As it is a powerful form of media, television plays an important role in the public audience. Its insistence in presenting the body and keeping it constantly within the scope of the camera seems to contradict the policies of the Bush Administration, namely the scarce television coverage of the dead bodies of American soldiers returning home from the Iraq War (Lawson, 2005, p. xx).

I would like to now draw some attention to specific recent events of our times, to the 9/11 issue and also to the way people around the world suffer these days, particularly in the case of those who lost someone in terrorist attacks.

In the final chapter of *Rest in Peace: A Cultural History of Death and Funeral Home in Twentieth-Century* (2003), Gary Laderman poses an interesting question about the 9/11 terrorist attacks: How do Americans live with their dead? He argues that, in some cases, such as Martin Luther King Jr. or John F. Kennedy, people found ways of communal mourning united in grief, which allowed them to cope with the death of these striking individuals. However, in the case of 9/11, as Laderman comments, there were no bodies to bury, and a funeral without a body to mourn may be very complicated⁴:

Without identifiable bodies to ground our responses, and absent funeral rituals that can provide an orderly manner to dispose of them individually, close family members and all Americans were left with literally nothing to focus their hearts and minds on. (Laderman, 2003, p. 215).

I believe *Six Feet Under* plays here a very important role, not only because it brings death into the spotlight, but also because it can represent a way of collective mourning, as Turnock proposes:

[...] it is through media representations of public mourning following major disasters (such as 9/11) that people learn about responding to death and strategies for mourning'. (2005, p. 49)

The power in *Six Feet Under* lies with the opportunity of public grieving, because it tries to rehabilitate, in a certain sense, the possibility of dealing with the concept of death. As Thomas Lynch puts it, funerals are about the 'living and the dead' and, I believe, by dealing with death and the dead on a daily basis and by portraying that reality on screen, the television show familiarizes the Americans with this reality allowing them, as viewers and as human beings, to mourn their own dead. In spite of it not being the same thing as having the body to mourn, the show allows the spectator and, consequently, the nation to have 'a brief intimate moment [...] an ingrained ritual gesture that brings meaningful, and material order out of the chaos of death' (Laderman, 2003, 211).

By putting the dead and the concept of death at the centre of its heart, *Six Feet Under* promotes a better understanding of these notions, and strives to celebrate the survival of the community by bringing groups together emotionally, and helping them cope with their loss. The Fishers create an atmosphere where the presence of the dead body will have positive effects on the community, helping them find ways of survival, as Seth Moglen comments:

Any community that suffers grave harm must find or invent practices of grieving in order to understand what its members have lost, in order to affirm those aspects of the self that have been denied, in order to find an outlet for rage, in order to survive. (2007, p. XVIII)

A funeral is not only the ritual of burying the dead, but it is also about the celebration of the community that continues to survive, therefore, carrying great psychological and social meaning. As we have seen, death has become more and more a taboo that is being withdrawn from everyday life. Hence, there is no place for mourning and grieving; it will eventually become a silent matter, as Turnock comments:

If grief is not publicly acceptable, and with funerary rituals becoming increasingly sterilised and industrialised, what we find is that bereaved individuals no longer know how to deal with grief. (2005, p. 49)

What makes *Six Feet Under* so special is the fact that each episode openly discusses these themes, and creates a space where death and mourning are no longer done in silence, but are talked about. Consequently, there is the possibility of confronting pain, bereavement and also mortality, providing, in a certain way, a vehicle expressing 'grief and faith and hope and wonder' (Lynch, 2005, p. 210) which will contribute to a sense of common belonging and to the healing process not only of the individual, but also of a nation.

NOTES

- 1 The scenes that serve as an example to some of the theories developed in this paper are from the episodes 'Pilot' (1:1); 'The Foot' (1:3); 'Familia' (1:4) and 'An Open Book' (1:5) from the first season, as it is in the first season that Allan Ball addresses such issues. In the following seasons there are other issues that the Fishers must face.
- 2 This difference between the two brothers, however, is misleading, because David is familiar with the several rituals of the many communities that inhabit L.A. (the place where *Six Feet Under* is recorded), thus showing a versatility that will play a key role. It is, in fact, this engagement with the funerary culture that allows the Fishers to understand and be understood, this way helping those in need go through the process of mourning.
- 3 In fact, they do not know how to perform a Mexican funeral, but they make an attempt at it anyway. Later, in that same episode, we are informed that they were the only ones that accepted this job, because all the other funeral businesses refused to organize the gang member's funeral. Another curious aspect is that the spirits of the dead appear to the Fishers and talk with them, be it to defy the way they live or to help them, as in this case. Paco helps David perform the ritual while helping him confront his life differently.
- 4 Laderman also refers that, as always, Americans will find a way to go on and to remember their dead, be it through public memory, as in the case of memorials or popular culture. I believe that *Six Feet Under* is one of these devices, since it reflects, in certain specific ways, the state of the nation.

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