



## THE MAKING OF AN OBJECT AS “DISCONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENTS”

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This paper could be located within the question of method in the social sciences. Method or methodology within the distinct field of sociology and anthropology has been deliberated upon to a large extent keeping in mind the question of what constitutes an ethnography. Although there has been adequate reflection and critical overhauling of the very concept of ethnography and what it means to do ethnographic research or how as researchers we constantly negotiate our own selves in the act of producing an ethnography, the fundamental question on the basic constituent units of an ethnography is seldom thought of or made a project of inquiry in itself.<sup>1</sup> If we think of ethnography as an object in itself that has its own constituent units of production then can we think of ethnography in itself as an object which is consciously put together or *made* with its own inimitable constituent units or principles of making? If we decide to adopt this stance then what do we understand of what could be thought of as an object in the social sciences. Using this position of thinking about ethnography as an object, this paper argues how we could arrive at an understanding of what is an ethnography by looking at the process of a particular object taking shape.

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<sup>1</sup> I am making this statement in the light of works like Malinowski (1961 [1922]) and (1967), Garfinkel (1967), Geertz (1973), Clifford and Marcus (1986), Marcus and Fischer (1986), Fortier (1996), Hertz (1997), Denzin (1997), Clifford (1997), Fischer (2003), Bourdieu (2003), Hume and Mulcock (2004) and Faubion and Marcus (2008).

The paper presents the ethnography of one particular object in its emergence to argue how an object makes itself visible through a “successive system of coherence” albeit through “discontinues.” (Simondon 1980). I would like to explicate this argument through a discussion on the making of a play on the thematic of a place and its contours to show how the process of creating an object or the process of making is disjointed and of the moment and how such a broken, non-linear, non-structured process of making eventually leads to the production of the object in a manner which is not necessarily about moving from the “abstract to the concrete” but is actually about “discontinuous improvements.”

I have borrowed the conceptual category of “discontinuous improvement” from the work of pre-Deleuzian French philosopher - Gilbert Simondon who presents this peculiar combination of words – “discontinuous improvements” to look at the genesis of the “technical object.” Simondon argues how “concretisation” of the technical object is but a process of simplification achieved through a simple redistribution of a technical object’s functions.<sup>2</sup> The paper I am reading today intends to elaborate on this argument through a brief ethnographic sketch of a play in the making - a disjointed and a non-structured process of creation which is nevertheless bounded and spoken of through detailed particularities. Simondon’s exposition on what he terms “discontinuous improvement” is the analytical category that I have used to understand this process of making which is essentially about how the creators of this play – the writer and the director, through a process of research, writing, conversations, workshops and devising sought to create a “play on Kashmir through the lens of the Kashmiri Pandit experience,” as claimed by the director himself. I will detail Simondon’s argument towards the end of my paper after I have presented my ethnography as that will help contextualise the argument.

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*“Making the Process as we Proceed”*

Getting back to the question of how what is made is along the lines of “discontinuous improvements,” I would like to present snatches of a few initial conversations between the writer and the director to show how an object, which in this case is the play we are talking about, had no

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<sup>2</sup> While Simondon presents his thesis of “discontinuous improvements” as an analytical category specifically in the light of technical objects, I am necessarily borrowing it to use it as an analytical trope to think through the object I followed the making of for my ethnography. In doing so, I have realised how the making of an object per se could be seen as a work of what we may call discontinuous improvements and this paper is an elaboration of this very idea. The attempt here is to demonstrate how we could think of “making” that is entailed in the construction of an object as a work of “discontinuous improvement.” C.f Simondon 1980

particular fixity or method in terms of its making. The process of making itself was uncertain and the entire process got made, remade and undone many times over before it took the shape of the object it became. While it is a given that any object would unvaryingly emerge in its finality through many possibilities of making, what became interesting to note here is how the process in its own certitude, which they as creators had fixed and decided on also kept changing.

Two such thematics that were absolutely fixed and certain were, first, creating this play through the structure of a monologue and second, a story which would weave in a character drawn from the real life of the Kashmiri Pandit actor they had consciously had chosen to work with. The workshop plan or design, to try out various possibilities, was thus drawn up keeping in mind these two fixed thematic propositions. Ira as a writer was supposed to draw from these workshops to produce a text, whether it be a sketch or an idea or possible narrative threads which could then be later woven in to form the script, which was in a way supposed to be the final object that they were working towards.

The elaboration which follows, reproduces a few of the conversations between the creators – Abhishek the director and Ira the playwright, to highlight how the structure of work apart from the content that these structures allowed, kept changing in itself and how these so called regimes of certitude kept moving in an uncertain fashion altering its own pre-decided structures.

