Cirucci, A. M. (2013). The Social Dead: How Our Zombie Baggage Threatens to Drag Us into the Crypts of Our Past. In M. Balaji (Ed.), The Thinking Dead: What the Zombie Apocalypse Means (pp. 37-55). Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

Popular culture has a way of seizing upon our anxieties and apprehensions and delivering content that reflects these fears while still entertaining us. Zombie films, and the Voodoo lore from whence they originate, are certainly not new. However, soon after the events of September 11th, American media found itself amidst a zombie and apocalyptic narrative resurgence. Starting in 2002 themes of zombies and apocalyptic culture began to reappear in films, television, graphic novels, and video games. By 2006, the trend was in full swing, and people started to take notice. Journalists and media scholars claimed zombie themes to be in a full renaissance. This popularity has been particularly validated with the current obsession of AMC's *The Walking Dead,* the show which I will be using as my primary example for this chapter (Bishop, 2010).

The time is ripe for the rebirth of zombie culture. Zombie narratives are situated amidst the fear of a collapsing structure that begs to be rebuilt and the need to be shielded from the violent other that threatens to snatch us up in its fiendish grasps. As Bishop describes them in his *American Zombie Gothic*, "zombie narratives always stand out as telling and valuable cultural indicators" (p. 26). Clearly, after September 11th, American citizens not only conjured up a fear of a stereotypical "other," they also feared the literal and figurative break down of structure in our country. Scenes of citizens fleeing from crumbling buildings in apocalyptic media eerily parallel those images emblazoned on our minds from September 11th news coverage. More importantly, because of the events of September 11th and those that followed, audiences cannot help but view zombie narratives "through the filter of terrorist threats and apocalyptic reality" (Bishop, p. 30, 2010).

The struggle for meaning in this perceived breaking down of social structure necessarily includes the self. As we question our country's fate, we are also questioning our own, individual destinies. We yearn to understand ourselves—who we are and where our places are in society. It is not surprising that at roughly the time that zombie narratives were in full swing, social media users flocked to the new social networking site, Facebook, in unprecedented numbers.

Launched at Harvard in February of 2004, Facebook had one million users by December of the same year. Two years later the site had 12 million users, and by December of 2012 Facebook boasted over one billion monthly active users (facebook, 2013). Facebook allows its users to create online identities and connect with people around the world. Although most of Facebook users' friends are people they have previously met offline (boyd & Ellison, 2007), the site allows for a new way of negotiating identities and presenting the self. This chapter will explore the similarities between our country's obsession with zombie narratives and social networking and what we can glean from these connections.

Photography, Social Media, and Current Zombie Narratives

The function of the photograph as proof of the existence of phenomena dates back at least as far as the 1880s, when the use of photos in newspapers became widespread, fueled both by technological advancements, such as that of flash powder or the wirephoto, as well as by the voracious appetite of the public for more and better images of news stories. Sensational news stories, the reality of which may have seemed distant or even impossible before, could now be thrust into the light. Photographs were evidence, a type of indisputable proof that an event had occurred (Sontag, 1973).

The presumption remains today—even in an increasingly edited and touched-up world—that the image relates to a phenomenon in the real world (Sontag, 1973). Because we are willing

to believe in this reverse-mapping of a photograph to a real phenomenon, we have come to rely on pictures to tell us tales that we otherwise could not believe or envision for ourselves. Panoramas of remote deserts crested by sand dunes, the views from snow-capped mountain tops down onto towns or forests below, the cracked and weathered face of an ancient tribal shaman, or the luxurious opulence of a celebutante's Midtown Manhattan apartment—we are fascinated by photographs that show us worlds that we have never experienced for ourselves.

