Chapter 8

Making and Unmaking History

Identities in Ruins

We must distinguish unfinished works of art from the nonfinished in artworks. In Michelangelo and Paul Cézanne, the nonfinito (Ital.) is the inclusion within the work of a contributory inconclusiveness. The uncut stone, white canvas, or abandoned subplot in an artwork provokes heightened awareness of the artistic process. The presence of the unworked material amid what has been worked-over makes us participate in the making of the work. A gain, not a loss. The work’s unity incorporates the undone in this sophisticated kind of artistic doing. The nonfinito shares with the ruin enjoyment in the discovery of material, contiguity of the formed and the unformed, and springing forth of form.

—Robert Ginsberg, The Aesthetics of Ruins

Nature as History

On the island of Gotland, one of my most loved places in the world, two film geniuses have given nature another form. They have transformed it into an important aspect of cultural history, and of their biographies. This fragment of nature has become a part of humanity’s cultural and aesthetic memory. The mere mention of Gotland instantly leads to the easy identification of both film masters. They are Ingmar Bergman and Andrei Tarkovsky. Bergman’s name is closely associated with Fårö, a small island of Gotland, where he sought relaxation for many years and spent the last years of his life after the end of his intense creative period.

L. Donskis, Troubled Identity and the Modern World
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This island is well known in the film world for its unique light, a feature that cinematographers have been aware of and appreciated for a long time. The rocks, sun, and water combine to form a certain brightness and mood, which is just as easily recognized by those not wielding a camera. Sven Nykvist and other Swedish cinematographers have filmed on Fårö, and it was here that Bergman filmed his immortal film *Persona*.

Tarkovsky chose Gotland as the location for his last film *The Sacrifice*. It most likely appeared to him that Fårö had already been made too well known and overexploited by other film creators. The Russian film master needed a location that had no signs of time, history, or culture. He found this timeless space on the small island Närsholmen, which in Swedish means a near or low island.

The two great masters of film were in awe of each other. Tarkovsky loved Bergman’s films and held them in the highest cinematographic regard. It is most likely that these same feelings were reciprocated by the masterful Swede. Bergman has admitted, even in print, that he had always considered Tarkovsky to be an artist who had succeeded in creating a special language of film that he himself strived toward, and that in his films, Tarkovsky had managed to convey that which Bergman had always felt and wanted to share, yet could not find the adequate film language or poetics.

Had they ever met each other? It does not appear so. Bergman was present at the same Cannes Film Festival that Tarkovsky attended with his film *Nostalgia*, created after he had already emigrated from the Soviet Union to Italy, which was awarded the Grand Prix Spécial du Jury. Bergman wanted to approach Tarkovsky but did not dare approach a genius of his stature. Ironically, Tarkovsky was just as timid—he did not believe he had the right to disturb the great Swedish master.

Are they similar artists? Yes and no. They are as similar as Frans Hals and Rembrandt, Dante and Petrarch, and Shakespeare and Cervantes. Both were geniuses. Creators of a language of art and cultural form, maybe even creators of a distinct consciousness. However, the differences between them are great. The image was always important to Bergman, in particular masterfully composed photographic images, or portraits that exposed the story behind an individual’s internal consciousness. This explains the caliber of actors Bergman required—the faces of Liv Ullmann, Max von Sydow, Erland Josephson, Ingrid Bergman, and Harriet Andersson are key in his films.

Bergman’s greatest strength is the piercingly psychological nature of his films and the exposure of his characters’ deepest interpersonal layers. Psychoanalysts would have surely expounded on the minute