Journal of American Studies of Turkey
21 (2005) : 77-88

America *Six Feet Under:* Serial Death and the Paternal Ghost in Neo-Soap Opera

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1. Against the Tradition of the American Soap Opera, or Death as Comic Relief

> "No accident you guys are undertakers. You take every fucking feeling you have, put it in a box, and bury it."
>
> (Brenda, *Six Feet Under* I/4)

Brenda Chenowith is one of the main characters in the US-American television series *Six Feet Under*, launched in 2001 and now running in its fifth season. The series has been created by Alan Ball who also wrote the Oscar-winning script of the film *American Beauty*. As in *American Beauty*, Ball in *Six Feet Under* chooses the suburban setting to tell an acerbic tale about repressed white America. The series, which arguably is a variant of the soap opera genre, has rightly been called sublimely dark and gothic (Balko) as it confronts the morbid truths of life especially by highlighting the characters' ignorant and confused manner of dealing with life's petty calamities. With its riotous black humor, the series particularly centers around the absurdities of American funeral rituals, inappropriately reappearing dead persons, and a disastrously disorderly family, namely the Fishers who own and live in a funeral home. In many self-reflexive moments especially filtered through characters adjacent to the Fisher family – like in the quote above by Brenda, the girlfriend of one the Fisher sons – the series continuously comments on what the audience actually sees. These analytical statements not only tellingly observe contemporary funeral service routines and the American way of handling the dead. They also serve as strategies of parodying traditional television family series and are therefore commenting on postmodern popular culture and mass media discourses in general, thus rendering the series into a neo-soap opera. But all these essential digressions notwithstanding, what most blatantly departs from the traditional soap opera formula is the fact of letting the family father die within the series' first five minutes and have him return as a ghostly figure.

American television series from their start in the post-radio days of the 1950s have primarily been about families and addressed to a family audience. As cultural theorist David Morley points out not only is television "a domestic medium (and is characterised by programme forms specifically designed for that purpose)", but moreover "the domestic context of TV viewing […] is constitutive of its meaning" (*Television, Audiences* 321). In this sense, "'[w]atching television' cannot be assumed to be a one-dimensional activity which has equivalent meaning or significance at all times for all who perform it" (Morley, *Family Television* 16). Hence, as John Storey asserts, watching television is a social practice; it can be a means either to isolate

oneself or to make contact with other family members who are watching television at the same time (19).

The prime example of this interaction between medium and consumer is undoubtedly the historically most popular television genre: the soap opera. *General Hospital*, *The Wonder Years*, *Dallas*, *Dynasty*, *Falcon Crest*, *Knots Landing*, *Flamingo Road*, *Once and Again* are just some of the many notable examples of daily as well as prime-time soaps. Television's small screen and home-based usage perfectly suit the purpose of dealing with and focusing on character and relationships. As Robert Abelman stresses, all television genres, but especially soap operas "play exclusively on these intimate properties of the medium and its consumption" (357). Through its personal as well as serial nature, the soap opera calls for audience involvement as a sense of becoming part of the lives of the characters. It is above all the family-home setting that serves as ideal narrative framework for emotional entanglements and interpersonal conflicts. Accordingly, at a soap opera's center there must exist the family (Kingsley 2).

Six Feet Under partakes and revisits this tradition of the family-based soap opera. The series starts out on the highly symbolic day of Christmas eve. It is the annual event of the family gathering for a festive dinner that will never take place. Because this year, Fisher senior dies in a car accident – he is driving their brand-new sleek hearse – caused by his lighting a cigarette, leaving the family to organize their messy lives as well as the run-down funeral business. The pilot episode culminates in the funeral of Mr. Fisher. Leading up to this climactic event the audience is introduced to each member of the Fisher family: son Nate, returning for Christmas from his unsatisfying career as assistant manager of organic produce in Seattle, performs anonymous sex in an airport storage room with Brenda whom he has just met on the plane; second son David is secretly enjoying the bliss of 'forbidden' sex with a black policeman with nobody in the family even suspecting him being gay; the teenage daughter Claire smokes crystal meth and is about to embark on her first sexual experience when she hears about her father's death; and finally mother Ruth breaks down and admits to her sons during her husband's funeral that she is having an affair with her hairdresser. As the family members get together and will remain under the same roof until way into the second season, each of them is bound to come to terms with his or her position within the family unit. Unwillingly, but forced through the death of husband/father, they stumble towards an understanding of one another and themselves. At the same time, the funeral business continues to interfere with their private and professional lives, which in turn reflects back on the way they handle the wishes and sorrows of their clients who are expecting to be taken care of at "Fishers' Funeral Home." Thus, the start of *Six Feet Under* with its family mourning the sudden, tragic loss of one of their members may be said to be a typical soap opera formula – at first sight. The opening sequences show appearances of real grief to which is added through various disclosures of private secrets a touch of melodramatic excess which is but another distinctive feature of the soap opera genre.