Pictures become the shadows in Plato's Cave, the images that the prisoners see dancing on the cave walls, and we assume that they must represent reality (Sontag, 1973). Almost as soon as photography appears, people begin using this idea to their advantage. Even with the early daguerreotype, parents would have a photographer take pictures of their dead children arranged as though they were sleeping. While evoking the presence of a *living* child, these photographs also served as proof of their existence. In this sense, a photograph was viewed as a sort of autobiography, asserting that the captured person did indeed exist (Sekula, 1984; Worth, 1981).

By the early 20th century photography was becoming an amateur activity, a domestic job bestowed upon housewives, who became the photographers of the home and children (Holland, 1997). Since this time, people have used photography to display a conformance to social norms and to map friends and family members. Photography integrated itself into already established social traditions such as birthdays, weddings, and graduations (Chalfen, 1987; Holland, 1997). Photographs helped to establish group identities by giving them a visual narrative. These social snapshots also helped individuals to create a life narrative by both placing themselves into the larger group narratives and through weaving a personal narrative outside of the group, by appearing in photos of various groups over their lifetimes.

Although the content of photographs may serve to establish identity, the manner in which a picture is displayed is also of significance. Photographs placed in albums, which are easy to manage and contain an edited selection of images, are meant to be shared with others whereas pictures placed in a shoebox under a bed are typically meant for more private viewing. A photograph in a frame sends a message of a time that is fixed, a time that is to be cherished and remembered, such as a wedding photo. A photograph hanging loosely on a refrigerator on the other hand sends a message of current but flowing identities since they can easily be switched out for new photos (Edwards & Hart, 2004).

The introduction of digital photography gave users even more freedom to capture their lives as they please. Digital cameras, and now mobile devices with integrated cameras, allow users to snap as many pictures as they want, deleting the "bad" ones along the way until they have fabricated their desired "look." Digital software allows amateurs to easily edit pictures that they feel do not properly represent their idealized selves, often by simply cropping out unwanted parts of the body or airbrushing to smooth out flaws (Ritchin, 2009). Just as early amateur photographers had learned to create different versions of reality with the daguerreotype, amateurs today use digital snapshots and software to create their own versions of events, and their own identities. Today, however, people have a much larger platform to display their created worlds.

Social networking sites are not necessarily a new phenomenon. Bulletin Board Systems (BBSs), AOL chat rooms, MySpace, and even multi-user dungeons (MUDs) all encompassed aspects of what we would now label as social media. Although these older spaces relied primarily on text-based descriptions as the means for users to define themselves, Facebook is perhaps the first—and certainly the most popular—social networking site to put such a large

emphasis on photographs. Facebook does not deem a user's profile page "100%" complete until that user posts a profile picture. In the case that some lazy or subversive user has still refused to choose a profile picture, the silhouette of a man or woman with a questionable hairstyle is used as the default. Friends then have the option to "suggest" a profile picture for the indolent user.

Most importantly, there is now a clear connection to an offline self (Lenhart & Madden, 2007; Ong, Ang, Ho, Lim, Goh, Lee, & Chua, 2011). Older social networks may have asked users to create screen names or profile pages containing avatars, buddy icons, or even music, along with text, to symbolically represent each user's personality. However, in the absence of photographs, these profiles could contain no concrete links to a user's offline persona if the user so chose. In fact, many of these early sites were lauded by the academic community for their anonymous nature; scholars were delighted to learn of a space that welcomed and easily facilitated experimentation with a variety of identities (e.g. Turkle, 1995). Without a clear link to an offline self, users never knew if the presented identity of another user was actually connected to a real offline person.

Facebook, on the other hand, has created a clear link to an offline self by pushing its users to post photographs that reveal offline identities and in so doing the site has also created a space where truth is taken for granted. Our history of relying on photographs to tell the truth now leads us to the conclusion that the identities presented on Facebook are real or authentic because there may be a handful of snapshots to back them up. Unlike the separation of traditional photographs into albums, framed pictures and refrigerator fodder, photographs displayed on Facebook tend to be an agglomeration of all of these types of photographs—even in the presence of tools and applications that might help us sort them, filter them or restrict their viewing—living

side by side on one profile, creating a cacophony of identities, past and present, fixed and evolving.

