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"The Use of the Dead to the Living": Gothic Surgical Horror in *Six Feet Under*

ABSTRACT

US television drama Six Feet Under *has been examined for its contemporary expansion of Gothic tropes (e.g. Coghlan et al., 2016). This paper develops existing readings by focusing on the evocation of Gothic surgical and body horror (Conrich & Sedgwick 2017) within* Six Feet Under *and the manner in which it directs attention to treatment of the body post-mortem. Death care, it is argued, reflects a broader cultural unwillingness to concede to the inescapable decay, deterioration and demise of the body. This paper examines the various cultural logics attached to revulsion aroused by dead bodies, hidden carnographic transformation of the body, and their uncanny social reappearance "cleansed, purified, immobile" (Bronfen 1992, 99). It is argued that the Gothic corpse in* Six Feet Under *represents "potential that has yet to be realized in full" (Shapira 2018, 2) referring to the illimitable aesthetic values of 'makeover culture' (Jones 2008) that are imposed on the dead. By delving deeper into the industry practices portrayed in the funeral drama, a connection is revealed between the increasing tendency for living bodies to become "a mixture of nature and artifice" (Van Dijck 2001, 100) and its uncomplicated extension to the dead.*

Keywords: Six Feet Under, surgical horror, body horror, makeover culture, gothic corpse

In the third volume of *Aeternum*, Coghlan *et al.* established how the concluded HBO television series *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005) exhibited tropes of California Gothic in its geo-specific suburban reworking of the haunted house, in which the "dysfunctional and under-threat middle class", exemplified by the Fisher family, are variously trapped (Coghlan *et al.* 2016, 17). Their entrapment is largely generated and perpetuated by the family funeral business that literally intersects and occupies the family space. Fisher & Sons Funeral Home (later Fisher & Diaz), not only carries the name, memory and past-labours of their deceased father (Nathaniel Fisher), which must be preserved, but its commercial spaces (slumber rooms, chapel and morgue) that also reside in the same American Victorian Craftsman mansion (Seamon 2013), replete with peaked roof and gabled dormers, that the family call home. With the intramural attendance of the dead within the same structure, a suppressive intensity infuses the 'living' quarters, contaminating it with a requisite comportment, emotional and behavioural restraint and self-control associated with the demeanour of commercial 'death care' (Heller 2014). Jennifer Jenkins states that Gothic "is about contamination, whether perceived or real", arguing that its "narratives topically address prevailing or sublimated fears of institutions that threaten the essential human" (2012, 480). This paper argues that such fears are well-founded in terms of the fiction of the anatomy and the transformation of the body post-mortum during 'death care,' thus making *Six Feet Under* a Gothic text that "bears witness to the permeability of boundaries, which is the point at which monstrosity begins to arise" (Kavka 2002, 228).

By virtue of its location, *Six Feet Under* normalises preparatory death rites. Indeed, it often presents casual everyday exchanges between central characters as they go about the routine practices of embalming or performing cosmetic restoration on the dead. Gothic works traditionally function to give visibility to the otherwise unseen and impalpable (Lloyd-Smith 2004; Coghlan et al. 2016), with contemporary Gothic "more obsessed with bodies than in any of its previous phases" (Spooner 2006, 63). Pete Boss attributes this neoteric concentration on the body to the increasing "influence of medical technology and institutional bureaucracy" on and over the body (1986, 14). Once a person is declared dead, common law countries follow the principles that, firstly, "there can be no property in a human body after death" (Leiboff 2005, 221), and secondly, the dignity of the human body should be preserved in death. The professionalization of death care and performance of funeral rites is driven by the aim of giving the dead a 'pleasant demeanour', thus avoiding confronting mourners with the deterioration of the body (Harris 2007). Yet, it is argued that 'exquisite stasis' is achieved via surgical procedures that border on the horrific (Aldana Reyes 2014). The horrific nature of restorative practices have been masked by definitions of body horror that have otherwise concentrated on graphic depictions of body mutilation in destruction. Furthermore, the mode of body surgery performed on cadavers is

permitted to prevail as it serves as a 'liberating practice' for mourners— removing the oozing exudations and discharge of a body in collapse. Nevertheless, methods used to preserve the identity of the dead are invasive, intrusive and often monstrous sites of "human-technological hybrids" (Edwards & Graulund 2013).

