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## Living with the Crisis: 'Mindful' Consumption and the Rehabilitation of the Zombie in Twenty-First-Century Popular Culture

This paper offers a brief analysis of the contemporary zombie's viropolitics – the way this figure evokes metaphors of disease and methods for its containment within a socio-political discourse of otherness and consumption. The zombie is an incredibly versatile (and thus incredibly varied) symbol. Often, it is an inherently contradictory figure. Sarah Lauro argues that the Haitian zombie is 'an allegory of slavery that is at the same time historically connected to [...] revolution'.<sup>1</sup> For Seth Morton, and elsewhere Jack Halberstam, the zombie is an example of 'bare life' – a person who is not classed as a person, or upon whom a restrictive brand of personhood is imposed.<sup>2</sup> Another common reading of the contemporary zombie is as a symbol of mindless consumerism and the effects of global capitalism.<sup>3</sup> This last reading is embodied most memorably in George Romero's 'mallrats' from *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), milling aimlessly through the retail spaces they occupied with equal mindlessness when they were alive (see Figure 1).<sup>4</sup> As Stacey Abbott argues, however, the contemporary zombie is 'a bricolage of influences, responding to shifts and changes within the nature of the horror genre'.<sup>5</sup>

**Figure 1:** George Romero's 'mall zombies' in *Dawn of the Dead* (1978).

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V\\_zo8HmzUVs&t](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V_zo8HmzUVs&t)

Zombie viropolitics can be dramatically different from text to text. In one strand of contemporary fiction, for instance, the zombie is portrayed as a mindless horde: a global pandemic or invading force that threatens the total collapse of civilisation. [Consider the *World War Z* film adaptation (2013) or AMC's *The Walking Dead* (2010-present).<sup>6</sup> These stories assign specific physical characteristics to the zombie, summarised by Behuniak as 'Romero's trope' – after George Romero, director of the influential zombie films *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) and

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah J. Lauro, *The Transatlantic Zombie: Slavery, Rebellion, and Living Death* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015), p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> Seth Morton, 'Zombie Politics', in Edward P. Comentale and Aaron Jaffe (eds), *The Year's Work at the Zombie Research Center* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), p. 327; M. de Bruin-Molé, 'Our Zombies, Ourselves: A Lecture with J. Halberstam', *Frankenfiction.com*, 4 February 2015, <http://frankenfiction.com/our-zombies-ourselves-a-lecture-with-j-halberstam/>, accessed 17 November 2019.

<sup>3</sup> David McNally, *Monsters of the Market: Zombies, Vampires and Global Capitalism* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2012), p. 213.

<sup>4</sup> Rob Latham, *Consuming Youth: Vampires, Cyborgs, and the Culture of Consumption* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 31.

<sup>5</sup> Stacey Abbott, *Undead Apocalypse: Vampires and Zombies in the 21st Century* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), p. 64.

<sup>6</sup> *World War Z*, Marc Forster, dir. (Skydance Productions/Hemisphere Media Capital/GK Films/Plan B Entertainment, 2DUX<sup>2</sup>, 2013).

*Day of the Dead* (1985).<sup>7</sup>] This kind of zombie harkens back to the identity politics of late twentieth century horror, and symbolises the fear of invasion from a monstrous, 'infectious' outside force. These mindless monsters still dominate Western popular imagination.