But there is more to this series than just sensation and melodrama. There are a number of narrative as well as visual details that distinguish the events in the establishing scenes from those of standard soap operas. Not only does the often short-cut editing technique mark an unusually elaborate level of sophistication compared to other rather blandly edited soap operas. The juxtaposition, for example, of Ruth throwing her freshly roasted Christmas turkey across the kitchen floor after hearing the news of her husband's death – and thus culinarily ruining the family feast – with David's bored manner while attending a funeral service downstairs as well as Nate's rampantly making out with Brenda in the storage room calls forth a comic effect that clearly counterpoints the tragic situation at hand. The intrusion of comedy into this otherwise melodramatic setting from the start marks a distancing from the black-and-white logic of traditional soap opera's ethics.

2. An American Family Affair, or The Saltshaker Rebellion

Another instance of comically disrupting the flow of the narrative is the interspersed appearance of uninvited guests at the Fisher funeral service that takes place in their own house. While Nate and Claire sit with an attitude of exasperation on the couch watching the stream of mourners file by their father's open casket prominently on display in the slumber room, they spot a black man in police uniform. Claire takes interest in this attractive cop whom she has never seen before and thus cannot identify as David's lover Keith who has come to pay his respect without David knowing about it. In the following dialog of non sequiturs Nate gets lost in memories past activated by his crying mother, and at the same time he is annoyed at people present he has never seen. Claire in the mean time starts to cruise the cop, again causing a comic relief counterbalancing the otherwise somber atmosphere:

> Claire: Who's that cop?
> […]
> [Ruth cries in front of casket, David leads her to side room.]
> Nate: What? She's sad, so he has to get her out of sight?
> C: They always do that. The second someone starts to lose it, they take them off into that room. It makes the other people uncomfortable, I guess.
> N [loud]: This is not about the other people!
> C: Volume.
> N: When I went backpacking through Europe after I quit school, I went to this island off the coast of Sicily. [View of island with small group of people at beach and boat carrying casket. Nate's voice-over] *It was this volcanic island. And on the boat over, there was this pine box. Somebody from the island being returned to be buried there. And there are all these old Sicilians dressed up all in black waiting, lined up on the beach. And when they got that coffin to the beach those old Sicilian women went apeshit, screaming, throwing themselves on it, beating their chests, tearing at their hair, making animal noises. It was just so . . . so real. I mean, I'd been around funerals my entire life, but I had never seen such grief. And at the time, it gave me the creeps.* [Cut back to funeral parlor] But now I think it's probably so much more healthy than . . . this.

> C [looks at Keith]: That cop is hot.
> […]
> C [sides up with Keith at the casket]: Did you know him?
> Keith: No. Did you?
> C: He was my father.
> K: You're Claire?
> C [surprised]: Yeah.
> K: Keith Charles. I'm a friend of your brother's. [They shake hands.]
> C: Of Nate's?
> K: No, David's.
> C: David's friends with a cop?
> K: [hesitantly, repeating David's earlier evasion]: We play racquetball together.
> C: David plays racquetball?
> David [cuts in and pulls Keith away]: Excuse us (*Six Feet Under* I/1).