In the *Poetics of Space,* Gaston Bachelard notably proclaimed the cellar "is first and foremost the dark entity of the house, the one that partakes of subterranean forces" (1958, 18). In the Fisher household, the cellar functions to contain death while practices are performed on the body that decelerate the processes of death, in order to give the corpse a new life in death. In the Fisher's 'prep' room, David and Nate conduct their business but also articulate and explore "repressed thoughts and feelings through corpses that seem to come back to life" and converse with them (Seamon 2013, 158). Consistent with Gothic literature, death is horrific precisely because it is often not quite the end. As Conrich and Sedgwick have already stated "*Frankenstein* is undeniably a commanding progenitor of the Gothic body" in its exposure of the body as the raw material for medical science to attempt to breach the boundary between life and death (2017, 7). Such themes remain evident in contemporary concern and debates surrounding the ethics of medical extension of life, resuscitation, and the medical definition and declaration of death (Liao & Ito 2010). On this last matter, the prevailing definition of death is today framed biologically, expressed as the "irreversible loss of the psychophysical integration of the human being or human person" that constitutes a 'higher-brain' or 'consciousness-related' formulation of death (Lizza 2018, 3). That is, it expounds that while the body might still possess a level of 'internal organic integration' (side-stepping Frankenstein's capacity to artificially establish this in a 'constructed' human form) it is said to lack a 'spontaneous drive' to interact with the environment in a 'life sustaining' manner (U.S. Presidential Council on Bioethics, 2008).

Liggins (2000) discusses how the relationship between surgeon and patient, anatomist and cadaver during nineteenth century advancement of medical science as a state-regulated institution, provided a pre-natal context for Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. In this context, medical science succeeded in shifting established attitudes and beliefs on the sanctity and inviolability of the body, to gradually accept how dissevering the body could be a path to knowledge that would supplant a different kind of violence associated with unsafe and unethical medical practices. To this effect, Liggins cites Dr Southwood Smith's (1827) objections to practitioners who "give speed to the progress of disease and certainty to the stroke of death" labelling them "instruments of cruelty and murder" (ibid, 60). Released in 2015, the UK television series *Frankenstein Chronicles* points directly to Mary Shelley's fiction as the product of historical events connected to the way medical science achieved authority over the body via the Anatomy Act, passed in the UK in 1832. Set in 1827 London, the series follows Detective Inspector John Marlott's (Sean Bean) investigation following the discovery of a patchwork corpse on the bank of the Thames. In the course of his inquiry, Marlott enters the burgeoning world of anatomical science and dissection that led to dead bodies being in high demand. In an attempt to achieve legitimacy and

political disassociation from unsavoury means of acquiring bodies (e.g. grave robbing), the Anatomy Act instead sought to exploit the culture of poverty to gain greater access and authority over the body. Southwood Smith's (1827) article *The Use of the Dead to the Living* typifies the anatomist objective in his recommendation that: "all unclaimed bodies from hospitals and workhouses should automatically be handed over for dissection" (xiii).

Six Feet Under works to substitute past horrors associated with manufacturing a body in a "workshop of filthy creation" (Shelley 1818, 43) with the presentation of a now acceptable clinical future for the human form, in which inert bodies are sanitized and sculptured to permit exhibition and 'uninterrupted gaze' (Jones 2008). In his book *Body Gothic*, Xavier Aldana Reyes argues that surgical horror "appropriates Frankenstein's gothic laboratory and transforms it into the antiseptic clinic and the nightmare of the operating theatre" (2014, 147). *Six Feet Under* deservedly fits this sub-genre as it too deals with "explorations of the limits of the body and of existence" referring to the manner in which the human frame is preserved at any cost (ibid). The television drama represents a contemporary redeployment of the Gothic that portrays an industry charged with the "recomposition of the human body" rescuing it from its collapsed, besmirched state by conforming to the same cultural logics that drive makeover culture (Sawday 1996, ix). In doing so, post-mortem body restoration is tied to the forms of body modification practices performed in life that promote "the clearly manufactured and purchased [...] over an organic or 'natural'" (Jones 2008, 92). Within makeover culture, living bodies are enhanced, improved and 'preserved' in a state of youthfulness. As Walter has argued, "late-modernity's celebration of the body is threatened by disability, disease, death and decay" (2004, 465). Thus, early nineteenth century "resurrectionist culture" is reconfigured in *Six Feet Under* so that rebirth is exchanged for release from degeneration and protection from decay thus preserving the dignity of the human body in death rites (Marshall 1995, 327).