We also have the more recent, 'friendly' zombie, epitomised by self-aware humanised zombies like Kieran Walker from *In the Flesh* (2013-2014) or Melanie from *The Girl with All the Gifts* (2014). The friendly zombie reveals a more nuanced consideration of what it means to be physically or socially different, through metaphors of quarantine and chronic illness.<sup>8</sup> This strand of zombie fiction is again influenced by late-twentieth-century trends and identity politics, particularly the rise of the sympathetic monster. Today, though, I want to look at an even more recent kind of friendly zombie who is not really 'other' at all. I like to call this the 'mindful' zombie, and we can find it in novels *Breathers: A Zombie's Lament* (2009) and *Warm Bodies* (2010, adapted as a 2013 film), or in TV series like *iZombie* (2015-2019; first a comic in 2010-2012) and *Santa Clarita Diet* (2017-2019). 'Mindful' zombies differ from horde zombies in that they are not mindless, whether in terms of their inner lives or their consumer practices. Like friendly zombies these chronically other characters are fully self-aware. But unlike friendly zombies they are uncannily capable of managing their own desires and urges. The mindful zombie is often straight, white, middle class, Western, and otherwise 'average' or unexceptional.<sup>9</sup> Rather than serving as a ritualistic demarcation between the self or nation and the monstrous other, instead (as David Nally suggests) these fantastical monsters 'dramatise the profound senses of corporeal vulnerability that pervade modern society, most manifestly when commodification invades new spheres of social life'.<sup>10</sup> Rather than dehumanising the other outside of the community, in these narratives the horror is directed inward, to the twin 'monsters' of modernity that cannot be escaped, destroyed, or ignored, and must be embraced and ethically managed: *capitalism* and *consumerism*.

Mark Fisher writes that 'it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism'.<sup>11</sup> This seeming inevitability of capitalism is perpetuated through systems of neoliberal consumption, producing 'certain kinds of social relations, certain ways of living, certain subjectivities' at the wider, cultural level.<sup>12</sup> In this world, the market is 'a natural reality' – individuals are encouraged to constantly build themselves into newer and better versions, more capable of competing in a global market.<sup>13</sup> This is the labour of (un)life, where 'chronic otherness' is the new norm, and personal irregularities or inadequacies must be eternally managed and improved on, rather than unequivocally banished or embraced. Many critics have pointed out that this model can be applied very well to the figure of the undead, though the monster of choice has traditionally been the vampire. As McNally argues, drawing on Karl Marx's own undead metaphor, 'fantastic depictions of global capitalism as a vampire-system that extracts and sells body-parts capture something very real about the economic universe we inhabit'.<sup>14</sup> In an interesting twist on the history of the zombie,

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<sup>7</sup> Susan M. Behuniak, 'The Living Dead? The Construction of People with Alzheimer's Disease as Zombies', *Ageing and Society*, 31 (2011), 70–92

<sup>8</sup> Mike R. Carey, *The Girl With All The Gifts* (London: Orbit, 2014); *The Girl with All the Gifts*, Colm McCarthy, dir. (UK, Warner Bros. Pictures, 2016).

<sup>9</sup> S. G. Browne, *Breathers: A Zombie's Lament* (New York: Broadway Books, 2009); *Warm Bodies*, Jonathan Levine, dir. (Mandeville Films, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> McNally, *Monsters of the Market*, p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester, NY: Zero Books, 2009), p. 2.

<sup>12</sup> Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society*, trans. by Gregory Elliot (New York: Verso Books, 2014), p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> Dardot and Laval, *The New Way of the World*, p. 2.

<sup>14</sup> McNally, *Monsters of the Market*, p. 9.

who has gone from mindless worker to mindless consumer, the most recent mainstream variety of the friendly zombie is often framed as a newly *mindful* or liberated consumer.

In these mainstream, 'friendly' zombie texts, the white, middle class zombie heroes are 'mindful' of what they consume (literally human brains) without ever directly condemning the practice of consumption itself. Notably, this attitude towards mindful consumerism also echoes the real-world use of mindfulness as a coping mechanism among Western corporations and consumers. Erika L. Rosenberg, for instance, argues that mindfulness can help consumers address both 'the nonconscious psychological processes that are exploited by corporations and advertisers to shape consumer preferences', and the 'underlying life dissatisfaction and the need for fulfilment that might be temporarily satisfied by consumption activities'.<sup>15</sup> In other words, since they are helpless to undermine consumption itself, consumers can minimise the unease and exploitation of the system by directing their efforts into mindful or ethical consumption practices. Ironically, as Bee Scherer and Jeff Waistell point out, this (mis)use of mindfulness as a coping mechanism actually 'detracts from its main purpose in Buddhism of attaining insight and cultivating compassion (for example by alleviating poverty through wealth distribution)'.<sup>16</sup> The original function of mindfulness is thus 'not ethically neutral', instead actively *challenging* capitalist values of 'economic materialism, competitiveness, and individualism'.<sup>17</sup>

