2

Haunting the Memory: Moments of Return in Television Drama

‘Everything. Everyone. Everywhere. Ends’ was the tag line for the fifth and final season of the critically acclaimed series *Six Feet Under* (HBO, 2001–5) – a dark comic drama centred on the lives of the Fisher family and their family-run funeral home in Los Angeles. In the final episode (‘Everyone’s Waiting’, season 5, episode 12), following the death of her oldest brother Nate (Peter Krause), the youngest sibling Claire (Lauren Ambrose) leaves the family and Los Angeles. With no job lined up but an ambition to become a photographer, she pulls away from the family home and drives into an uncertain future. What follows is a remarkable six-minute sequence, framed by the track ‘Breathe’ by the female singer-songwriter Sia, in which Claire literally drives into that future. The sequence intercuts shots of Claire driving, the back projection speeded up to heighten the ‘fantastical’ feel of the scene, with a montage of the weddings, celebrations, deaths and funerals in the remaining lives of the Fisher family – a six-minute sequence which spans 80 years.1 Here the future is foretold but its possibilities are asserted by the long road disappearing into the horizon, where the series ends and where we leave Claire driving.

The sequence is both an ending and a beginning. Whilst there is the space for the viewer to imagine the drama in between, the character’s storylines are taken to their final moments. There is an insistence on the inevitability of the ending but the cyclical patterns of life are also reaffirmed. To quote Umberto Eco’s thoughts on serial narratives – ‘what becomes celebrated here is a sort of victory of life over art, with the paradoxical result that the era of electronics, instead of emphasizing the phenomena of shock, interruption, novelty, and frustration of expectations, would produce a return to the continuum, the Cyclical, the Periodical, the Regular’ (1990, p. 96).
Six Feet Under reverses the logic of the ‘reflective coda’, projecting forward rather than reflecting back. This is not to argue that the final montage insists upon a forward momentum; it also sets up a pattern of return well established throughout the series via a succession of ‘hauntings’. The members of the Fisher family, and Nate in particular, are regularly ‘haunted’ by their father, killed in the pilot episode after a collision with a bus. At the opening of the coda it is the ‘ghost’ of her brother Nate that motivates Claire to go when she wants to stay, and as she pulls away from the family home she glances in the wing mirror of her car. Framed in the mirror is the image of Nate, jogging behind the car (see Figure 2.1). Overlapping briefly, the two lines of vision and movement inevitably separate and the image slowly drops out of the reflection as the car speeds up and travels on. It is this moment that haunts me. Whilst it returns us to the familiar image of Nate running, it returns us only to a reflection that poignantly drops out of view. The return is accompanied by a retreat, capturing a pattern of haunting and a recharged sense of loss.

Writing on what he perceives to be the ghostly movement of narrative, Julian Wolfreys argues that ‘the movement of the return is not simply that, for that which is spectral is only ever perceived indirectly by the traces it has left. It has in returning, already begun to retreat’ (2002, p. 3). For me, this captures a wider characteristic of

Figure 2.1 Six Feet Under, ‘Everyone’s Waiting’, season 5, episode 12 (dir. Alan Ball, prod. HBO/The Greenblatt Janollari Studio/Actual Size Productions, US, 2005).