

# Capitalism on



**MAX RAGER**

*iZombie* Serves its Critique of Capitalism with a Dash of Hot Sauce

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# iZombie as Evolution

- Nods to previous zombie media
  - Romero, *iZombie* comics, video games
- Continued social commentary
  - Racism, sexism, wealth inequality
- Continued humanization
  - Ability to maintain personality, increased empathy, desire to help others

# This is Liv. Liv Moore. Naturally.





# Working Girl



# Bosses





# Blaine's Gourmet Brains



# All-Consuming Greed



# Chris Hedges on Late Capitalism

"They are cursed from birth to endure poverty, disease, toxic contamination and, often, early death. They are forced to kneel like bound captives to be slain on the altar of capitalism in the name of progress. They have gone first. We are next. In the late stages of global capitalism, we all will be destroyed in an orgy of mass extermination to satiate corporate greed."

—"Capitalism's Cult of Human Sacrifice" (2015)



# Resistance

- Ethical Consumption
- Empathy



## The New World Order



What will they serve up next?





# Select Readings

- Bishop, Kyle. "The Idle Proletariat: Dawn of the Dead, Consumer Ideology, and the Loss of Productive Labor." *Journal of Popular Culture* 43.2 (2010): 234-248. *Academic Search Complete*. EBSCO. Web. 15 Jan. 2011.
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## Intro

The CW's popular series *iZombie* represents the apogee of two movements in zombie media since *Dawn of the Dead*: the demonizing of capitalism and the humanizing of zombies. These trends seem particularly relevant in the context of political and socio-economic tensions in the US at the time of its production. *iZombie* updates the critique of capitalism in Romero, exposing ever-more-corrupt corporations, disparities in power and wealth, and the consequences of capitalism run amok on its victims. Here, the rich literally eat the poor and appropriate their experiences.

This is Live . . . Transition

Olivia Moore (Rose McIver) was a type A med student with a hectic but nearly perfect life and a bright future with her Fiancé, Major Lilywhite (Robert Buckley). But then, in an origin story that calls to mind *White Zombie*, Liv "goes astray" by attending a boat party where she encounters Blaine DeBeers (David Anders), who turns her into a zombie by scratching her during the outbreak/massacre. After she turns, she develops fair skin, white wavy hair, and shadowed eyes reminiscent of *White Zombie*'s Madeleine, but she is far from helpless.

(Working Girl slide)

Liv survives by taking a job in the morgue, where she has access to plentiful brains and is even more fortunate that her boss, Ravi Chakrabarti (Rahul Kohli), becomes a friend, confidant, and source of comic relief after he learns of Liv's condition and

begins to work on a cure. They soon meet Blaine again and over time discover how he feeds Seattle's zombies while making a killing for himself. Liv begins to work with Detective Clive Babineaux (Malcolm Goodwin), pretending to have psychic abilities while using the memories of Seattle's crime victims. Liv and Clive, often assisted by Major and Liv's roommate, Assistant DA Peyton Charles (Aly Michalka), solve a case of the week while unearthing criminal and corporate conspiracies that impact humans and zombies alike. Liv eats and seeks justice for people from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds. In many cases there is a clear "preying on people" element, but she's not just helping 'good' victims—street kids and sex workers, for example, represent how capitalism feeds on bodies, especially poor, black, and/or female bodies. The first victim Liv 'helps' is an immigrant prostitute, and later we meet a woman who was turned and forced to have sex with zombie men in exchange for food.

At the same time, our heroine Liv is a zombie—a consumer—who uses her power to challenge that system. She can do this because she isn't a 'real zombie' in several respects. Much like the zombies in *Graveyard Alive* (2003) who maintained (or improved) their appearance and personalities by eating human flesh, Liv can only maintain her humanity by eating brains. When she experiences the victim's memories, however, she walks in their shoes in a way that encourages empathy and action toward justice. In this way, *iZombie* echoes predecessors like *Fido* and *Warm Bodies*, where zombies protect people they care about instead of eating them;



iZombie not only offers a pointed critique of capitalism, but also suggests how individuals and groups can resist its inhumanity.

(Evolution Slide)

While some might see just another example of zombies invading all genres, and zombie fiction author Stant Litore was fairly dismissive of this “cop show” during a 2016 Denver Comic Con Panel, this show represents a clear evolution that follows naturally from developments in other zombie media. Throughout the series, the writers situate *iZombie* within zombie history by including plenty of allusions and jokes while they deploy and extend standard zombie tropes. Liv and Ravi watch *Night of the Living Dead* in the first episode, and they refer to the full-on zombies as Romeros. The zombies here eat brains, à la *Return of the Living Dead* and many texts since. As in *Warm Bodies*, the zombies experience memories from the brains they eat, but *iZombie* takes this to the next level by having zombies adopt personality traits and behaviors of their victims. Moreover, Rob Thomas and Diane Ruggiero-Wright present a complex critique of capitalism and other social issues that reflects contemporary cultural concerns à la Romero in *Dawn of the Dead* and *Land of the Dead*.