In the TV series *iZombie* the zombie can be read from a 'friendly' zombie perspective, as a metaphor for coming to terms with chronic illness, or even with chronic otherness. The appropriately named Olivia 'Liv' Moore is a young medical resident, who is personally and financially successful, healthy and able-bodied, white, cis, and conventionally attractive. She is infected one night at a boat party, undergoing a physical transformation as a zombie that essentially entails becoming paler and adopting an 'alternative' (i.e. popular subcultural) clothing style. Unwilling to risk infecting others, Liv abandons her promising career as a surgeon, breaks off her wedding engagement, and goes to work as a coroner's assistant, where she won't need to kill for the brains she needs, but can instead steal them from the dead. Eventually, Liv discovers that the zombie's ability to absorb the memories and personalities of the dead by eating their brains can also help her to solve their murders. This forms the main premise of the show, and every week Liv eats the brains of a new victim, partially assuming their identity in order to catch their killers. Again, however, the titular 'monster' is not marginal in the traditional, socio-political sense. The show makes it very clear that her initial state of isolation is the result of her own self-doubt, rather than her infection, as she has a strong and constantly supportive network of friends who are happy to accept her in her new zombie form.

**Figure 2:** Liv learns to love zombieism in the trailer for *iZombie* (2015-2019).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UQhzQDW4L84>

Instead we might consider Liv as an example of this newly 'mindful' zombie in popular fiction. Through her role as a crime-solving zombie, Liv is able to come to terms with her need to consume brains, finding new meaning, and new confidence, in her monstrosity. In *iZombie*, then, the

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<sup>15</sup> Erika L. Rosenberg, 'Mindfulness and Consumerism', in Tim Kasser and Allen D. Kanner (eds), *Psychology and Consumer Culture: The Struggle for a Good Life in a Materialistic World* (Washington: Psychological Association, 2004), p. 109.

<sup>16</sup> B. Scherer and J. Waistell, 'Incorporating mindfulness: questioning capitalism', *Journal of Management, Spirituality & Religion*, 15/2 (2018), 2.

<sup>17</sup> Scherer and Waistell, 'Incorporating mindfulness', 2.

proper antidote to infection and monstrosity is quite literally 'mindful' consumerism: awareness of the origins of what one consumes – in this case brains – combined with an effort to minimise one's harmful consumption and balance it with humanitarian generosity. Rather than using the zombie and its 'chronic otherness' as a socio-political metaphor for marginalised people, however, *iZombie* presents the zombie as a metaphor for whiteness, capitalist exploitation, and mainstream consumer practices. Peter Dendle describes how 'the essence of the zombie at the most abstract level is supplanted, stolen, or effaced consciousness; it casts allegorically the appropriation of one person's will by another'.<sup>18</sup> In *iZombie*, the metaphor is flipped: the zombie's need to consume human flesh becomes a metaphor for the 'disease' of Western consumer culture and capitalism, in which the fortunate prey on the less fortunate.