While Claire watches the ensuing discussion between David and Keith, finally gathering from their bodily interaction that the nature of their relationship certainly is not restricted to only playing racquetball together, Nate has gone into the side room to comfort his mother. Nate's almost antagonistic and hostile attitude throughout the scene stands in stark contrast to David's, who anxiously tries to hold up pretences both lying about his homosexuality and stifling his own grief as well as that of his mother. Nate's behavior, on the other hand, critically speaks of the total lack and the absolute repression of outwardly articulated, unrestrained mourning.

In what will lead up to his 'saltshaker rebellion,' Nate contrasts his family's tight and sanitized grip on their expressive response to the Mediterranean ritual of mourning where – as the audience can see in the graphic interspersed flashback – the bereaved women fling themselves shouting and crying on the casket of a deceased, implying that he thinks this latter behavior to be more adequate and even healthier. In the ensuing scene at the graveyard, the mourners are using a device for sprinkling earth onto the casket: the so-called earth dispenser. Once more, Nate is infuriated by the funeral procedure:

> Nate [watching the priest sprinkling earth]: He looks like he's salting popcorn. [Each of the family members take their turn in using the dispenser, while the minister goes on to recite the standard funeral prayer "dust to dust," etc. When it is Nate's turn, he kneels down and grabs some earth from the graveside]
> David: Nate - -
> N: No! I refuse to sanitize this anymore.
> D: This is how it's done.
> N: 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. He was our father!
> D: Please don't do this.

> N: 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're ever gonna have is gone! Forever. And that sucks. But it's a goddamn part of life, and you can't really accept it without getting your hands dirty. Well, I do accept it, and I intend to honor the old bastard by letting the whole world see how fucked up and shitty I feel that he's dead! Goddamn it! [Fiercely throws handful of earth into grave.]
> Minister: Ehm. Amen (*Six Feet Under* I/1).

Nate not only refuses to follow the standard burial procedure, he also uses a language spiked with graphic slang expressions that turn into blasphemies within a religious context like this. And while David is very much offended by Nate's rude behavior, Ruth steps up herself and follows David's example:

> Ruth: Wait. [Walks up to grave once more, picks up a handful of earth and throws it into the grave. She repeats this several times, now with both hands, starts to cry loudly, leans over grave side. David tries to interfere.]
> N: Let her.
> Minister: Let us pray. (*Six Feet Under* I/1)

Like the Mediterranean women shown before in the flashback-scene, Ruth is letting go of her culturally trained self-control, and she openly and publicly howls. Digging their hands into the dirt surrounding the paternal grave, both Ruth and Nate herewith are acting up against what Brenda had acknowledged as the typical 'clean' family behavior of the Fishers: taking a feeling, putting it in a box and burying it. They also refuse to follow the standard procedure of *The American Way of Death*, to borrow the title phrase of Jessica Mitford's classic study.

3. The Death of the Father, or "We put the fun back in *fun*eral."

> A funeral is not an occasion for a display of cheapness. It is, in fact, an opportunity for the display of a status symbol, which, by bolstering family pride, does much to assuage grief. A funeral is also an occasion when feelings of guilt and remorse are satisfied to a large extent by the purchase of a fine funeral. It seems highly probable that the most satisfactory funeral service for the average family is one in which the cost has necessitated some degree of sacrifice. This permits the survivors to atone for any real or fancied neglect of the deceased prior to his death. (*National Funeral Service Journal*, qt. in Mitford 20)

In what at times comes across as highly comic and absurd, Jessica Mitford's investigation of "a new mythology," the modern American funeral rite, recounts "the peculiar customs surrounding the disposal of our dead" (15-16). Accordingly, she looks into the seemingly common-sense claim that America's high standard of living calls for an equally high standard of dying. Of particular interest is her stressing "an assortment of myths based on half-digested psychiatric theories" like the importance of the "memory picture" ("meaning the last glimpse of the deceased in an open casket, done up with the latest in embalming techniques and finished off with a

dusting of makeup" [16]) and the need for "grief therapy." Here, as a historian of American funeral directing claims, the undertaker takes on the dramaturgic role of grief-therapist becoming "a stage manager to create an appropriate atmosphere and to move the funeral party through a drama in which social relationships are stressed and an emotional catharsis or release is provided through ceremony" (qt. in Mitford 16-17). The undertaker – in current terminology aptly renamed as "funeral director" – plays a major role managing the performance of what seems like an Aristotelian tragedy. As the scenes in the slumber room and at the graveside described above have shown, the funeral of Mr. Fisher strictly follows the rules of this standardized American rite – with one major exception: the late funeral director himself is being grieved over by his family, friends and former customers. The question thus remains: Who manages the funeral, if the funeral director is the deceased being on display?