(Bosses Slide)

The ugly side of capitalism is represented by three bosses. Blaine DeBeers is the drug-dealing zombie who turned Liv. We later learn that Blaine’s drug operation began under and now competes with the larger operation of Mr. Stacey Boss. Mr.

Boss is a fairly run-of-the-mill sociopathic crime lord not directly related to the zombie plot, so I won't discuss him today. In a second story arc we meet Vaughn Du Clark, the megalomaniac CEO of Max Rager, whose energy drink interacted with the tainted party-drug Utopium to create the zombies. As we learn more about Vaughn, it becomes clear once again that zombies aren't the greatest danger. Greed—for power and capital—is the ultimate driver, and the bosses happily feed on others for their gain.

(Meat Cute Slide)

Blaine de Beers has carved out his place in the zombie economy by strategically turning others into zombies and controlling them as the sole provider of brains. Here again, *iZombie* harkens back to *White Zombie* (1933) as Blaine primarily turns people with power or fortune into zombies, much like Murder Legendre's zombies from the government and church. Blaine has zombies in the police force and DA's office, for example, and uses these connections to his advantage.

Blaine then charges \$25,000 per month for brains, which he harvests from street kids (like those Liv's boyfriend Major works with, so that's a problem), prepares, and distributes through a butcher shop. Much as in modern industrial farming, the consumers (or at least the wealthy ones) are spared the inconvenience and mess of procuring their own food or recognizing where it comes from. This harkens back to *Land of the Dead*, where wealthy humans were able to hole up and completely ignore the zombie apocalypse because they rely on the poor to do all of

the dirty work for them. Liv's first zombie boyfriend Lowell is a customer who explains that he doesn't go looking for triggers, as they only see/experience what the victims/underclass lived when they are in similar circumstances. We look away from the suffering that supports our lifestyles, but there are also parallels with how well to do whites appropriate the bodies and experiences of young men of color. One of Blaine's goons even steals a kid's shoes, which have an American flag pattern. On the other hand, powerful client Mr. Keiser says, "I'm tired of your brains. These visions from runaways and junkies are worse than depressing; they're boring. I want better, and I see an opportunity here for the both of us." Blaine then serves his "Platinum Level" upscale menu items like astronaut for \$200,000 per serving to meet the demands of his wealthy customers.

The zombie entrepreneur is particularly sinister because he literally creates his consumers and he can make more—basically an even more brutal version of his drug business model, or like Wal-Mart and how they pay their workers so little that they can't afford to shop many other places. Similarly, Blaine hires workers who have few other prospects to run his drugs and brains, but gives them little of the profit. Blaine saves or sells the good brains and leaves the leftovers for the help. When Meat Cute is destroyed after a battle between Major and Blaine, Blaine moves on to another front business—Shady Plots Funeral Home—where the "job is to upsell grief"—highlighting how even Blaine's legitimate businesses are predatory.

(Max Rager Slide)



On the human side of corrupt and predatory but legitimate businesses we have Max Rager—famed for energy drinks, lifestyle branding, and extreme everything. We see corporations hiding things from us, from the ‘mom and pop’ butchers to the Max Rager empire. We can’t trust what we eat—especially meat. We can’t trust corporations to do what’s in our best interests, and they may even work against them by making us dependent on things that are bad for us and hiding the terrible consequences of their products. Vaughn knows of the potential consequences, but pushes his new product forward in a drive that echoes big pharma. He grandly proclaims, “With Supermax, our consumers will no longer have to sleep. Exhaustion will be a thing of the past. Supermax will be an amphetamine, a steroid, an opioid. I will be the serotonin what Milton Hershey was to Chocolate!” (Season 1, Episode 13). Vaughn hires a researcher from big pharma to ‘solve the zombie problem’ while he hires Major to kill the existing zombies. (In another unintended consequence of consumerism, especially in the age of Amazon, Vaughn is able to identify zombies through their purchases of hot sauce, self-tanner, and hair dye.) When the board Max Rager Board asks if he can guarantee that Supermax won’t have the same “violent psychosis” side effects as Max Rager, he says, “Well, I can guarantee that we’ll all be so rich we won’t care.” (Season 2, Episode 1). Vaughn is so rapacious and self-serving that he left his own daughter to become a zombie and he seems to enjoy tormenting her and others.

