

ERIC ROHMER: FILM AS THEOLOGY by Keith Tester, *Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2008, pp. vi + 175, £45.00 hbk*

The critical acclaim surrounding Danny Boyle's *Slumdog Millionaire* has re-directed attention, even in times of rising secularity, to the link between the *auteur* (the personal vision of the director) and Catholicism. For Ford, Hitchcock and Scorsese, Catholicism supplied a reverence in framing images, the need for inference in regard to visual representations, a recognition of the power of symbols, and alertness to theological themes of guilt and innocence, redemption, forgiveness, hope and despair. These accentuations have been re-set in their significance by a realisation that a culture of postmodernity is unexpectedly denoted by theological considerations. The writings of von Balthasar on aesthetics and theology present a vital support for those seeking to decipher these trends. More than any other recent theologian, he has opened out links between the traditions of theology and the expectations of the humanities in ways that facilitate a creative fusion of both. Thus, his large tome on Georges Bernanos complements the French director Robert Bresson who filmed *Diary of a Country Priest* and in the case of both, understandings of grace operating in culture can be greatly enhanced. Likewise, adventurous theological insights have emerged by means of the link between Flannery O'Connor and John Huston in regard to *Wise Blood*.

Set against the above considerations, Tester's search for theological issues in Rohmer's long and distinctive directorial career has much to offer. A labour of love, the study is crammed with detail about the place of Paris in his films, his use of amateur actors, his rigidity regarding scripts, and the degree to which everything is planned ahead so that shooting schedules are short. Concise summaries of the plots of the films are supplied in the study and these are subject to minute, sometimes ingenious, appraisals. Rohmer's films might be characterised by realism, but these are more than mere refractions of everyday life; they exhibit moral tales of dilemmas well fitted for close observation. There are two unusual properties to this particular study. The first relates to the author's disciplinary background that shapes this interpretation of Rohmer's significance and the second points to the distinctive theological themes which Tester uncovers in his study of the films.

In a sense, this study is a sabbatical from Tester's more usual pursuits as a widely published sociologist whose works cover culture, morality, and the human condition. He is also a notable commentator on the extensive writings of the Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, who has sought to think past postmodernity in ways that lead into recognition of the endemic and enduring properties of the human condition. These emerge distinctively as modernity matures and as contingency accentuates a sense of the indeterminate. The dilemmas these occasion influence Tester in his approach to Rohmer, but unusually for an English sociologist lead him in the direction of Catholicism. The concerns with fate and chance that arise for Bauman in his worries over postmodernity and life generate particular theological needs which Tester wishes to explore.

Given Rohmer's enigmatic and elusive status (pp. 4–7), Tester's decision to concentrate on the territories of this director makes a lot of sociological sense. His interests are with the coming of grace 'in the human nature of sociability' (p. 18). Concerns with its properties yield realisations of vulnerability where the ordinary is called into question most especially when fate strikes. This sense of precariousness forms a domain property of Rohmer's films, notably when tragedy emerges from 'sad endings brought about by social pressures' (p. 28). These confine the actors to the mundane, to the empirical world, that seems endowed with inescapable properties of the immediate, the 'now' (pp. 25–28). As Tester writes 'it is this atmospheric "now", our "now" that is the site of Rohmer's most nuanced work', hence why his films are denoted by realism (p. 45). By

illustrating the way the even tenor of the 'now' is sabotaged by ambiguities, events and personalities that are so disruptive, a suitable terrain for the reception of grace is disclosed.

Grace comes as an irruption that thrusts into the routine hazarding of everyday life, and it comes as a gift that transcends its ambiguities. Sometimes, as Tester suggests, God takes matters in hand and by means of grace blows the 'now' into the infinite. In Tester's view, it is this prising open of routines, in whose fissures grace might come, that gives to Rohmer's films a particular theological potency. But as Tester suggests, Rohmer's concerns hinge on the degree to which its conferral might be misrecognised, due to a blindness stemming from hardness of heart (pp. 91–92). Yet grace can be discerned by others in unexpected circumstances. It is this property of wager that generates an interest in Rohmer's films, even when the viewer has no theological interest in the outcomes. The films' narratives entice the curious to look closely and think about outcomes that sometimes are left dangling and open-ended. In the indeterminacy, the viewer might feel the need to look more closely at the everyday and in doing so might become more alert to its unexpected moments of grace.

Pascal emerges as the central theological figure in this study, not least because of his place in one of Rohmer's more famous works, *My Night at Maud's*. Strangely, specific examples of grace conferred rarely appear in Rohmer's work but an exemplary infusion is to be found in one of his films, *A Winter's Tale*. Its central figure, Félicie is given a gift of grace that enables her to make the right choice over conflicting loyalties. The conferral occurs in a cathedral. It is an exemplary infusion. Indeed, as Tester remarks, 'it is not at all far-fetched to identify Félicie as *the* point of redemption in Rohmer's entire body of work' (p. 160). Pascal also comes into significance over the deceptions and revelations the self encounters in the course of the routine round of life where miracles emerge in chance encounters that reveal all. Leaving aside the worry that grace is everywhere but nowhere in particular, Tester draws attention to its conferral in the many passages of life portrayed in Rohmer's films and most notably when they are concerned with moral themes.

