

Death, in a Manner of Speaking:

A Reading of *Six Feet Under*

La muerte, en una forma de hablar:

Una lectura de *A dos metros bajo tierra*

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Abstract

Six Feet Under (2000-2005) is a popular television show created by Alan Ball about the funeral industry in the United States. The purpose of this study is to propose a close reading of some of its main subjects, such as death and the contemporary funeral industry, but also life, transformation, nation and identity. By placing death and the dead at the center of the camera, Ball is confronting American Society with its own frailties and fears while, at the same time, criticizing the American nation for not being able to deal with its own problems. Despite the Fisher Funeral Home being a business, it is different from other larger corporations. This house is a place for redemption, for the celebration of multicultural diversity, life and, above all, a place where the living can properly mourn their dead, find some spiritual healing and move on with their lives. In *Six Feet Under*, Ball shows no specific solution, but offers some alternatives for dealing with these issues by questioning the personal as well as the national identity.

Keywords

Six Feet Under, Alan Ball, HBO, death, funeral industry, nation, identity.

Resumen

A dos metros bajo tierra (2000-2005) es una conocida serie de televisión creada por Alan Ball acerca de la industria funeraria en los Estados Unidos. El propósito de este estudio es presentar un análisis de los temas principales de la serie, como la muerte y la industria funeraria, la vida, la transformación y la identidad. Colocando la muerte y los muertos en el centro de la trama, Ball confronta la sociedad americana con sus fragilidades y miedos. Al mismo tiempo, critica a la nación americana por no conseguir enfrentar sus problemas. Pero a pesar de que Fisher Funeral Home es un negocio, es distinto de las demás corporaciones funerarias, pues es un espacio para la redención, la celebración multicultural, la vida y, sobretodo, un espacio donde los vivos pueden entrar en duelo y encontrar alivio espiritual. En *A dos metros bajo tierra* Alan Ball no presenta soluciones específicas, pero muestra alternativas para enfrentar mejor estos problemas, usando la serie para cuestionar la identidad individual y nacional.

Palabras clave

A dos metros bajo tierra, Alan Ball, HBO, muerte, industria funeraria, nación, identidad.



Good funerals are about what *we* do.
Can they be done without coffins and gladioli? Without limousines and mourning suites? Without flags and anthems and processions? Of course. But can we do them without the dead? (Lynch, 2005: 214)

1. Knowing *Six Feet Under*

With so many television series coming out these days it is only natural that the viewer's turn their attention to this type of format for several reasons: the episodes are shorter than the average feature film; you can catch up with the plot at any time and a series can tell you a longer, deeper story, among other possibilities. Nevertheless, there are some television shows that have a deeper impact on the viewer than others; hence, being more successful. *Six Feet Under* is one of these cases and, curiously enough, each episode is one hour long as opposed to the average sitcom and soap opera, which is under half an hour. But what makes *Six Feet Under* so special or popular?

According to Mark Lawson, «two of the most popular dramatic genres at the turn of the millennium» are those featuring detectives or pathologists, both of which are usually based on death (Lawson, 2005: xvii). Most of these series' episodes start with a corpse and a murder mystery that must be solved by the end of the episode, which means death is only the motif for something else, as the author comments: «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: xvii). What Lawson is implying is that in television programmes like *C.S.I.* (Zuiker, cr., 2000-), *Crossing Jordan* (Kring, cr., 2001-2007), *Bones* (Hanson, cr., 2005-), *E.R.* (Crichton, cr., 1994-2009) or *House M.D.* (Shore, cr., 2004-2012), death/disease serve only as a pretext to find a solution: the cure or the murderer.

Unlike other shows, in *Six Feet Under* death and the dead become the central character. The series created by Alan Ball, and produced by HBO, has defied one of the greatest taboos in American television by putting death and the dead corpse in front of the camera, particularly at a time of extreme sensitivity for the American people (9/11 and war in Iraq)¹, which changed the American emotional landscape. More than that, what *Six Feet Under* brings forth to American television is how the corpse will direct

¹ Although *Six Feet Under* was released before 9/11 and war in Iraq, it is meaningful that HBO continued to show the series after the terrorist attacks, particularly at a time when the Bush administration wanted to void any public references to the death of soldiers. Plus, as Turnock argues and Duarte further explores, *Six Feet Under* is a powerful medium for collective mourning since it allows all those who lost loved ones to mourn their own dead (Turnock, 2005: 49; Duarte, 2012: 144).

