

The Ideal Palace an ideal movie

'Heartwarming and heart wrenching' is how blurb writers would try to attract audiences and for once their potted criticism would not be wrong. Those qualities are among the reasons why I am encouraging everyone to see *The Ideal Palace* when it opens on Thursday, December 12, at the Palace cinemas, if not elsewhere.

I went to *The Ideal Palace* when it screened in the French Film Festival earlier this year not expecting a delight but because the subject intersected with one of my never-to-be worked up threads in how we un settlers have tried to make ourselves feel at home here. More of that presently.

I got more on that than I could have hoped for but also lots on one of my other hobbies – the contrast that Marx draws between the architect and the bee on the second page of chapter 7 in volume One of *Capital*. And more of that to come.

Both strands express the truth of historical materialism: we become what we do.

So, I came away with three reasons to recommend *The Ideal Palace* to friends but never expecting that it would get a commercial release. I suspect that its run will end when the Holiday Blockbusters open on Boxing day. I shall go on the opening weekend so that I can leave a week or more before a third viewing.

I should preface those commentaries by making it clear that *The Ideal Palace* is not in the least political in the sense of three other recent films that are even less likely to screen at a Multiplex near you. *George Reddy* follows a student leader from Kerala murdered in 1972; *Matila the Murderer* is about an Indonesian widow who turns the tables on a band of pillaging rapists; and the first Gujarati film, *Hellaro*, on how women in the Rann of Kutch escape from patriarchal dominance.

Yet the inner dynamics of *The Ideal Palace* have as much to offer activists as any representation of mere events, no matter how true to life, or how enthralling as fiction.

Let me make it clear that even if you have no interest in how un settlers have tried to make ourselves at home here by constructing castles and ruins, and have even less interest in the byways of Marx's critical analysis of political economy, you will come away recommending *The Ideal Palace* to friends. Here is the ideal movie to cut through commodified gift-giving and stomach-stuffing celebrations.

The Ideal Palace is beautifully realised in a mountainous area of southern France. The actors perform with the modesty of their characters.

The story is straightforward and inspired by the life of an inarticulate postman – perhaps autistic – who finds a way to express the love he has for the daughter he never imagined he could have. He builds her an ideal palace to represent the joy she has brought into his life. Over thirty years, he collects stones to fit into a multi-storied treasure house of rooms which grow out of each other like a coral reef.

Here is the spot to stop reading if the byways of Australian experience and the intricacies of historical materialism are not your things.

Having done all I can to encourage you to see *The Ideal Palace* for its own sake and for what it shows about human creativities, I shall now outline why I had picked it from the forty or more Festival offerings and then explain why it is important to critically analyse what Marx says about the difference between an architect and a bee.

Castles on the plain

It is the dry season of 1985. I am perched on a rocky outcrop in Kakadu looking across the flood plain at the park's best-known formation – Oberoi. If I were penning a postcard to a friend overseas, who had no idea of what Oberoi looks like, what could I say it looks like? Angkor Wat? which I know only from reproductions where the thousands of carvings give the total visual effect of the rock segments of Oberoi viewed from this distance.

As wild as this comparison might be, I have done what we all do in struggling to grasp the unfamiliar by seizing on the near-enough. Angkor Wat haunts the postman's ideal palace as my inadequate comparison does for Oberoi. But were I to send a postcard summing up what the ideal palace in the film looks like I'd say like Gaudi's *La Sacre Familie* in Barcelona.

Travelling on from Kakadu to the centre, I was at a total loss to come up with comparisons for Uluru and even more so for the Olgas.

My foundering alerted me to details in the accounts by new arrivals, tiny points which too often are ignored when making sense of conquest. Over thirty years, I have collected so many instances of 'castles' around Australia that I had to start a second envelope folder on 'ruins'. Some castles are a poor person's Disney Land; others assert wealth and power; even more are architectural features across suburbia.

In the year of the Cook 250th, it might not be out of place to offer some examples of how his scientists had to resort to the same thought-pattern as I did for Oberoi. Joseph Banks writes of ant nests: 'Dr Solander compared them to the Rune Stones on the Plains of Upsala in Sweden, myself to all the small Druidical monuments I had seen.' (Banks, *Journal*, II, 18, cf 121 for more Druids.) Further North, Cook spies the industrial glasshouses of his native Yorkshire. Eighteen years later, Watkin Tench, as ever, leaves us with a general precept: 'Ithaca itself was scarcely more longed for by Ulysses, than Botany Bay by the adventurers who had traversed so many thousand miles to

take possession of it.' (*Journal*, p. 31) The time and distance of oceanic voyagers has been compared to space travel in our age. The socio-cultural dislocations from moving to new social and natural environments never cease to generate distress and its antidotes. Head-he-go-round-man is Pidgin for the Highlander who visits Moresby.

Jump forward twenty years from my Kakadu puzzle into the wild west of Lightning Ridge with a castle as large if not as high as The Ideal Palace or as chromatic. Amigo's Castle is a major tourist attraction, a lot of it underground, generating a legend that its builder Vittorio Stefanato has a hidden treasure of precious stones. Twenty years of excavation of hauling rocks gives him some claim to say: 'If you love what you do you never work a day in your life.' a sentiment behind why worker bees should be in charge of our labours. Amigo's union ticket is on display.

Nearby, 'Polish Alex' has erected a globe in honour of his countryman, Copernicus. There is also a house made from thousands of bottles.