Authority Over the Body

The Rainbow of Her Reasons (2005) constitutes the sixth episode of the fifth and final season of *Six Feet Under*. It provides an interesting case example and provocation for the way in which the funeral drama represents and explores the pervasiveness of appearance ideals and its impact for the dead within mourning and burial rites. In this episode, individuals close to the deceased are able to witness the body 'untouched' before a peaceful, relaxing appearance is imposed upon an otherwise violently arrested life. Over the course of the episode, mourners consistently disregard funerary customs and boundaries that ordinarily regulate contact with the dead. The dysfunctional nature of appearance ideals imposed upon the dead is further emphasised by the involvement of film director Mary Harron (*I Shot Andy Warhol,* 1996; *American Psycho*, 2000; *The Notorious Betty Page*, 2005) as a guest director for the episode. Harron's directorial involvement in *Six Feet Under* provides a connection between the television series and one of her other most notable film projects, in which she brought one of the great sociopathic misogynists of contemporary fiction to the

screen – *American Psycho*'s Patrick Bateman. In *American Psycho*'s "damning critique of the cultural consequences of contemporary capitalism" Patrick Bateman represents a corporate acquisitive struggling to contain and control the ever-evolving set of codes for projecting status and success, such as the design of business cards, achieving table reservations in exclusive restaurants, apartment living, personal grooming and appearance etc. (Rollert 2016). Bateman's empty corporate existence and excessive yuppie life-style is typified in part by his "excessive and erotic [narcissistic] interest in his own body", which serves to emphasize how he inhabits a culture that values appearance above all else (Floti 2017).

A level of equivalence exists between the deference with which Bateman objectively treats his own body and the clinical practices performed on the dead by funeral directors, as represented and (partially) portrayed in *Six Feet Under*. At the beginning of *American Psycho,* film audiences are introduced to Bateman via his elaborate daily cleansing and exercise routines. Bateman's applications of anti-aging and beauty enhancing products constitute an excessive projection of pathological narcissism through which he desperately tries to communicate and associate substance with appearance. Yet, like a human cadaver, Bateman reveals he is lifeless within, a cypher rather than a character (Young 1993). He reveals:

> There is an idea of a Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me, only an entity, something illusory, and though I can hide my cold gaze and you can shake my hand and feel flesh gripping you and maybe you can even sense our lifestyles are probably comparable: I simply am not there (ibid).

"Fiona Lenore Kleinshmidt, 1948-2005"

Following the convention established from the first season of *Six Feet Under* onwards, its final season continued the practice of opening each episode with a prelude that depicts the death of the person that Fisher Family & Sons are subsequently entrusted to prepare for viewing and burial. While the series chronicles the changing relationships and family ties that connect individuals to Fisher Family & Sons, each episode tells its own story – the story of the deceased. In this way, the episode directed by Harron is the story of Fiona Lenore Kleinschmidt. Unlike the majority of cases handled professionally by the Fisher sons, in this episode the deceased is known to the family as the friend of Aunt Sarah, sister of Ruth who is the mother of Nate, David and Claire Fisher. The episode also reveals Fiona to be the woman to whom eldest Fisher son, Nate (Nathaniel), lost his virginity when he was only fifteen years of age. The otherwise routine-nature of the preparatory process and the conditions under which the immobile body is observed are unsettled in *The Rainbow of Her Reasons* due to the Fisher family's personal relationship with the deceased. The veneer of objectivity associated with performing the professional role of a mortician is particularly disrupted for Nate, due to his prior subjective experience of the body that he is then required to treat dispassionately. During the episode Nate consults with Aunt Sarah over the funeral arrangements for her friend. Although the episode avoids subjecting its audience to the cost breakdown associated with Fisher Family & Sons

services, the scene serves to allow Sarah to request that Nate "make her beautiful" (ibid).