Facebookers can choose to not have a profile picture, but this is not common. The majority of Facebook users have a profile picture that captures their physical identity (Nosko, Wood, & Molema, 2010). Further, Facebook offers users the ability to create albums for "Life Events," such as a new job, a marriage, a new home, weight loss, or travel; to write status updates, which often include pictures, in order to keep friends and family apprised of their actions and whereabouts; and to "tag" each other in photographs. Studies have reported that users find pictures on Facebook to be the most critical aspect of the Facebook profile—they are what users are most sure to include and what users spend the most time thinking about when maintaining an up-to-date profile (Hum et al., 2011; Lenhart & Madden, 2007; Ong et al., 2011; Siibak, 2009). Following Facebook's lead, identity construction online has become about showing through pictures rather than telling through text (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008).

In this change from traditional photography to digital photography displayed on Facebook, pictures have also changed, centering on the individual. Identity has become more about the self than about social and familial associations. This only seems natural; after all, the Facebook profile is supposed to be a summary of one person, so why wouldn't the photographs displayed predominantly tell the story of that one person? Users poorly crop out others in their photos to showcase only themselves. The mirror picture and the extended arm picture, both known fondly as "selfies," run rampant on Facebook. Users have no shame in posting pictures that imply hours spent in isolation in a bathroom or bedroom trying to capture the perfect pose.

In his 1981 book, *Camera Lucida*, Barthes describes photographs of people as ". . . that rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the return of the dead" (p. 9). Clearly he

is not saying that every photograph is of someone who has actually died; instead, Barthes is explaining that because every picture is necessarily of the past, the specific identity featured in the photo is dead—there is no returning to that old self. Instead, we as humans are constantly negotiating our identities through new experiences and encounters. Sayer (2004) echoes Barthes when he writes that we can only create our identities by those things that have happened in the past—we take memories of past events and of our past selves and use these blurred recollections to create our identities in the moment.

If we believe that we can only use memory to create our identities, then Barthes' (1981) claim that, "the Photograph is violent: not because it shows violent things, but because on each occasion *it fills the sight by force*, and because in it nothing can be refused or transformed," (p. 91) impels us to see how influential photographs are on identity negotiation. When our memories are consumed merely by images instead of lived experiences, our views of reality become skewed, and we therefore negotiate our current identities by recalling events that have been framed or skewed to reflect a particular version of reality. As Sayer (2004) implies, if we do not remember something then it logically cannot be part of our identity.

It is no secret that users attempt to create idealized versions of themselves through Facebook. Facebookers create identities that emphasize aspects of their desired selves, downplaying perceived faults and shortcomings. Users will use images, profile text, wall posts and status updates to try to make themselves appear more intelligent, more beautiful or more macho than they may actually be (Valkenburg, Schouten, & Peter, 2005). And this is only natural—people would rather remember, and have others remember, the "good" parts of their lives, even if they are false or somehow inauthentic.

Indeed, Facebook photographs in particular have become an important source of self-identity. They fill our heads, reinforcing our own false conceptions of ourselves, crowding out our memories of actual events, and instead implanting the realities portrayed on Facebook through our own, and others', photographic narratives. As we scroll through our profiles, we are constantly reminded of the identity Facebook is compiling for us, or that we are crafting for ourselves through Facebook.

In prior papers I have argued that social media provide a kind of narcissistic platform—a place where we can play a certain type of social game that allows us to level up by accumulating and distributing social capital, not completely unlike in a video game, where the gaming avatar has been replaced by the social media profile. A main goal, then, would be to create a celebrity-like persona—we collect friends, fans, and followers, we anxiously await the moment when someone will validate and reward our content via "likes," and we post pictures and mundane "stories" of our everyday selves as if we are our own paparazzi (Cirucci, 2013).