In one of the workshop after the research phase of the project, Ira was completely exasperated as she was not able to pen material from the workshop. In this state of exasperation Ira suddenly says:

“See, I think what I want to do by August is bring in a script. I mean it’s not material to work on, it’s not a structure, it’s now the script..... Like it starts here, people say all this, do all this and it moves..... We look at that and see whether it throws up all the issues we want to touch on” She goes on to say ..... “What I am saying is that we try out stuff that we are doing now without using text-text, like actual dialogue text, we may do that a little later into the rehearsal, once we have a script.”

At this point I ask her if what she intends to work on now is to think of a structure or a frame that could inform the final outline of the script to which she replied in the affirmative saying “yeah.”

In reply to Ira, Abhishek at this point says -

“I understand what you are saying Ira, but I think there is something else with this right now. In the sense that creating text from text is not the same thing in my mind as following the frame of a text, like that you can do infinitely, like you can start writing dialogues and you can take from that text and I can start devising, and then I can write dialogues and then I can write a monologue and then I can take from that monologue and you know that kind of an infinite journey can happen, whereas following the same idea in either just having a text, and in seeing what we got..... or it could be taking what you have written, and finding first of all the most interesting way to play it and let this playing determine if anything else needs to come in.”

Abhishek went on a little more on the lines of how they should stick to creating text through a process that they were generally following to which Ira then replied –

“The reason I suggested it is, because..... I thought I was sort of digressing from the project. That I had by sort of writing a detailed sort of script, I am sort of going away from what we had originally planned, so I was thinking if we want to keep it open, because there is a certain discipline that comes in with fixing structures for a script and that’s what we don’t want right now, right?”

In response to this Abhishek replied –

“Basically what I am trying to say is this, I mean of course the process is in our hands, but we have to sort of intelligently use the process as opposed to being prejudiced towards one way of working as opposed to another.”

Ira continued with her apprehension of not being able to weave in all the details they could think of especially after their research trip to Kashmir and how the demands of working through a structure was making it difficult for her to weave in all the tangents that had come up after their visit to Kashmir.

Abhishek kept interjecting Ira while she was saying this with a nod and a “yeah” and a “sure” and a “definitely” and then went on to say –

“So all I am saying is that I don’t think you are digressing from the process at all, because this is the process, like we are *inside* the process, so we can’t digress from it, *we are making the process as we proceed*, so there is no real way we can digress from the process”

This statement of “making the process as we proceed” is interesting because the strategic plan or working structure that they seem to have conceptualised keeping in mind the larger imperative of working within the frame of a monologue and the idea of writing a draft script informed by their workshop exercises did not seem to be of concern anymore. Instead, relying on the process the way it played out became the only way or method of working on the play. If the process of making then be of the moment, how do we define the essence of such a process or grasp its significance or think about its impact on the object and the shaping of it, if at all? How do we articulate or speak of such a process which makes itself while constantly giving way to something else while also being constitutive of the object it seeks to make.

In order to understand this phenomena which is about a process being made while simultaneously making the object it seeks to create, I would like to use the concept of duration and think how duration could be seen as a method in itself as propounded by the early twentieth century French philosopher Henri Bergson (Bergson 1919). Deleuze (1988) in explicating Bergson’s work and philosophy talks about how he would like to describe himself as an “empiricist engaged in tracing the becomings of which multiplicities are made up.” (Deleuze 1988: 8). One way of looking at a fleeting and momentary process which gives in to something else while being what it is and influencing the creation of the object it works towards would be to think of it as a “becoming of multiplicity,” to borrow Deleuze’s terminology. In taking the reader through Bergson’s philosophy, Deleuze provokes us to rethink the category of multiplicity. He tells us how multiplicity need not necessarily be about arbitrarily placing or grouping things next to one another but is actually about recognising and reading the variously placed things together. The only way to do this would be to recognise these elements for what they are and think of the roles they play in conjunction with one another, and then go on to talk about the relationality that one could decipher on the basis of this placement. The idea of reading a composite for what it enables rather than what it differentiates.

Such a reading for Bergson is to talk about difference in terms of degree than of kind. Deleuze tells us how “according to Bergson, a composite must always be divided according to its natural articulations, that is, into elements which differ in kind.” (Deleuze 1988: 22). Thinking through the brief excerpt we just heard I would like to argue that, a process which enables the making of an object while constituting itself could be thought of as the work of duration in the Bergsonian sense, where we do not necessarily have multiple elements working simultaneously but a composite of

elements playing with or against one another while becoming the process it becomes and allowing for an object to emerge through this play of composites. Duration itself then becomes a “case of transition, of a change, a becoming, but it is a becoming that endures, a change that is substance itself.” (Deleuze 1988: 37). Bergson goes on to say how the concept of duration for him accommodates that which is heterogeneous and that which is in continuity. One way for us to grasp the essence of this is to realise that while such a process is always in continuity what it does bring together are various elements which may be heterogeneous entities in themselves; these heterogeneous entities work in tandem with one another keeping their distinctions intact while making the object it seeks to make. I would like us to think of process in this manner where what we essentially have is a constant play of heterogeneous elements which in turn leads to the creation of an object. The excerpt of conversation presented above reflects this very idea where we see how the question of making is always about an inevitable continuity while accommodating differentiating elements.