Now back to the Territory, this time to the township of Bachelor. Its park is a relief from the stunted vegetation of the north. The surprise was not just a fountain, of which Australia has far too few to relieve the dry heat. This fountain was the replica of the castle in the Czech town from which its builder had come to work on the Snowy, an area not as different from Europe as the Territory. The fountain was built by two labourers working for the council. The castellated fountain was their gift to their new home and a way to connect with the homeland they had left.

Few new arrivals built castles. Fewer had 'ruins' constructed for their gardens. But the stocking of a garden with exotics was an easiest way to feel 'at home.' 'Water them Geraniums' has never been confined to the Outback. Strolling Australian streets one could conclude that the rose and not the wattle is the national flower. Less obvious is how Mediterranean immigrants continue to get tomato seeds from their villages past quarantine.

Our lives are determined by all we do. For most us, that includes paid work. Builders' labourers know who built this country and it wasn't the Grollo brothers.

In any society divided by classes workers can have no country. For as long as the state serves the bosses, we are like aliens in our own land. However, we know that we do have a country because our labours keep on re-making Australia. Our self-worth as individuals and as a class flows out of our shared labours at work, around households, and from volunteering.

The bee as master-builder

You don't have to be my age to retain a memory trace of Mike Cooley's 1980 *Architect or Bee?* championing worker control to reunite conception and

execution. Those were the days. Labor governments ran scared before the revolt of wage-slaves from classrooms to assembly-lines. To see 'how exactly' the relative strengths of the contending classes has been reversed is vital to how we might defend ourselves from that continuing onslaught, let alone how to regain the initiative.

They are topics for every day. No progress will be made by chirping 'The Accord did it. The Accord did it.' The question for historical materialists must be: what needs of corporate capital did the Accord(s) serve? What are its current needs? Our position will continue to slip backwards for as long as the Left regurgitates Idealist error that it was a Bad Idea – Neo-Liberalism - . As Marx and Engels had to remind the Young Hegelians in 1845: people do not drown because their heads are filled with the law of gravity.

The rebirth of proletarian power cannot advance without a battle for ideological clarity. And like rebuilding of our strength in the sites of exploitation, step by step, the war for ideas has to be mortared brick by brick. Marx took decades to work his way towards the secrets of capital accumulation. Why should the likes of us expect to grasp those insights without the efforts to lay firm foundations?

The architect-and-bee paragraph is an ideal place to think our ways into historical materialism. Above all, the passage yields no mindless slogan to parrot, as with the 'Philosophers have interpreted the world. The point is to change it.' The core of historical materialism is that we change the world and we can interpret the world as we change it. Activism and understanding cannot be opposites. If the only task is the 'change' the world then Marx wasted much of his life, as Lenin did in producing the 600-page *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* (1899) – which really is volume Five of *Capital*.

To approach the ever vexed question of 'what Marx really meant' our starting point has to be what Marx actually wrote.

The passage raises questions about a human essence, about the differences between our species and all other creatures and about a materialist conception of knowledge and purpose without falling under the sway of purposes that exist outside our endeavours to realise them:

A spider conducts operations which resemble those of a weaver, and a bee would put many a human master-builder to shame by the construction of its honeycomb cells, but what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the master-builder builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax. At the end of every labour process, a result re-emerges which had already been conceived by the worker at the beginning, hence already existed ideally.

Here Marx strays from the historical materialism earlier in the paragraph:

By thus acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature. He develops his slumbering powers and compels them to act in obedience to his sway.

Whatever the final building looks like, it will not be 'the result that already existed in the imagination of the labourer at its commencement.' To suppose that it might is to follow Plato's Doctrine of Forms where every product of human labour is an inferior copy of a Perfect Form which, by definition, can exist only as The Idea. Everything we do is altered, to a greater or lesser extent, in the course of its making. We learn by doing.

Is it possible that, like Homer, Marx has nodded? That is not only possible but necessary to validate historical materialism. Only god is all-knowing. Marx is no more god than such being can exist.

Our postman has to teach himself the fundamentals of building. As his palace goes higher, he develops methods that are at the forefront – perhaps even in advance – of those of the professionals. On day one, his 'ideal' is to express his love for his daughter by giving her something that looks like the Angkor temples he has seen in postcards. He is neither the far-seeing architect nor the instinctual bee. Like all of us, in every realm of our being, he is changing himself as he changes his world, in particular, changing the more he achieves over thirty-three years, always learning how he do so more than he had supposed, not just before he started, but at each and every stage. He does not reach an imagined goal after thirty-three. He just stops.

We shall now go back over the questions regarding historical materialism by dissecting Marx's choice of words. He did not pen the ones reproduced above, or oversee their translation. Engels kept a watching brief on the first English edition in 1888, but was limiting his reading and writing to protect his failing sight.

How do the English words compare with the German? Where the English uses 'architect' the original has *Baumeister*, a literal translation of which would be 'master-builder.' There is also the German word *Architek*. The 1873 French edition, on which Marx spent a great deal of time, says *le architecte*.

There are two interlinking matters to consider. The first aspect is to ask: when did the term 'architect' acquire the associations we now give it in English?

And when did those associations happen in German and in French?

Secondly, there is a striking switch from 'the imagination' of the master-builder to 'the imagination of the worker.'

Helping each other to read *Capital* 'exactly' changes each of us, strengthens our class, and contributes towards our building a social order, no matter how far it must fall short of 'ideal', will stretch our imagination o how much more it is always possible to achieve.