Having experienced his first sexual encounter with Fiona at the age of 15 years, Nate once again beholds her naked body – this time not by mutual consent but as the result of Fisher Family & Sons authority over death. As Nate enters the mortuary, his ordinary everyday place of work, he reacts with "whoa!," to which his brother David acknowledges: "Yep, first person you ever slept with". This statement takes restorative artist Federico, who is working on Fiona's body, by surprise, as he exclaims "Really?" Looking down at the body, subjectively discerning the naked, older and inert Fiona before him, Nate states, "For real." David then vocalises what Nate might be thinking when he asks: "I bet you'd never thought you'd see her naked again?" Federico then pushes the conversation too far by asking: "Hey, how'd she hold up? What's the difference on her 20 years later?" To which Nate responds: "In case you haven't noticed she's all bruised and busted up you fucking idiot," before covering the body with a sheet in a gesture of protection. In this respect *The Rainbow of Her Reasons* conforms to Harron's broader treatment of violent events, also employed in *American Psycho*, where "she finds the aftermath of violence more interesting than the actual act" (Bastién 2016). In this episode, Harron again exhibits her tendency to linger on bodily trauma, firstly as Fiona's death is the result of an accident (she slipped and fell down a canyon having been forced to join Sarah on a morning walk), but secondly because the whole episode probes what the series has otherwise succeeded in normalizing.

Meredith Jones (2008) explores the perpetuity of the artificial, in both life and death, in her case study of television celebrity and pornographic actress Lolo Ferrari– famed for her extreme body modification. During her life, Ferrari underwent 22 enlargement procedures to increase her breast size to a 182cm silicone-enhanced bust. In Jones' analysis of Ferrari's hyper-femininity, one quote from Ferrari particularly stands out, in which she states: "I adore being operated on [...] I love the feeling of a general anaesthetic – falling into a black hole and knowing I'm being altered as I sleep" (Ferrari quoted in Jones 2008, 93). While Jones uses the quote to demonstrate the nexus of cosmetic surgery, consumer and medical culture, the manner in which Ferrari claims pleasure from her immobility and surrender during transformation, serves to craft a new and interesting space where surgical means of attaining beauty effortlessly connects with death care. To this effect, Tseëlon recognizes that the "aestheticisation of the dead" and the "beautification of the living" are both "designed to protect [...] from realization of some lack by creating an illusion of wholeness and immortality" (1995, 117). Jones also highlights the parallels between Ferrari's comment and tales of the "supreme beauty of the sleeping, or dead" found in Sleeping Beauty and Snow White respectively (2008, 94). Indeed, while Snow White dies, she does not decay. As Jones puts it: "not breathing yet 'fresh'" (ibid, 95). Indeed, Bronfen has also argued that Snow White's transparent coffin "elicits an aesthetic viewing" returning us to the surveyed feminine body and the power of the masculine gaze explored in *Six Feet Under* through the preparation of Fiona's body (1992, 102).

More generally, *Six Feet Under* captures how death is perceived as a "matter out of place", a phenomenon that is separate from the composition of everyday life thus leading to the surrender of control to others deemed more equipped and professional (Douglas 2003). Protocols, conduct and convention provide substance and guide the grieving through an aberrant experience, filling the void at a time when individuals worlds have been emptied and drained. A key area where mourner conformity is expected and reinforced is in the area of restoration services. This aspect of the profession has sparked its own industry in specialised cosmetic products. For example, a cadaver will require non-thermogenic make-up as conventional make-up for the living is designed to be absorbed by the skin and applies more uniformly, whereas on the flesh of the dead it simply blotches. The artificiality of the surface veneer pervades most post-death rituals. An aptly named Australian florist company, 'Absolutely Unreal', recommends to its prospective customers that they "may wish to consider hiring artificial floral tributes" for funeral and service flowers. It appears that nothing should trigger thoughts of decay.