the story in each episode. For Alan Ball, death should not be something to be afraid of or to be avoided in our daily lives, but it should rather be dealt with naturally because sooner or later, in one way or another, we all must face it. The problem is that death has become a subject that we all want to avoid, since it reminds us of our own mortality. As Kashdan points out, death can be a distressing issue:

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. (Kashdan, 2011: 1)

Being it such a disturbing topic, Alan Ball decided to bring forth this subject to television, introducing viewers to one of the biggest issues of life: their own mortality, which can be seen for instance in the opening credits that set the (Gothic) tone of the series:

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. (Turnock, 2005: 39)

The opening sequence offers the viewer the macabre and the grotesque, the enigmatic and the mystic. All the objects, namely gurneys, hearses, dead bodies and gravestones, contribute to enhance the atmosphere that saturates most episodes. As if this were not enough, all the episodes are set in the Fisher & Sons Funeral Home that is both a business and the home of the Fisher family.

Almost every member of the family works in the funeral industry and deals with death on a daily basis. This is also another important feature in *Six Feet Under*: just like the Fishers deal with death and the dead, we the viewers are also confronted with the necessary processes to make our loved ones presentable to the family. Ball presents a critical clinical eye of the death industry, which in most cases became just a business with no regard whatsoever for the importance of the funeral rites. As Turnock comments, *Six Feet Under* is important because it shows the troublesome transition from traditional to modern funerary rituals (Turnock, 2005: 49). In return, the series also offers some reflection on this issue and tries, in a more postmodern way, to create an equilibrium between the old and the new.

These new values «offer the possibility of better coming to terms with death and bereavement in the contemporary (Western) world» (Turnock, 2005: 49). More than that, *Six Feet Under* also explores other important subversive matters by using the turmoil that involves the loss of a loved one to talk about emotions, life and transformation. This last issue is essential because death «rips apart human constructions of reality and plunges the living into a fissure, a liminal space, an awareness of their own betweenness» (Spark and Stuart, 2010: 63), in which they have the opportunity to question themselves and, eventually, change, like in the case of the Fishers or their clients.

2. What are good funerals really about?

Is it possible to talk about good funerals? If so, what are good funerals really about? As mentioned before, the contemporary Western world has troubles in coming to terms with death and bereavement, and this is particularly true in American culture, as Heller suggests:

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, 2005: 71)

This effort to deny and disguise death ended in what Jessica Mitford would call «The American way of death», an expression that clearly resonates in the well-known «The American way of life». In her book *The American Way of Death Revisited*, Mitford explores the funeral industry as a business and a hiding place for death, in which the funeral directors, responsible for the whole process, are depicted as taking advantage of relatives and increasing their own profit margins by selling expensive products:

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 costumer to the higher-priced caskets, they are administering the first dose of grief therapy. (Mitford, 2000: 20)

What is suggested here of course is a certain capitalization of death, where most funerals are just like any other business, a rite without any meaning. The funeral director also becomes the mediator between the dead and the living and has redefined

the funeral ritual by creating an atmosphere that brings a false sensation of comfort. In other words, the funeral industry has transformed the burial service into something empty by trying to emotionally control the living, which in its turn, prevents those alive from fully coping with their loss.

Besides taking advantage of the emotionally fragile clients, the funeral director also has the important role of taking care of the dead. Seeing as society shuns death, the funeral director corresponds to its desire by «hiding death behind a grotesque mockery of cheap surgery and cosmetic artifice» (Laderman, 2003: 4), and new terminology based upon euphemisms, as Mitford notes:

[...] 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: 17)

According to Mitford, a good funeral is one where emotion is kept under control and proper standards are maintained, as opposed to one that is messy and emotional (Stearns, 1994: 147). By controlling the body, funeral directors can hide and disguise its grotesqueness while at the same time creating a sanitized atmosphere. In order for the corpse to aptly perform its duty, it should look spectacular, which in its turn will help the living with the grieving process.

This atmosphere is representative of a contemporary funeral much more distant and private because it does not allow those who are alive to fully express their feelings publicly. As Turnock suggests, «If grief is not publicly acceptable, and with funerary rituals becoming increasingly sterilized and industrialized, what we find is that bereaved individuals no longer know how to deal with grief» (2005: 49).² Here it is important to mention the work of Giorgio Agamben who explored the importance of the body and the relationship between power and death. In *Homo Sacer* he explores the contemporary exposure to death, in which he argues that we are all left exposed to death by power

² This is very important, because as Philippe Ariès explains in *The Hour of Our Death*, there was a transition (reinforced by the advances in medicine and language) in which «someone who was dying came to be treated like someone recovering from major surgery» (Ariès, 1981: 585). Plus, people stopped dying at home and the hospital became the «scene of the normal death, expected and accepted by medical personnel» (Ariès, 1981: 585). This is, of course, the institutionalized hiding of death.