True enough, everything a funeral director as grief therapist generally provides for has been done here, too: "revamp[ing] the corpse to look like a living doll," arranging for it to nap in a slumber room, putting on "a well-oiled performance in which the concept of *death* has played no part whatsoever," that is doing everything "to make the funeral a real pleasure for everybody concerned" (Mitford 51). The concept of the grief therapy stresses embalming and restoring the deceased as well as deleting anything directly relating to "death" itself as necessary for the mental and emotional solace of the bereaved family: "The most 'therapeutic' funeral, it seems, is the one that conforms to their [i.e. the funeral's industry's] pattern, that is to say, the one arranged under circumstances guaranteeing a maximum profit" (Mitford 65).

Six Feet Under here takes an ironic look on the mechanisms of "memory picture" and "grief therapy." At the outset of the pilot episode, all members of the Fisher family represented the common distancing of American society from the ubiquity of death, transforming it into a source of high-margin profit and pseudo-mystifying so that "grief itself often seems an embarrassing and shameful mental disorder" (Wright). After their at least partial refusal to use the 'saltshaker' and thus with the funeral gone awry, the family's rigid rule of self-restraint breaks down and an endless chain of similar events is set off in which things previously taken for granted are called into question. But this does not lead to the dissolution of the family, as might be expected in a typical soap opera after the loss of the paternal guidance, but contrarily to their finding channels of communication that until that time were unknown to them.

The initial death of the family's father and owner of the funeral home not only causes a severe imbalance in the economics of family affairs, both within the series' plot and to the genre of the television family drama. But what gives his death and especially the ensuing funeral a surreal, sardonic quality, is the fact of his notoriously and ludicrously returning as amused onlooker and smart wisdom-dispenser. During the funeral service at the Fishers' home, he appears to Ruth telling her "I know, Ruth. I know everything," which in turn causes the confession to her sons of her having the affair with a hairdresser. Earlier on at various stages during the preparation of his corpse, the paternal ghost has been appearing

repeatedly to Nate and David, mostly visualized as flashbacks of their childhood. In each of these scenes, the 'boys' are once again confronted with the specific problems they had with their father: Nate's disgust at the carnal aspects of funeral business leading to his escape to Seattle to become dedicated to vegetarian food processing, and David's playing with dolls that signals his ensuing homosexuality, bigot religiosity and fear of public exposure.

In the crucial graveyard scene, the dead father sits as materialized specter on a neighboring tombstone, preposterously donned in Hawaiian shirt and sipping a Mai Tai. His lewd look that follows Brenda as she passes him, and his cheerful applause "Amen!" acclaiming the saltshaker episode affirm his immediate presence, since he is commenting the ongoing action. Only one member of the family at a time, however, is capable of seeing him. This brings his appearance closer to signifying not an autonomous spirit, but an emulation of himself as seen through the grieving eyes of the surviving family members. Here at the cemetery, it is Claire whom he haunts with benevolent motivation, forcing a smirk on her face in clear contradiction to the surrounding scene of misery. While still being alive, all members of the Fisher family seemed to have been avoiding the father in one way or another. Now, as he no longer belongs to their ongoing present, but is relegated to the family's past, he actually shows more presence than ever before.