I wouldn't say that this evolution in identity formation has occurred organically. Instead, I would argue that the principle catalyst has been Facebook's push towards this kind of personalized and individualized online identity. All of these actions take place in a highly structured and controlled environment—the rules and categories are fixed, giving us the social norms of the culture of online personae. Facebook's interface and parameters define for us how we will create our online identities and how these identities will then be seen by others and reflected back to us, (Cirucci, 2013) especially with the recent addition of the Facebook Timeline. So yes, Facebook assuages our fears of the loss of structure by guiding our identification processes, but have we begun to allow it to take too much control of the building of our online and offline selves?

In Facebook's guided turn to a more individual sense of identity in a post September 11th world, post-apocalyptic media have also taken a turn. Unlike old zombie narratives that focused on some homogenous, infiltrating other, directors are now more concerned with audiences feeling connected to a protagonist who is fighting to endure the zombie infestation, trying to maintain a sense of their identity despite a world that has been radically changed. For example, Bishop (2010) concludes that *The Walking Dead* is not about zombies at all, but about Rick's (the main character's) struggle to understand his new world and his new self (Bishop, 2010). Kirkman, the creator of *The Walking Dead* graphic novel series, stated that the story was really about watching Rick and how he endures the post-apocalyptic world (Canavan, 2010).

And why should this not be the case? The world of zombies provides an idealized battleground for change. Instead of being the inevitable result of passing time, the product of a torpid but continuous process that offers few identifiably discrete degrees of division, change in the zombie realm occurs suddenly—the virus breaks and spreads quickly, even the government, our constant source of control and reliability, is powerless to stem its tide and it quickly and inevitably shatters the order of things, leaving in its wake only a few isolated survivors, islets of normalcy in a sea of madness. These survivors are truly individuals, their individuality made all the more stark by contrast with the zombie horde.

Further, the zombies themselves have begun to take on personalities of their own. Zombies now have names, look more like humans, have emotions, and can think and remember (Bishop, 2010). This seems like a natural next step—should the undead legions have no distinction among them? Can't a zombie be concerned with his own wants and needs? Recent movies such as *Wasting Away* and *Zombies Anonymous* even go so far as to show us life from

the zombie point of view, and to show us some of their less-than-successful attempts at integration.

Conflict

In order to examine zombie narratives and social media as analogous phenomena, we will now discover what we might learn when we take one and understand it as we would the other. Specifically, let us see what will we gain from an analysis of Facebook by understanding it as a fight for meaning in a changing of and a breaking down of our once relied upon social structure.

We can more easily see the parallels between social media identities and zombie narratives by drawing out the main conflict that is present in each. The contention is that the old structures of civilization and culture are gone; the country as we know it has changed into something dangerous and incomprehensible. Zombie narratives take place in a post-apocalyptic world—safety and community have been demolished. This new catastrophic culture also asks that you choose between maintaining your old life and making a change to stay alive. The former consists of the zombies, the latter of the survivors. To try to maintain the past, that comfortable world that has been whisked away, means to ultimately succumb to the encroaching undead armies.

I mentioned earlier that the zombie world is a world of sudden and violent change—that the isolated individual is what remains behind—but perhaps the story is more complex. The protagonist in the zombie narrative has already begun to move on, to separate himself from the rest of the world. In the post September 11th world, many of those who felt the warm protection of the status quo, the illusion that they were safe and that the rest of the world was too distant, or that they were too isolated to come to harm, were thrust into the blinding reality that this was only a farce. Here, then, is the break with the past. It is the individual who has changed, who has