The Embalmed Corpse: Creating an 'Object of Sight' (Bronfen 1992)

In many Western cultures, embalming (the injection of chemical solutions into the arterial network of the body in order to 'disinfect' and 'slow' the decomposition process) is presented as a normal and necessary procedure. However, in countries like the US where embalming is an expected part of most funeral arrangements it is not actually a requirement of law nor, as some argue, is there much legitimate need for it. Indeed, the highly toxic chemicals used in the physically invasive process of embalming pose a real health risk to those who perform the procedure. The premise that embalming sanitizes the body, which has become a source of contagion, to make it 'safe' for viewing is inaccurate. The procedure is primarily used to temporarily slow decomposition in order to preserve a more 'life-like' appearance. Embalming has been so convincingly marketed to the funeral-buying public that it became routine and ordinary within American society (Slocum & Carlson 2011). To this effect, embalming constitutes part of a broader range of temporary cosmetic restorative processes that seek to reduce the appearance of death (hypostasis) in order to preserve the last elements of an individual's social identity (Chapple & Ziebland 2010).

In *Grave Matters,* Mark Harris (2007) provides a case study of the method for escalating funeral costs. In his account of the experiences of the Johnson family, responding to the loss of their only child, 18-year-old Jenny, Harris chronicles how a basic funeral package ranging between $3,295-$3,595 effortlessly increased to a total of $12,376. The funeral director is revealed as leading the Johnson family through an itemized set of costs that are added gradually, using one decision to require further consequential obligatory purchases. As Harris highlights, because the initial funeral package offered to the family included a viewing, they then also had to agree to embalming at an extra cost of $825, which in turn adds hair styling services (a beautician at a cost of $90) and dressing and 'casketing' of the remains ($50) to the

consideration. Harris is able to financially trace and chronicle the way dignity and presentational concerns permit funeral directors to be able to upsell supplementary services, such as 'professional funeral wear' where garments that have the back cut out for minimum disruption of the body and easy dressing ($135). What is an emotional process for the family is used to drive a financial process for the funeral director.

Accounts provided by individuals of their first encounters with a dead body, in otherwise death denying cultures of the West, describe how separate and disconnected the dead appear to the living, often causing individuals to respond by staying with the body (McManus 2013).[4] Pre-funerary medicalised rituals violate that vulnerability in order to prepare the deceased for one last mode of social connectivity. For the grieving it is a final opportunity to be with the person that will be physically gone forever. It will also constitute a notable last memory of the deceased. The funeral director's charge is therefore to avoid having mourners recoil at the grotesqueness of the natural order of events connected with the decomposition of the body, for autolysis (or self-digestion) begins immediately after death as the body has no way of getting oxygen or removing waste. Muscle stiffness (or rigor mortis) also gives the body sheen, due to ruptured blisters, causing the skin's top layer to begin to loosen. In the last moments with the deceased artificiality prevails as a means of disguise and diversion.

Exhibiting the Body

Typically, conventions relating to how the dead are laid out are "deeply ingrained in the specific death culture in which the corpse and its mourners are situated" (Mui 2016). For example, in modern Western societies laying out the dead often demands that the body is arranged so that corpse legs are extended, arms folded with hands placed on top of the chest – a demeanor that (again) is meant to reassure mourners that the dead are at rest. Yet, there are increasing examples of grieving families opting to preserve the memory of the deceased in 'living' postures that serve to denote the 'interzone' that the dead assume pre-burial or cremation where they may have passed away but have not yet passed on (Bronfen 1992). The dead remain in the presence of the living, rather than keeping death out of sight, in Charbonnet-Labat Funeral Home in New Orleans, USA, which has gained distinction for the manner in which it stages bodies in an 'out of the box' fashion in what might be described as death dioramas. The body of 53-year-old Miriam Burbank was posed sat at a table, cigarette in hand surrounded by her preferred alcoholic beverages as if sitting in the corner of a party. While in San Juan (Puerto Rico), Christopher Rivera, a boxer who was shot to death, was propped up standing in a fake boxing ring for his wake (Robertson & Robles 2014).