Death pervades this series in every possible sense. It brackets the contents of each episode with a death vignette, i.e. the often bizarre presentation of somebody's fatal end. It also shows in great detail the embalming preparation of the corpses for funeral services. It takes part in the mourning rituals of the grieving relatives, and it states the impact of the dead on the living, especially including the Fishers. But above all it is crucial to the overall connotation of death in this series that the deceased father actually participates in his own funeral, even up to the point of stage managing the procedure as mock grief therapist. By calling on his wife to tell her about his knowledge of her affair or by giving Claire the thumps-up to enjoy the awkward rebellious saltshaker episode, the father takes part in the series' effort to consistently undermine prefigured, sanctified notions of "the American way of death." Therefore, unlike much of American popular culture that continuously seems to affirm America's claim to be founded on the premise that one can escape history (O'Hehir) and thus excluding imminent death from our perception or turning it into a melodramatic spectacle, *Six Feet Under* is an exceptional example of a willingness to acknowledge the past and of discussing death in a manner that oscillates between the tragic and the macabre.

Instead of remaining within television's long history of ogling cadavers from series like *Quincy* to *Crossing Jordan* and *CSI* where "death has generally been typecast as either the direct result of a moral offense (i.e. drugs, guns, alcohol, cigarettes, illicit sex), a grave cosmic injustice (dead mommies, dead babies) or both ([…] chain-smoking drunk drivers)" (Chocano), *Six Feet Under* repeats in every single episode the simple fact that death is a very common thing happening all the time and to all of us in vastly differing ways, including the outrageously absurd and the hilariously comic. In this sense and quite contrary to the common denial of

'normal' death in mass media productions, it is here that the pervading presence of death is shown as a liberating force for repressed WASP America as represented by the Fishers: by confronting the morbid, yet petty truths of their lives, they get glimpses of a deeper, metaphysical understanding of their present state of being. In many of the following episodes, there are vastly differing funeral rites (performed by Jews, Latinos, Buddhists, bikers, rockers, youths, etc.), each marking alternate approaches to the standard already tentatively questioned by the Fishers in the first episode. Thus, the ghostly father as mock grief therapist serves as emblem of the demise of America's heralding the culture of the present, in that he constantly and humorously calls for an inclusion of memory, the past and the dead into our daily lives.

4. Housing the Dead, or The Refusal to the Death-Care Industry

> You know something? I never worked in a funeral home that was this depressing.
> (Amanda, the new embalmer, *Six Feet Under* I/10)

In quite a literal sense, the dead are part of the Fisher family: not only do the Fishers work as undertakers; their 'funeral home' is both the transitional housing of the deceased on their way to the grave, and the actual permanent residence of the Fishers. And while they are coping badly with their own dysfunctional domesticity and often feel estranged living at their own home, they are quite competent in their empathy towards their clients, providing the deceased with a surrogate for their real homes, where in former times the dead had actually remained until the funeral. So, on the one hand, this living arrangement causes the Fishers to be very careful, very fragile, or even very depressed regarding their own affairs, but in their effort to do justice especially to possible burial wishes of the dead they excel beyond standard business routine.

Significantly diverging from today's so-called "death-care industry," the Fishers refuse to sell their small, often poorly financed funeral home to a large anonymous and economically efficient corporation. This gives their 'home' an additional meaning, because they paradoxically rely on an outdated idea of the family trade instead of joining the mass-marketed industry. This almost anti-capitalist stance clearly goes against the grain of contemporary American business strategies looking for ever increasing profit. Instead of favoring a macro-economic structure, the family trade is being depicted as a sometimes tedious and laborious, but mostly rewarding, because humane enterprise.

This causes a special twist to the soap opera formula: While in one sense radically concentrating on the family as center of the plot – and this is true even with the missing father –, in another sense *Six Feet Under* no less radically inflates the inherent privacy attached to the standard family drama. Soap operas in general center on very private, yet universal issues like love and death. But this obsessive urge to communally discuss all those private things makes privacy in the end impossible because everybody seems to have an unrestricted right of access to the other's most personal experiences and intimate feelings. It simply is impossible to

say "It's none of your business," because, as Laura Stempel Mumford claims, "[i]n the soap opera world, everything is *everyone's* business (49). Here in *Six Feet Under*, this business is turned up-side-down, because it is taken literally: it is indeed the Fisher' business to tend to the private affairs of their clients. They thus engage in a professional form of extra-domestic privacy that blurs clear boundaries of private and public in a way totally unknown to regular soap operas.