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### *Of Vignettes and Multiplicities*

If a process becomes what one makes of it, as we have seen in the section above, it becomes pertinent to ask if there is any logic or rationale in choosing one process over another. If everything at every point in time can keep changing, then is there any part of the process which is stable and fixed and in a way essential? If nothing is fixed, how does one weigh the legitimacy and viability of what one chooses to work with?

Thinking through the making of this play revealed how unstructured and disjointed ways of work allowed for newer and alternate structures to emerge rather than foreclosing such possibilities. These structures which were basically alternate ways of approaching the object they were working towards, emerged in response to the context itself and established their legitimacy with regard to the same context. For instance the larger frame that they were trying to work on, the thematic of Kashmir framed through a Kashmiri Pandit experience, determined and led to a particular structure of the play which they had eventually landed on, viz. the structure of vignettes. The idea of developing the play through vignettes instead of a thematically connected narrative strung together with a beginning and an end emerged as a result of this apparent framing. This decision to work in the structure of vignettes was informed by what they believed to be the context of Kashmir, a context which according to them was “broken, disjointed and multiple,” hence the idea

of tying in their narrative through vignettes – a structure which according to them could accommodate that which is “disjointed and broken.”<sup>3</sup>

When they were discussing the possibility of vignettes, I asked if there were any specific concerns of doing that. I asked what significant difference would there be in choosing to work through a specific singular narrative vis-à-vis a fragmented and multiple narrative as the driving thread of the play. Ira in response to this query said –

“.....actually this was the reason, not *the* reason, this was one of the things that I was thinking of when I arrived at this thing of never coming back to a particular character. The experience of Kashmir was one, so fragmented, that essentially you know that they are talking about the same thing but it’s like this .....it’s like this..... endless voices, like even when we were talking about it, there is no end to like how many people you keep talking to and you will get a slightly shifted, slightly different sort of a facet of the situation. It will still be about this but yet won’t be about this....you know..... and it’s all about one thing but it’s also not. So I thought this whole thing of having one person represent this whole thing already makes it about one thing in a way, without directly making it so; but that one person never becomes *a* person for you, he always remains a facet, he never becomes one character that you can hold on to and go on a journey with. So that is one way of looking at it .....

I wanted to cite this particular apprehension of Ira because a long exchange took place following from here which ultimately led them to work through the structure of vignettes even though that was not what when they intended to. They felt the context demanded it to be so. For paucity of time I am not reproducing this long exchange between Ira and Abhishek on how to work through vignettes and how that would be a way of weaving in a monologue, how a structure of vignettes would allow them to play with the notion of multiplicity which they felt was true of the context, how would they string all the vignettes together and so on and so forth. Though my larger ethnography contains this exchange which in itself is interesting, my idea of hinting at this exchange briefly is to point out the fact of how their move from a certitude of working in the form

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<sup>3</sup> It is interesting to note that many decisions on ways of working or structures that they conceived for working on the play were informed by what they would often say were “appropriate of the context,” or “made sense” given the nature of the subject they were dealing with. Even if this was not done consciously, such a trope was often used to justify a decision taken. Vignettes as “standing in” and “reflecting” the context of Kashmir was a product of this thought and they have articulated it as such.

of a monologue with one character and his story gave way to working through vignettes as a monologue quite seamlessly as they felt the structure of a vignette would allow them to construct an imagination capable of as they said “accommodating the reality of the context” they were trying to work with. I would now like to move to my concluding section which is titled:

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*Concrete as the Altered*

So far we have seen how the making of on an object entails a certain progression from one structure to another without necessarily diluting or effacing a previous structure. Given this progression I feel it is pertinent to ask how that is achieved. Such a process, I would like to argue, is essentially a question of “discontinuous improvements,” and every subsequent stage of creating an object is in itself cohesive and formalised and we need to recognise the significance of that. In this concluding section I would like to draw from Simondon’s analysis of the genesis of the technical object and use his notion of “discontinuous improvements” to contextualise the brief excerpt of conversation I have presented so far.