(Agamben, 1995: 115), as our body is the site of our exposure to death (Noys, 2005: 31). This indicates, as Noys argues, that «Western culture has become thanatopolitical, which means that it is dominated by a politics of death that leaves us more and more exposed to both death and the operations of power» (Noys, 2005: 11). Subsequently, death has become horrifying³ and banal but, at the same time, «meaningful and meaningless, both individual and anonymous, both visible and invisible» (Hall, 2007: 8), as Noys notes in his book *The Culture of Death*. He further argues that contemporary society has an ambiguous relationship with death. Consequently, there is a preference in avoiding the confrontation with reality, thus leaving the process to be managed by professionals who have transformed the ritual into something empty.

So, in a sense, death has become an ordinary business, and the funeral ritual has come to represent a simulated rite of what it should be and of what should be felt as real; being it essentially disguised by an industry eager to increase profits. This is only possible because there is a total control of the body, the principal element for visual catharsis; hence, this power over the body functions as an important mnemonic device for easing the pain of losing someone. By embalming the corpse and eliminating any traces of death an image of continuity is created, as Meiwald comments:

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). (Meiwald, 2007: 4)

This influence over the body allows them to perpetuate the living image of the loved one, in addition to also helping the family to mourn the dead. The problem is that they exaggerate by persuading the customer into buying high value products due to their emotionally fragile state.

Six Feet Under openly criticizes the funeral industry through commercials (broadcasted within the episodes) that highlight the importance of buying certain cosmetic/funeral products for their loved ones. For instance, in the first episode, where the Fishers lose their father, there are commercials such as «Wound – Filler: She looked her best every single day of her life. Don't let that horrible disfiguring accident

³ For this issue see Benjamin Noys' *The Culture of Death* (2005). In this book he argues that we are constantly being exposed to death in modern culture (life exposed to death as Agamben points out), particularly because of war, which Susan Sontag explores in her book *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003).

change that» or «Franklin Funeral Supplies: We put the fun back in funeral» (Ball, cr., 2000-2005, s. 1, ep. 1, «Pilot»). A funeral is therefore not a celebration where we can express our sadness, but rather where we find comfort due to the spectacular dead body. However, this is also a way of ridiculing society's need to escape from the reality of death, the funeral industry's supply of endless ways of hiding it from society and, at the same time, its commercialization.

As Ruth, the matriarch of the family, further comments, «I have seen too many corpses in my life and they're work» (Ball, cr., 2000-2005, s.1. ep. 1, «Pilot»). Although Ruth expresses this idea, she does react against it when she discovers that her husband Nathaniel is dead. For instance, due to the intervention of one of her sons (Nate Jr.) she refuses to cooperate with the rules that define, in general, the funeral industry: like being taken away to a separate room when she starts crying during Nathaniel's funeral or, for instance, when she uses a salt-shaker to pour some dirt into the coffin, instead of the usual handful of dirt. By declining to play by the rules of the death care industry Nate Jr. is opposed to the secular attitudes toward death, represented by David (his brother) who has always worked in the funeral industry. Indeed, it is Nate, who returns home for his father's funeral, who refuses to sanitize the ritual, as opposed to David:

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. (Ball, cr., 2000-2005, s. 1, ep. 1, «Pilot»)

Nate tries to demonstrate how this control over emotion is not good. People should be allowed to grieve as they wish, be it in private or in public, as it is essential for the grieving process. When confronted with Nate's new point of view, Ruth starts sobbing violently, screaming, unleashing all her frustration and pain, throwing handfuls of dirt into the coffin; which in a certain way helps her overcome her loss.

Nate calls the viewers' attention to the need of publicly expressing grief as opposed to a more «restrained American way» (Turnock, 2005: 46). The latter was created by the contemporary funeral industry, without any regard for those who have lost someone, as some funeral directors prefer «a triumph of accessories over essentials, of stuff over substance, gimmicks over the genuine» (Lynch, 2003: 212). The character

of Nate, for instance, comments that he does not want to become a «Human MacNugget», refusing to sell Fisher & Sons to a larger corporation (Ball, cr., 2000-2005, s. 1. ep. 3, «The Foot»).