seen through the illusion of the old order, which is now the order of the zombies, of all that the protagonist used to be. They remain locked forever in the illusion of the past, unwilling to accept the truth, and because of this, have already died—their identities and behavior now necessarily inauthentic, performing the awkward, shambling dance of the brutal and relentless status quo. Their words no longer hold any meaning—they can only produce unintelligible moans and shrieks. Of course they must devour the brain, the zombies' greatest threat, the wellspring from which flows the world as it really is, the world behind the curtain. Looking back the protagonist sees the arms of the past violently and desperately trying to cling to him and to drag him back with it. Looking ahead he sees a difficult road, one of more change, more realization and enlightenment, and of constant conflict with the life he left behind. The decision is not clear and many characters are incapable of surmounting the difficulties. To survive is to evolve, to find new ways of life and new reasons for living. To die is to give in to the past and to comfort, to permit the destruction of the mind, to adopt the status quo knowing now that it is just an illusion.

As a concrete example of the protagonist's struggle, Morgan has to make these kinds of tough choices in *The Walking Dead*. His storyline reaches a climax when he sees his zombie wife, Jenny, nearing him. We as the audience literally see her in the crosshairs of his gun. Now he has a choice—he can make the decision to be with her, to give in to the past and succumb to the old Morgan. Or, he can make the difficult decision to break with the temptation to long for his lost love and attempt to squelch the punishing guilt that he likely feels from being a survivor while she became one of the walking dead (Bishop, 2010). And who has not had a similar experience with a friend or loved one?—a moment where we realize that our own growth threatens our relationship and that we are on the verge of moving into a new phase of our lives while they remain much the same.

The situation on Facebook is analogous. If we are to carry on with our lives, we must constantly make changes. Facebook highlights the exact moments of contention. Will you remain the partier you were in college, or will you clean up your act and try to get a job? Will you remain connected to your parents, or will you begin to show that you are an adult with your own life to begin? Each time a decision is made to change, it means a change to the Facebook page, sometimes by deleting photographs that reflected old versions of you. And indeed, even after you have chosen to move on, you are constantly surrounded by the people or things that signify the world you once knew—our online zombie baggage.

If Barthes is right, and photographs can only represent our dead selves, then it is safe to say that our Facebook photographs are our zombie selves. They represent past lives to which we cling and that are constantly reflected back at us. Every time we log on and look through our albums, decide on a new profile picture, or transfer a fresh batch of photos off of our phones, we are spending our time in the present dabbling in the macabre world of our past. Before digital media we may have kept old pictures, but they were kept in an album on a shelf or in a shoe box. We may go to them every so often to take a walk down memory lane, but they were not on constant display for us to see.

More importantly, traditional photographs were not on display for our entire social networks to see. Facebook compiles our photographs into our Timelines, asking us to track our lives back to birth. It allows others to tag us in photographs that we may not have seen in years. Photos of our less-proud moments from high school mingle with photos of us with coworkers. Episodes from our past can be continually relived as we are tagged in ancient class photos, or in albums uploaded by long forgotten friends and enemies of events that we might not remember at all if not for the unfortunate presence of a camera.

In light of this argument, it is not surprising that in September of 2012 Facebook acquired the social networking site Instagram. Instagram can be loosely described as Twitter with pictures—users post never ending streams of photographs, likely snapped by their mobile devices and then quickly uploaded through the Instagram mobile app to inform their "followers" of what they are up to that day, to "report" breaking news stories, and to invite their networks to upcoming events. Some users have even taken to Instagram's weekly theme of "throw-back Thursdays," posting older pictures of themselves, family members, and friends. Most importantly, many Instagram users link their accounts to their Facebook Timelines, allowing them to quickly add new photographs to their photographic narratives.

Without Facebook, these photographs would most likely cease to be a part of our identity negotiation, fading into the past as we beat on. However when they are collected and displayed on our Timelines, they cannot help but become representative of our current selves. We are expected to be the same person that we were—to act differently might make us seem inauthentic, to give in to these pressures is to fail to evolve.