Simondon’s work unlike many of his predecessors helps us decontextualize the relationship between man and the machine. He denounces the existence of a difference between the two and more significantly a hierarchy between them. His thesis, asking one to look at the genesis of a technical object and to understand its existence, begins by acknowledging how the individual technical object corresponds directly with the human dimension and neither of them is dominated by the other. Conferring a degree of individuality to every technical object, Simondon persuades us to realise how technical objects in themselves do not have a fixed structure and an obsession to see it only in terms of its structure will not define its use. His project of finding meaning of a technical object begins by acknowledging how the structure and function of any object occupies different domains of meaning and one ought to be aware of this separation. Every technical object, he argues is multiple and is constantly changing and one of the ways to therefore grasp its meaning would be to look at, what he calls – its genesis.

In order to look at the genesis of a technical object, it is significant to look at its specificities which may change or alter over time but which nonetheless is always essential to what it becomes. That which is unique and specific about a technical object at any given point in time do not change even if the constituent units of the same object change over time. Simondon explains this with the example of the automobile engine and its configuration over time to state how a later development

of say the petrol engine is not necessarily about something else than its earlier avatars. Only an internal examination of its exact systems of operation will tell us how an automobile engine of a later stage is a new system but only in terms of coherence resulting in a functional change while still drawing from its earlier constituents. Simondon says “The technical object as such is not anterior to its own becoming but is present at every stage of its becoming. The technical object is a unit of becoming.” (Simondon 1980: 13)

Thus in looking at the genesis of a technical object we realise there is always a sequence, a continuity which extends. It is however equally important to recognise the possibility that the constituents of an object which makes an object what it is can also change over time and in fact do so. Does that change necessarily make the object an altogether new one or is that alteration nothing more than an “exterior manifestation of an internal contingency,” as Simondon would have us believe. (Simondon 1980: 17). As a way out of the conundrum, Simondon’s thesis of grasping the sense of a technical object in terms of its genesis then becomes pertinent where he argues how we need to see and understand this move as a “successive system of coherence.” Simondon in his words says, “the actual evolution of technical objects does not happen in an absolutely continuous manner; it does not happen in an absolutely discontinuous manner either: it involves stages that are definable by the fact that they bring into being successive systems of coherence.” (Simondon 1980: 21) This move of a technical object in terms of its genesis is the building of what he calls the concrete character of an object which is not a question of further complication of the object but is rather a specialisation achieved through an “interior redistribution” of functions which is actually about simplification.<sup>4</sup>

Although this is one part of the story, it is not the entire story. One may argue for an altered technical object as one with an altered system of coherence which is simplified but even in being so can we ever claim to know a technical object in its entirety. Such a position has in fact always been held for a scientific object where science itself claims how no scientific object is ever completely known. While this is true and many others<sup>5</sup> have also treaded along this line, though much after Simondon’s proposition, what that tells us is how a scientific/technical object is never

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<sup>4</sup> Simondon explains this process of simplification by using the example of the evolution of the Crookes tube to the Coolidge tube which are in a sense both molecule separator tubes using cathode and anode voltage. C.f. Simondon 1980, pp. 27-31

<sup>5</sup> C.f. Latour and Woolgar (1979) wherein they argue how even facts always have their own networks of production let alone scientific object. Notes on which have surfaced in the public domain. And Lorraine Daston (2000) who argues how there is a constant ‘perpetuity of coming – to – be’ of scientific objects of inquiry.

completely concrete and therefore the only concrete sense we can have of this object is in terms of its functional synergies and inherent changes in its functioning as a result of demand determined by use. Modifications in the internal systems of a technical object is not a smooth process which can be easily grasped. The changes at times are minute and detailed and sometimes detailing itself becomes the basis of change. Keeping this in mind, Simondon introduces the set of words he coined to explain this phenomena – “discontinuous improvements,” a concept that aids our understanding and analysis of all disjointed, unregulated, unstructured process of making which is true of many processes at work.

Explicating this by talking about the genesis of the technical object and how we arrive at an essence of a technical object, Simondon’s precise set of words says - “It is not enough to say, therefore, that the technical object is one which has a specific genesis proceeding from the abstract to the concrete. Once again, it must be specified that this genesis is achieved by essential and *discontinuous improvements* that bring about modifications in the internal system of the technical object, and do so in leaps and not along a continuous line.” (Simondon 1980: 38).

Drawing on this particular proposition, I would like to argue how the work on the play, which was also a constant process of moving back and forth on the certitude of one kind of process over another could also be seen along the lens of what Simondon terms “discontinuous improvements.” Deciding on the possibility and utility of one way of working over another does not necessarily diminish the value of what has been created through a previous kind of engagement. The previous set of modalities only adds to what then becomes a possibility in the present and the structure that is achieved is in a way combination of both yet being an extension from one to the other. The significance of this line of thought ratifies the fact that every stage of their process was concrete and not abstract and the sense of what this concrete was, lay in its alteration which as I would like to argue is nothing but a “successive system of coherence” achieved through “discontinuities.”

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