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IMAGES AND INFLUENCE – IMAGE-BASED STORYTELLING AND THE ETHICS OF NARRATIVE

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Images and Influence — Image-based Storytelling and the Ethics of Narrative

Synopsis:

A consideration of the ethical imperatives of storytelling, in view of the ongoing debate over whether images of violence in popular culture influence behavior and/or values.

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The 1976 film *Taxi Driver* was cited by John Hinckley, Jr. as a principal factor in his unsuccessful attempt, five years later, on President Ronald Reagan's life. The filmmakers, especially its director Martin Scorsese, quickly and unequivocally denounced Hinckley's claim as utterly without merit. For better or worse, the question of how depictions of violence in contemporary storytelling genres affect behavior has not only remained controversial, but it has also gained renewed currency with the proliferation of gun violence in recent years.

This paper argues that it is a drastic oversimplification to assert that the absence of an immediate and direct line of causality proves the absence of a connection between storytelling and its impact upon thought and belief as well as behavior. One of the most significant terms in the discussion, however — and one which complicates the analysis — is the generally unqualified acceptance of a positive influence from a compelling or emotionally uplifting narrative. Television has a long history of programs whose positive influence is well known. At the peak of their popularity, *Mash* and *ER* were each credited with significant spikes in applications to American medical schools. Likewise, the 1980s TV series *LA Law* inspired thousands of applications to law schools. More recently, it was reported that the first installment of the movie franchise *The Hunger Games* created such an interest in archery that equipment stores had difficulty meeting the demand. Meanwhile, the advertising industry historically spends billions to influence buying behavior, even as it disclaims depictions of risky or life-threatening behavior in commercials (e.g., "Professional driver on closed course. Do not attempt."). And the influence of video games such as *Grand Theft Auto* and so-called First Person Shooter Games is also the topic of a great deal of debate.

It is simply not reasonable to accept or even embrace positive effects of exposure to the great variety of storytelling platforms, but dissociate entirely from any deleterious ramifications. All else being equal, individuals are of course responsible for their own actions, and works of art worthy of the name have the capability of delivering messages beyond what the author intended. It is nevertheless a matter for serious, critical reflection what ethical imperatives attend a creative narrative, even one that is simply "entertainment."