What is also interesting in *Six Feet Under* is that, although the Fishers' have to play by the funeral industry's rules, they manage to distance themselves from the rest of the other businesses.⁴ It is true that they also use cosmetics to visually enhance the body and that they run a business, but the great difference that exists is how they create a special bond with their clients. They are able to do this because they understand what the loss of a loved one means, since they too have lost someone who, for better or for worse, is always present as a ghost, not to scare them, but to help them solve their own familial issues.⁵

3. The time for redemption

In his book *Mourning Modernity: Literary Modernism and the Injuries of American Capitalism* 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. (Moglen, 2007: xviii)

Fisher & Sons is important because it is unlike other ordinary funeral industries; their experience (a combination of personal and professional care) allows them to find convincing solutions to help the living cope with the death of their loved ones. The fact that they too have also lost someone places them at the same emotional level as those who are their clients, and puts them in a new and renewed journey where they can rediscover themselves. Plus, they accept the multicultural diversity of the

⁴ Sometimes big corporations buy out the small, independent and familiar funeral homes and raise the prices; however, the family name is kept and the former owner continues on as a paying consultant, so that costumers could relate to them. This allows them «to consolidate clusters of mortuary facilities in various regions of the country, creating economies of the scale that yielded monster profits» (Laderman, 2003: 179). Even though the Fishers were contacted by a major corporation to sell themselves out they refused the offer, a symbol of their resistance to the funeral ritual becoming just another event and not something meaningful.

⁵ Nathaniel represents the death of the patriarch, a metaphor for «the death of security and the exposition and deconstruction of North-American ignorance and fear of the process of death and funeral practice» (Spark and Stuart, 2010: 64). Plus, like all other ghosts, he directly confronts the living with their own issues, helping them to overcome their problems. In a way, Nathaniel is the memory of the past that needs to connect with the present in order to promote a better future in how death is seen/depicted in American culture.

community that surrounds them and are open to celebrate those differences in customized funerals if necessary. This is clear in the episode «An Open Book» (Ball, cr., 2000-2005, s. 1, ep. 5) where they hold a funeral for a porn actress (Viveca St. John) who died electrocuted, by creating an atmosphere that helps the living mourn the dead. More than that, they let Viveca's friends mourn in their own way, even if that means breaking the usual decorum of language and proper standards, as we can see in one of her friends' statements:

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. (Ball, cr., 2000-2005, s.1, ep. 5, «An Open Book»)

From this example, we can infer that the *Fisher Funeral Home* is not like other funeral homes. It is a place that harbors the opportunity for a society to express their beliefs, representing the multicultural community living in the United States. The fact that they are open to organizing different types of funeral rituals is, of course, their largest asset. For instance, they are the only ones who accept a Mexican-American funeral ritual. While all the other funeral houses refuse to organize it, because the loved one (Paco) belonged to a gang and they do not want to risk any trouble that may arise, the Fishers accept the funeral. In this episode entitled «Familia» (Ball, cr., 2000-2005, s. 1, ep. 4), the Fishers also seem a bit suspicious at first of the gang, but they end up accepting them and manage to please both the gang members and «Paco's» parents as well, by creating the adequate and necessary funeral ritual. They are so successful that when the gangsters discover the Fishers also have lost someone, they invite them to take part in a final prayer, which includes Nathaniel:

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. (Ball, cr., 2000-2005, s. 1, ep. 4, «Familia»)

It is clear how the Fishers distance themselves from the common funeral industry seeing as they have a deeper understanding of those who need assistance (Turnock, 2005: 44). David, for instance, has the necessary knowledge of the proper funeral ritual, while Nate, who has a more emotional/human view on death, assists those in need, and finally, Rico (the embalmer) looks after the corpses with a more personal

approach, as opposed to the mass production style. As one of the character's comments in the episode, «Nobody Sleeps», «[they are] more open to accommodating certain requests» (Ball, cr., 2000-2005, s. 3, ep. 4), which proves how much they care for the people and for those in need.

This gift on how to deal with the dead and with the living, plus their professional and personal versatility, is what makes their funeral home such a special place for the community. Although money is one of their concerns, they are also concerned with all the necessary practices for the services provided. Therefore, Fisher & Sons is much more than a business, it is a place where the funeral ritual can be performed according to the rhythms and needs of each client; 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: 80). In a certain way, the Fishers redeem themselves by looking over for the community and allowing them to properly mourn their dead.