The sites of Rohmer's films are meticulously explored, especially his ambiguous attitude to Paris. In those films set in the country, Tester finds a telling image of the wind blowing through the trees. As they sway in the background, they mark the finiteness of life and the impossibility of the dreams of those who seek to escape from its limitations (pp. 69–70). It is this appeal to what is all around that makes Tester such an interesting commentator on Rohmer. A legacy of postmodernity is that it has revealed a quandary over the presence or absence of God, hence the interest in Pascal's wager. But these concerns arise earlier, as Tester well notes, in Baudelaire's familiar notion of modernity. The one half dealing with the fleeting and the transient is well-known; less well known, or downplayed in the interests of affirming secularity, is the other half which refers to what is eternal (p. 80). This property of the eternal relates to God, who is not totally absent, but as Tester aptly suggests is lurking about hidden, but wishing to drop down gifts of grace, whose donation involves also making a wager as to whether these irruptions will be recognised or not (p. 88).

While Pascal greatly aids Tester's theological quest, at its end one feels it is more Flannery O'Connor who comes closest to supplying what he seeks. Her concern was with the bizarre and with extra-sacramental infusions of grace outside Catholicism and delivered in bizarre circumstances. These indicate that God is not to be outfoxed, nor to be compromised by place, time or personality. Tester slightly overplays the infusion of the grace in the ordinary. The realism he finds in Rohmer's films downplays the irruptions of grace in the imagination where images of faith can also be delicately kindled. The ordinary in Rohmer's films might give comfort to sociological enterprises that best operate when confined to

the scrutiny of the routines of life. But the imagination is also an apt vehicle for the exploration of the unexpected and for the grace to see beyond the boundaries of everyday life.

Perhaps the ultimate value of this study is the way it seeks to find in the films of Rohmer moments of grace emerging in the ordinary, in unpropitious cultural times, persons and circumstances that affirm the extraordinary. The study is highly suggestive, credible and alert to many theological possibilities that are ripe for exploration in other settings, perhaps in relation to the study of other directors for whom the operations of grace yield other intriguing prospects.

KIERAN FLANAGAN

THE BODY OF THIS by Andrew McNabb *Warren Machine Company*, 2008, pp. 176, £18.50

What first brought this book the way of *New Blackfriars* is the fact that the author is a great-grandnephew of Vincent McNabb OP, who was a regular contributor to *Blackfriars* in its early years and a key figure in the Ditchling experiment centred on Eric Gill, Hilary Pepler, David Jones and others. In this collection of short stories (some of them very short, no more than a few hundred words), Andrew McNabb shows the influence of that aspiration to an 'earthy Catholicism', seeking to locate the spiritual in the physical, not alongside it, or in the neighbourhood, but simply identified with it.

The collection, as the title suggests, centres on bodies, human bodies in their various functions, relationships and ages, but also the bodies of buildings (which 'evolve' and 'breathe'), and the natural body of the created world. The tensions these stories recount (and generate in the reader) include those between the natural and the artificial, between being young and being old, being healthy and being sick, being rich and being poor, belonging to small city America (the stories are set in Portland, Maine) and not belonging there because one is a foreigner, is crippled, or is socially inept.

Near the centre of the book is a story entitled 'Herbert Wenkel Was Not Your Average Man'. Herbert laments modernity and is obsessed with a 'New World Order'. He feels better suited for medieval times. So he reads Chesterton and Belloc and convinces his wife that they should try to put these men's writings into practice. He takes his family off to northern Maine to live out the Distributist vision. He is happy among the spades and the hoes, with the seeds sinking into the rich dark earth, but the experiment does not last long as it proves impossible for them to escape the limitations, corruptions and requirements of modern life. Faced with a move from comfortable farming to subsistence living his wife finally says no. 'We're too normal, too average' she says, 'and if you want to be closer to God, do it on your own time'. So they return to enjoy the fruits of modernity, Herbert accepting that 'total devotion' is not possible in the capitalistic system, 'at least not when you've got kids'. The best he can do is garden at the weekends, 'waiting for a bit of that certain something he may never know'. In an earlier story the narrator concluded that 'no one can do everything unconventionally... you have to figure out how to fit into the system, at least a little bit'.

There is this poignancy in many of the stories, of something incomplete and unfinished, with aspirations and desires recognized but never satisfactorily fulfilled. Some of the shorter pieces are more like poems than stories. There is hardly time for plot or character to be filled out but they still, perhaps because of this, pack a punch. Some of the longer stories (and even these are just a dozen pages or so) do fill out plot and character very effectively. One is reminded at