5. Neo-TV, or The Postmodern Aesthetics of Seriality

Death as business enters not only the content of the series, but also its formal structure. In the pilot episode, the story-line is interspersed with mock commercials marketing products to enhance the embalming process and the funeral performance. Right after the series' trailer and before the story begins, we see an elegant lady in a black evening-robe tenderly caressing a hearse with her gloved fingers. Opera music à la Verdi adds to the posh atmosphere as does the smooth female voice-over announcing the slogan: "Sleek. Sophisticated. Seductive. The new Millennium Edition Crown Royal funeral coach. Because your loved one deserves the very best in style and comfort" (*Six Feet Under* I/1). The other commercials promote "Living Splendor embalming fluid" ("Only real life is better"), and "new Wound Fuller cosmetic molding putty" ("She looked her best every day of her life. Don't let one horribly disfiguring accident change that").

These mock commercials for funeral supply are modeled after real television ads. For example, "Franklin's new leak-proof earth dispenser" ("Say goodbye to soiled fingers forever. […] We put the fun back in *fun*eral") quotes the Gap commercial dance performance being broadcast on television at the time (Wright). The commercials both rely on the common practice of inter/rupting any given television show to advertise products often in some ways related to the theme of the show, and they function as a dis/rupting the 'emotional realism' proposed in the soap opera world. According to Ien Ang, soap operas can be read on two levels. There is the level of the literal content, the storyline, the characters, etc.; and there is the level of the implications and associations that the viewer experiences by watching the character interaction and following the storyline:

> It is striking; the same things, people, relations and situations which are regarded at the denotative level as unrealistic, and unreal, are at the connotative level apparently not seen at all as unreal, but in fact as 'recognizable'. Clearly, in the connotative reading process the denotative level of the text is put in brackets (Ang 42).

Therefore, watching soap operas calls for a selective reading that shifts from the denotation to connotation as the viewer experiences more or less 'realistic' moments. The insertion of commercials, however, leave no space for negotiations of that sort. Since they take no part in the storyline as such, they doubtless cannot be read as connoting anything other than what they are, i.e. extra-diegetic representations. And yet, taken separately, that is as an add-on to the plot, they might for the individual viewer still connote a sense of glamour and fun. Those emotional reactions stem from the fact that advertising has a great presence in popular culture

media promoting life-style products that are meant for enhancing people's well-feeling. The ads in *Six Feet Under* take up this very same notion, but relocate it to the realm of death business.

One the one hand, this strategy points towards the postmodern trademark of favoring styles and surfaces rather than depth and utility: "images dominate narrative," as David Harvey puts it in a nutshell (347). No matter what the product is, as long as it makes you feel good, might be the message even when marketing the funeral shaker. On the other hand, these willfully interspersed segments are meant to comment on the story-line itself. As such, this technique takes part in creating what Umberto Eco has called "neo-television." This is a postmodern, self-reflexive form of broadcasting in which television is about itself, referring back to its own conventions (Eco, "Guide"). *Miami Vice*, *Twin Peaks*, or *Dawson's Creek* would be well-known series which rely upon a recognized knowledge of the conventions television has developed for various serialized genres.

On yet another plane, the television commercial is a prime instance of an industrial-like product of mass media relying on repetition, iteration, redundancy, and obedience to pre-established formats (Evo, "Innovation" 162). This ties in with soap opera's own intertextual and cross-sectional genre history. Not only have television soap operas emerged from American radio soaps of the 1930s, but these radio soaps in turn can be traced back to the serialized domestic and sentimental novels, "which were simply the stories of ordinary people and the events of their daily lives" (Abelman 352), as well as to the melodramatic style of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century stage, which offered the "moral fantasy of showing forth the essential 'rightness' of the world order" (Cawelti 45). Radio soaps were launched as a commercial strategy to boost advertisements, sponsored primarily by detergent product manufacturers, and as such were particularly devised for and addressed to the female consumers or more specifically to housewives. Unsurprisingly, soap operas assert the family as the most precious and therefore highly endangered social space.