[4] In a *The Rainbow of Her Reasons,* Ruth breaks the rules and leads Fiona's friends down to the Fisher Family and Sons mortuary to be with the body.

A further example of the way methods for protecting bodies from decay have motivated extravagant modes of public exhibition that give bodies a new life in death can be found in Gunther von Hagens' oft-referenced *Bodyworlds* exhibition. The exhibition showcases his technique of plastinating bodies that entails removing body fluids and replacing them with resins and plastics. Much like the viewing trends discussed above, the plastics have the effect of holding the body in a rigid statuesque form. What began as a method for the use and application within schools of anatomy has been converted into an art form, producing anatomized bodies for public spectacle. Lieboff reflects on the way *Bodyworlds* incites re-consideration of the sanctity of the body in death and the legal rights of the dead, stating that:

> In our lives, law treats as axiomatic our status as autonomous free-willed agents. However, our ability to retain this autonomy [...] is taken away from us at our death—for instance, our choice[s] [...] may be overridden by others after our deaths (2005, 226).

Indeed, she observes that the Anatomy Act does not cover the purpose and function of *Bodyworlds*, and that while individuals may have donated their bodies for the process of plastination, they subsequently became "the raw material for transformation into basketball players, chess players, horse riders, and a chest of drawers" (ibid, 227). In other words, these bodies have been reconstructed in poses, roles and as objects that deny the free will and autonomy of the once living.

Taking the above examples and arguments and returning to Harris' (2007) account of the embalming process performed on eighteen-year-old Jenny Johnson's body, we are introduced to a set of practices that are equally invasive, intrusive, and involve the desecration of the body in the name of conjuring a representational likeness to the physical ideals of the living. Harris' description reads like a passage from Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* as he describes the process, instrumentation and techniques used on Jenny Johnson's body. For example, we are introduced to the sharp 2-foot long 'trocar' used to pierce the abdominal wall in order to siphon out its contaminants, which is required to be firmly driven into the body in an act termed 'belly punching'. Learning about some of the measures performed on the body provokes a response of physical empathy for what such actions would mean for a living, feeling, pain-sensing individual. For instance, the use of packing forceps to push "wads of cotton soaked in phenol into Jenny's anus and vagina", gluing eyelids to an 'eyecap' placed on the eyeball, shooting barb-tipped wire into the mouth filled with 'mortuary putty' in order to draw it and keep it shut, "running a half-curved needle threaded with suture into each breast at a point just off the nipples and pulling the suture taut", all evoke a sense of horror and body trauma (ibid, 17, 19). At the very least it requires the body to suffer indignity in order to achieve a 'peaceful' appearance to console the living.

An Ending

Funeral directing relies in part on exploiting the way society has come to view human remains with the "utmost of abjection" (Kristeva 1982, 4). Indeed, the "commodification of the corpse" (Richardson 1987, 79) by a professionalised death care industry, has reformed the otherwise gloomy respect that "condemned [the body] to putrefaction, the dark work of destruction" (Foucault 1973, 125). Following on from medical management of death, which assumed authority and control over the process of death, professional death care took on the responsibility of managing the appearance of the dead and mourners' access and interaction with the deceased. Thus, funeral rites have evolved to discourage families from having close physical contact with the deceased, and in the process created a new image of death which Bronfen describes as "idealized images of the deceased in such a way that permanently embalmed bodies and stable images displace and replace impermanent materiality" (1992, 87). In a culture where individuals define themselves, and are defined, by their body, the practices represented by *Six Feet Under* signal the predominant visual orientation of the death care industry and its impact on how we *see* the dead. *Six Feet Under* points to clandestine realities that are performed to perpetuate a pretence and create a deception that quells the fear of bodily *death* amongst the living. As a Gothic text, *Six Feet Under* exposes "corporeal instability, mutability [and] capacity for transformation" that exploits the desirability of the non-natural, artificial, contained and controlled (Aldana Reyes 2014, 57).

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