Liv's humanitarian actions, as she literally sees and feels alongside the victims of her consumption and acts to bring these people retroactive justice, are contrasted with that of other individuals and corporations throughout the series. In season one Blaine, the zombie who infected Liv, runs a black market empire, kidnapping and murdering people (from homeless teens to astronauts) so he can sell their brains – and their memories – to his wealthy clientele. In season two Liv and other 'good' zombies are pitted against Max Rager, the energy drink corporation that first created the zombie virus, and which still manipulates it for profit. Another zombie business sources its brains from terminal patients in Nepal, through a hospital owned by its billionaire founder.<sup>19</sup> In the show's later seasons, a group of zombies form a collective to protect themselves from humans, which includes a food production centre and a private army. It is soon revealed that the memory-free paste they eat is made largely from the brains of enemy combatants in the Middle East, killed during the zombie army's various privateering excursions.<sup>20</sup> At the end of the third season, this organisation uses their exposure as a zombie front to hold the country hostage, demanding the 'voluntarily' donated brains of the dead in exchange for their containment of the virus.<sup>21</sup>

Good zombies like Liv, in contrast, ensure that they only consume ethically-sourced brains – but again, 'ethical' consumption is only ever defined in contrast to these examples of unethical consumption. *iZombie* does reveal some of the 'work' of capitalism, not only in terms of the harm 'bad' zombie consumption can do, but in the way it links even good consumption to the literal bodies of its 'victims'. For instance, Liv prepares and eats most of her brains in the morgue kitchen, often with the body of the deceased in the background. These scenes are often presented as comical, but also mark Liv's consumption as intimately and intentionally related to the bodies that sustain her. Despite this gruesome setting, of course, the preparation process is still presented in a colourful cooking show montage, which reframes the dead body as a morbidly attractive object of consumption (see Figure 3). Though the show frequently does make efforts to champion diversity and equality, Liv's assumption of the minds and mannerisms of the people she consumes can result in uncomfortable stereotypes and appropriations. Early in the first season, for instance, Liv eats the brains of Sammy Wong, a man of Asian descent, and comically discovers that she 'knows kung fu'. In other moments the deceased's identity is played for laughs or fetishized as a commodity object, as in a season five episode where Liv eats the brains of a drag queen, preparing these as a rainbow jelly Pride cake (see Figure 4). In these moments the focus is overwhelmingly on the spectacle of Liv's

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<sup>18</sup> Peter J. Dendle, 'The zombie as barometer of cultural anxiety', in Niall Scott (ed), *Monsters and the Monstrous: Myths and Metaphors of Enduring Evil* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), p. 47.

<sup>19</sup> *iZombie*, 'Spanking the Zombie'.

<sup>20</sup> *iZombie*, 'Spanking the Zombie', Tessa Blake, dir. (The CW, 2 May 2017).

<sup>21</sup> *iZombie*, 'Looking for Mr. Goodbrain, Part 2,' Dan Etheridge, dir. (The CW, 27 June 2017).

consumption, and on Liv as a cis, straight, white woman with the privilege of sampling 'exotic' identities for the audience's entertainment (and her own).

**Figure 3:** Liv gets cooking. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Meq\\_Fv8UIC8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Meq_Fv8UIC8)

**Figure 4:** 'Are you ready to be fabulous?' ('Killer Queen' S5E11, 2019). <https://youtu.be/18TJxe36F-I?t=26>

By placing its focus on mindful consumption, *iZombie* draws the focus away from capitalist consumption as a negative practice in itself. It presents the zombie subject as physically normal and socially well-adjusted, and normalises its monstrous consumer practices as a cannibalistic 'diet' that can be managed through neoliberal force of will. The zombie, like other contemporary monsters, is being slowly co-opted by a neoliberal consumerist discourse. In many ways, this means that it is more of a 'modern' monster than ever before. In the age of global capitalism, and of increasing nationalism and intolerance across Europe and the US, this justification of 'mindful' consumerism, exploitation, and violence feels uncomfortably relevant. The viropolitics presented by this new zombie figure invite resignation and regulation, rather than anxiety or revolution. The neoliberal or 'postcapitalist' zombie narrative attempts to convince us that there is no use fighting against our identity as capitalist subjects, and to reassure us that if we only do it right, the monstrosity of capitalism and consumerism is nothing to be afraid of.