It is likewise important to highlight the role of the dead in the house. While they are being prepared in the slumber room, some of them appear to the living (specially to the main characters of the series) and defy them to face their own issues, to be different and to live a full life. This is visible in the case of Viveca, who teases David to publicly state his homosexuality – something he is afraid of because he thinks he will have a lot to loose in terms of his image in society and, of course, business. «Paco» also presses David for the same reasons, but in this case, he also shows him how to perform a Mexican-American funeral.

In the series, the dead live in a liminal state and, because they are dead, they are allowed to say what they want without any kind of punishment, helping the living to better understand life. They linger on so as to unite the two different dimensions, the real and the supernatural, in order to create equilibrium in understanding death, the dead, life and the living. They also manage to bring forth the «buried, encrypted past» (Merck, 2005: 62) into the present, reminding the American society they should (probably) not forget their own past by burying it deep inside them, because in the end, it will come back to haunt them, in addition to the fact that they should not hide death from society in general. Instead, another solution, which comes to better terms with death, should be found; a combination of the traditional and the (post)modern, one of the main purposes of *Six Feet Under*.

4. In the end, everything changes

One of the most valuable lessons learnt in *Six Feet Under* is that everything changes. However, in order to accept the change, we do not necessarily have to erase everything from the past. In *Six Feet Under*, memory is essential in the role it plays in helping those who are alive to mourn, as Sontag explains:

Remembering *is* an ethical act, has ethical value in and of itself. Memory is, achingly, the only relation we can have with the dead. So the belief that remembering is an ethical act is deep in our natures as humans, who know we are going to die, and who mourn those who in the normal course of things die before us—grandparents, parents, teachers, and older friends. (Sontag, 2003: 90)

In fact, it is memory, tradition, and innovation that allow the Fishers to move on. Instead of selling their business to a larger corporation, they decide to continue with the funeral house as a way to pay homage to their father's memory. Change is not just about erasing the past and starting over anew, it is more than that, it is the possibility of creating something new with what we already know. In the case of the funeral business, for instance, it is the possibility of maintaining both tradition and modernity.

Every person who dies at the beginning of each episode has a name, belong to a specific culture and are a part of the multicultural community that constitutes the United States. Different communities have diverse ways of celebrating funeral rituals and Fisher & Sons is an open space for those different coexisting communities in America. By being open to the celebration of diverse cultures, they are also changing the face of the funeral industry. In this house death and life is what unites people, eliminating the existing cultural barriers in day-to-day life.

With *Six Feet Under* Alan Ball questions what is national and personal identity, using the house as a microcosms for the metaphor of the country. Here, death is not hidden (with the exception of grotesque parts⁶) and the dead are not avoided. The Fishers do not succumb to corporate capitalism, and struggle to find their own specific rhythm, their place in life and in society. Aware that things eventually change, not only do the Fishers learn how to deal with their own frailties but also with others' problems:

Viewers are thus invited to view the Fisher family as a site of relentless interpretive struggle. In episode after episode, these struggles play out across the boundaries of

⁶ And even the grotesque parts are no hidden from the viewer who is confronted with his own mortality, the vulnerability of the human body and with the randomness of life.

public and private, juxtaposing the public performance of obligation to the commercial «death care» industry with the private performance of obligations to love, intimacy, sexuality and domesticity. (Heller, 2005: 74)

As Dana Heller comments, the Fishers have to deal with the boundaries that exist between business and personal issues, private family problems and social change, forcing the characters and the viewers to be confronted with their own mortality and their own issues. As the Fishers become closer to their clients, they start to «rehabilitate the surface of social relations» (Heller, 2005: 75), be it due to the restorative artistic capability of Rico, who manages to recreate an image of life in death, be it because they truly understand those who are grieving.

As time goes by, *Six Feet Under* paints the portrait of a nation composed by several different faces, identities and cultures; a nation that needs to collectively and personally mourn their dead without hiding it. *Six Feet Under* is not popular because it offers a solution for a nation that, like the Fishers, is still trying to find its own inner balance, but because it draws attention to how America needs to accept and find a response towards its own feelings about death and dying.

In *Six Feet Under*, the main purpose of the Fisher business is to create the ideal atmosphere for those living to truly mourn their dead, an important issue given that they are responsible for the first step in spiritual healing, allowing those alive «a brief intimate moment [...] an ingrained ritual gesture that brings meaningful, and material order out of the chaos of death» (Laderman, 2003: 211). *Six Feet Under* may be about death, in a manner of speaking, but its main subject is life, no matter how much it changes.

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