Just as Morgan is faced with moving on in *The Walking Dead*, it is hard to just discard of our zombie baggage online. The pressure is internal as well as external. We risk alienating those people from our past if we change too much, but we also are being exposed to these images ourselves while we attempt to make decisions that influence our lives in the present. We see images from our childhood and wonder why things cannot be the same way today. We see the failures of our teen years and wonder if they will not repeat themselves in our adult lives. We may offend a family member by asking them to take down a photo that we believe no longer captures our identity.

Sayer (2004) argues that we can only create our current identities through memories of past events and past versions of the self. If we are constantly bombarded with zombie baggage of ourselves, filling out memories with old versions of our self, how can we ever change for the better? How can we create a new identity to ensure our survival the way Rick and the other survivors do? Unfortunately, our online zombie baggage cannot simply be shot in the face.

Zombie baggage both in zombie narratives and on social media are so difficult to let go of because they represent the ultimate uncanny. Freud gives an early definition of the uncanny (*Unheimlich*) by describing it as when the familiar is fused with the unfamiliar, when the familiar becomes strange (Bishop, 2010). Zombies are uncanny because they are familiar as having been people, even people we might have known. Their familiar form, however, belies their true existence as members of the undead. Even the concept of the undead is itself uncanny. It is at once the recognizable, if incomprehensible, state of death made strange by the fact that they are still motile and even stranger still by the idea that they still have a purpose or mission—the destruction of the minds of the living.

Photographs exhibit this same paradox. They display a "parallel world of phantasmatic doubles alongside the concrete world" (Gunning, p. 43, 1995). Or, as previously discussed, they are as Barthes claims, images of the life of a thing now dead. I see an old picture of myself on Facebook, and I would not deny that it is indeed a picture of me. However, it is at the same time not me anymore. Looking at a picture of me from when I was a child in an old, dusty album, which is easily placed back on the shelf and forgotten, I can say "that *was* me." Looking at that same picture on my current Facebook Timeline I am almost forced to say, in a very uncanny manner, "that *is* me." It is, like Jenny and the other zombies on *The Walking Dead*, a mere shell of one of my many previous existences.

Our old Facebook photographs are the epitome of the uncanny—they are us, but they are not us. They are familiar and yet unfamiliar. And, just like zombies, they constantly try to drag us down and pull us back to a life that we have tried to leave behind. They violently fill our memories and cause us to question if we want to attempt to navigate the difficult path of growth and change, or if we want to succumb to our zombie baggage.

Fighting our Zombie Baggage

In a recent National Public Radio interview, Sherry Turkle discussed some findings in her research regarding teens and social media:

> They [teens] felt that on Facebook, their life story followed them through their lives . . . And one said to me, "My God, it used to be that when you went away to college you got to start fresh to be a new person, and I bet that was great." This sense of the Facebook identity as something that follows you all your life is something that many adolescents feel is a burden (NPR, 2012).

Like Zombie narratives, Facebook provides an outlet for the fears evoked by the changing state of our world. Facebook gives us a structure to better understand ourselves and our place in society. I fear we often do not realize, however, how restrictive this new structure can be. Just as the characters in zombie media fight for their lives, so should we as social media users fight for our evolving identities. We should fight for the opportunity to grow and change, to decide to become the new people we choose to be. We should cast aside the guilt and doubt that will plague us as we attempt to move forward while never looking back. As Turkle's quote highlights, Facebook has begun to make it hard for us to move on from past selves, from identities of which we may no longer want to be reminded, from our zombie baggage.

In the end, it is important to understand that change is inevitable, even for those who are not fond of it. Although the past may be staring us in the face, zombie narratives show us, albeit through extreme example, that the path of survival is the path of change—even when the zombie structure (Facebook's interface) is taking over, we can remain in the land of the living. Facebook may play a significant role in the negotiation of our new identities. And in the future we will likely develop even bigger and better systems for identity structure and negotiation. But as Baudrillard implies in his *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994), our Facebook profiles may be our maps, but we are still ultimately the territory.

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