People often demonstrate what Aristotle would call a “graspingness” for life, experience, and wealth (Walker 84) that equals the zombies’ hunger in ferocity but

is more troubling because they knowingly and cunningly pursue their desires at the expense of others.

(Resistance Slide)

Throughout the series, Liv and her friends and colleagues are dedicated to stopping injustice and helping victims, and in the Season 2 finale, Liv, Clive, and Major infiltrate the Max Rager SuperMax launch party to take on Vaughn while Peyton, Ravi, and especially Blaine (the zombie with a heart of gold?) take down Boss and his goons (though we can assume that Blaine will take advantage of this opening). We also get our traditional satisfaction when Vaughn is attacked by the zombies he's captured and experimented on with strong echoes from *Day of the Dead*. We are quickly reminded that power abhors a vacuum. Du Clark sold Max Rager (and its zombie research) to military contractors Philmore Graves Enterprises. We soon find that these soldiers of fortune are zombies themselves. Their CEO, Vivian, concludes the episode by asking, "Are you ready for the new world order, Olivia Moore? Ready to do your part for your kind?" It appears that we'll soon see new levels of corruption and intrigue that will further test Liv's ability to resist destructive, predatory institutions.

While the horrors of late capitalism seem inevitable, individuals and conscientious groups can fight against becoming villains or zombies. While imperfect, Liv and her group offer some models of resistance. As mentioned earlier, these are all talented, smart, and charismatic people who chose to pursue careers that help others rather

than taking advantage of them. They work for the greater good as individuals within the system, and can also work to change the system from within.

In addition to her medical-examining and crime-stopping, Liv models ethical consumption as a mode of resistance that's available in different ways to all of us. Live actively avoids hurting people for brains, and her consumption of experiences offers a sense of purpose and connection to other people rather than hedonic pleasure. But even she feels the pull of using people. There's one point when even the ethical consumer Liv uses victims almost like drugs, saying after some time as a stoner that she needs to "Drink some more cheerleader. Put some pep in my step" (Season 1, Episode 12). She later finds herself hoping that "someone with a winning personality is out there getting murdered right now. Whoa, Liv, not cool." Liv naturally shares some desires with the more consumerist zombies, but she is more self-aware and actively avoids causing pain to others through her consumption (though the gloves come off when she's taking out bad guys).

Season One, Episode Nine: Ravi calls Liv out for her self-righteous judgment of Lowell (and even Blaine), asking what she would have done to get brains if she hadn't been able to get her job in the Morgue and reminding her that it's "a luxury to not have to know for sure."

(Concluding Slide)

## Works Cited

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- Warm Bodies* (2013)
- White Zombie* (1932)
- Fido* (2006)
- Land of the Dead* (2005)



For later:

In Season One, Episode Six, Jackie, a well-healed zombie of whom Blaine has taken full advantage, doesn't get her gourmet brain delivery, so she eats the messenger. Because she violated their business relationship, Blaine had no concern about killing her, even though they had a mutually beneficial personal relationship.

(thus the always-new and clever ways Liv prepares her brains to make the whole enterprise more palatable)

In the iZombie world, zombies are the ultimate consumers—of goods (hair dye), services (spray tans), experiences (astronaut anyone?), and, of course, brains.

, but he also finds that reasoning, desiring zombies can push back.

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Liv and others would love to kill Blaine, but they can't. As he explains, "I feed Seattle's zombies. If I stop doing that job, they don't stop eating, and the zombie apocalypse begins. If you kill me, then everyone you love becomes a zombie or zombie food." We don't like how a lot of corporations work, but we need them.

But back to our zombie consumers. It's worth noting that Vaughn Du Clark is able to locate zombies based on these purchasing habits—tracking them as other corporations and the government do.

Matthew Walker links Aristotle and Romero in their critique of those who chase hedonic pleasure. "Like Romero, Aristotle . . . dismiss the life spent in pursuit of pleasure as 'fit for cattle' . . . and other animals, which lack the capacities for reason" (88). In this way, traditional zombies (and the deteriorated zombies on *iZombie*) are like the animals, and perhaps to be pitied because they have lost the ability to "flourish by living in accord with their sensitive capacities" (Walker 88). Liv, conversely, is not only able to use reason, she uses her talent/gift/curse to solve complex problems in the pursuit of justice and curing the zombie virus. Here *iZombie* echoes predecessors like *Fido* and *Warm Bodies*, where zombies protect people they care about instead of eating them. Liv's actions also suit Aristotle's definition of the purpose-driven good life, suggesting that a zombie can have a happy and/or fulfilling life, even as she suffers.

S2E3 wealthy victim, focus on the frivolity of the rich, who are portrayed as “great dressers, awful people.”