

Metta Spencer

Two Aspirins and a Comedy : How Television Can Enhance Health and Society
(Bolder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2006, 326pp.)

Metta Spencer asks a basic question often asked of peacemakers “How can we create a culture of peace and compassion?” Her answer in this extended conversation between Plato and Aristotle is “with entertainment – especially long-running stories in instalments that make you fall in love with characters or at least care about them. Love can change your way of thinking. I think the content of entertainment is exactly what matters most — the meaning of stories and the empathy involved in following characters as they handle their dilemmas.”

Plato was among the first to reflect on the role of art and drama in society. His image of drama was that of the poet – storyteller who recounted the heroic Homeric tales of the battle of Troy and the intervention of the gods in the life of mortals. Basically, Plato found the tales shallow and a distraction from the important questions of life. Plato was not against drama since his Socratic conversations are often high drama. But his aim was the elevation of the spirit. The myth does not stand alone but must be combined with philosophy in a fruitful synergy. The meaning of a deeply significant story does not register until a wise comment is added to explain them.

Aristotle in his *Poetics* was thinking not of the wandering poet but the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides which were the center of popular drama, at least for the citizens. I am not sure what the slaves did for entertainment.

For Aristotle, the meaning of the play had to be built into the action and the character of the persons. The aim of the play for Aristotle was not so much the elevation of the individual as a collective emotion, a sense of awe, of empathy and catharsis. Although the chorus was originally there to underline the message for those of slow understanding, as drama developed, the role of the chorus lessened, and the moral spoken by a character himself. Thus for Aristotle, drama was a necessary part of social life, a common reflection on the nature of society, the impact of fate, a school for emotional appropriateness. As Aristotle stressed in his *Ethics* , moral education involves learning to feel “the right emotion to the right degree at the right time.”

As Metta Spencer asks “Can Plato and Aristotle be reconciled? Can storytelling lend emotional power to objective, rational modes of discourse?”

Unfortunately most of the dramas shown on TV are not written by Sophocles or Euripides. As Metta Spencer notes “Most television programming is dreadful. The standard of writing is poor; many plots are marred by gratuitous violence, and TV watching becomes an isolating, inactive leisure activity.”

However, poor quality need not be the norm. There are possibilities for stories which address real societal problems and produce wisdom and emotional insight. The bulk of the book provides examples of useful and moving programs, and basically asks for more programs that have been both entertaining and socially useful. Among the socially useful programs have been television series, often made in Mexico or Brazil where the characters face real problems of unemployment, single parent situations, poor health. The characters deal with these issues, shared by many watchers, in realistic and socially progressive ways. Many identify with the

characters and discuss the choices to be made. Since these are often long-running series, the public has time to identify with the characters. Tolerance for diversity is often a positive theme of these series, showing people from different backgrounds working together for the common good.

Metta Spencer deals with two series shown in Canada “Street Time” concerning a parole officer and his interaction with those under his supervision and a series “Northern Exposure” – the lives of people in a small village in Alaska. Such series, along with other opportunities for discussion and sharing ideas can lead to personal development and help in the foundations of a culture of peace. This is a welcome book for those often discouraged by the quality of TV programs.

Rene Wadlow



Drawing : Cecile Wadlow