In his discussion of postmodern aesthetics of seriality, Eco has grounded the enjoyment of watching a television series precisely on the fact of the "return of the Identical," i.e. the consuming audience revels in the ability to foresee:

> With a series one believes one is enjoying the novelty of the story (which is always the same) while in fact one is enjoying it because of the recurrence of a narrative scheme that remains constant. The series in this sense responds to the infantile need of hearing again always the same sorry, of being consoled by the 'return of the Identical,' superficially disguised (Eco, "Innovation" 168).

In this sense, series have always created a sort of mythological present, forcing the characters to obsessively repeating their past. What is different in postmodern or neo-television series like *Six Feet Under* is the fact that they are partaking in this endless loop of repetition and are ironically making fun of themselves at the same time. Punning and joking as elements of parody in turn appeal in particular to an audience that is well-informed about popular culture products and is thus capable

of reading and deciphering structural or stylistic allusions, quotations, and repetitions. In this sense, it is especially through the audience participation – the pleasure of the 'postmodern housewife' and any other viewer willing to engage in self-reflection – that postmodern aesthetics of seriality join the highly negotiated semiotic battlefield of popular culture, forever operating between the forces of incorporation and resistance, between yielding to the imposed sets of meanings, pleasures and social identities, or rather engaging in acts of semiotic resistance in which dominant meanings are challenged by subordinate meanings (Storey 33). Popular culture critic John Fiske here succinctly claims "the hegemonic forces of homogeneity are always met by the resistances of heterogeneity" (Fiske, *Understanding* 8).

6. America 'Six Feet Under,' or The White Dissolve

A structural part of this heterogeneity as resisting force in soap opera has always been its open form, because a specific narrative feature of any soap opera is the lack of resolution. Since the soap opera is conceptually based on its – at the very best – eternal continuity, it defies the Aristotelian rules of a story being clearly defined by a beginning, a middle, and an end. The soap opera relies on an indefinitely expanding middle, instead. As such, there is no narrative closure to be expected, and thus all the initial conflicts and narrative entanglements will remain unresolved.

Six Feet Under involves itself in weaving an endless story of the fate of the Fisher family. Just as every episode starts out with yet another death, it invariably ends by fading into a white screen, signifying blankness instead of a final meaningful message to be brought forth or of a stimulating cfiff-hanger leading up the next episode. This kind of dissolve is an arbitrary sign, unusual because television is primarily an iconic medium (Fiske/Halley 24). Therefore, the dissolve emphasizes the fact that television in general does not represent a manifest actuality of society, but symbolically reflects values beneath the surface. It shows America 'six feet under,' so to say. In this sense, the series *Six Feet Under* visualizes the contrast between the overabundance of dead bodies and the constant transgression of moral borders on the one hand, and the non-descript blank dissolve on the other. The spectator is thus forced to realize the willful displacement of 'reality.' As such, by the technique of defamiliarization of the familiar, television here truly acts as a "cool medium," as Marshal McLuhan has called it: "hot media [radio, movie] do not leave so much to be filled in or completed by the audience. Hot media are, therefore, low in participation, and cool media [telephone, TV] are high in participation or completion by the audience" (31). It is up to the viewer to negotiate and decode the metaphorical real world shown onscreen, even up to the point of negating one's own privileged cultural position.

In neo-soap operas like *Six Feet Under*, the basically conservative ethics of American family television tend to be undermined by the represented family's dysfunctional and sexually repressed ill-doings. Despite the fact that by the 1990s sex was explicitly discussed or even portrayed in soap operas, overtly sexual

activity still grounded on the underlying Puritanical morality: "Those who violate moral standards – premarital or extramarital sex, bigamy, incest, rape – tend to get punished" (Abelman 370). In *Six Feet Under*, the contrary seems the case, since the characters who here repeatedly defy seemingly preconceived moral principles not only remain unpunished, but in unclenching their initially anally fixated, uptight behavior, they are actually encouraging one another to further explore their sexual and social potentials. Aberrant behavior abounds in this series. And while repressed (white) America emerges from six feet under, the series pivots on the white dissolving of standard American social acting.

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