



Project Ginsberg and Me: Reflections on an Experimental Translation

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“... to find, in a translation, something other than [the] reproduction of meaning...”

Walter Benjamin, *The Task of a Translator* (259)

“Just as a tangent touches a circle lightly and at but one point—establishing, with this touch rather than with the point, the law according to which it is to continue on its straight path to infinity—a translation touches the original lightly and only at the infinitely small point of the sense, thereupon pursuing its own course according to the laws of fidelity in the freedom of linguistic flux.”

Walter Benjamin, *The Task of the Translator* (262)

This paper is a preface that I wrote for an experimental translation project that was carried out in the summer of 2016¹. In this project, I collated a series of extracts from poems by Allen Ginsberg that swivel around the idea of “freedom” (a word that gained immense semantic intensity due to the political environment in JNU in February 2016) and then performed translational procedures on them at multiple levels (of mode, media, culture and form). The purpose of this project was to explore the signifier of “freedom” across historical formations, using translation as a research method. Whether translation could be used as a method for research or not is a larger question that I sought to ponder over through this project. The audio-visual translation itself was published on 16th June, 2016, in the 26th issue of *Café Dissensus* (<https://cafedissensus.com/2016/06/16/project-ginsberg-me-ruminations-on-freedom/>) and must be referred to in order to make sense of the current paper, which is a reflection based on it.

[Re]Thinking Translation/ Translating Translation Studies

Before we move onto a discussion of the project itself, we must first look at the theories of translation that guided it. Translation theory is not fixed and absolute, but is rather (re)created afresh with each new translation. This is why I feel that I must talk about how I have thought about translation at the outset itself—a stream of thinking that emerged through a to-and-fro

¹This project was conceptualized by me and materialized with the help of Yatin Dawra (audio production) and Dhairya Gupta (visual footage).

movement between performing translation procedures myself and through explorations in contemporary translation theory.

The most significant impact on my thought about translation has been of Itamar Even-Zohar's Polysystem Studies. The *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies* defines a system as "a multi-layered structure of elements which relate to and interact with each other" (Baker and Malmkjær 176). Polysystem theory then, as the name suggests, looks at semiotic phenomenon not as isolated phenomenon that exist on their own, but as systems that are embedded in a complex matrix with other systems to produce what we know as culture — which is itself a (poly)system embedded in a matrix with other (poly)systems of politics, society, religion, and so on—leading to ever increasing dynamic formations that are never completely isolatable into a single, uniform structure.

Applying this to translation studies helps one move beyond traditional approaches to translation which looked at all translational procedures only as attempts to create equivalences between fixed, isolated source and target texts, to thinking of translation as a kinetic process which involves transferences between two or more systems within a polysystem, governed by the systemic relations that exist between them. These transfers bring different layers of a polysystem into dialogue, initiating cross-pollination between them and leading to the production of newness within the polysystem. Transfers can be thought of broadly as (but not limited to) processes that involve either the decomposition of a source system phenomenon and its simultaneous re-composition into a target system phenomenon, or the transplantation of source system phenomenon into a target system phenomenon (Even-Zohar 74-75). This new orientation allows us to re-think adaptations, as both traditional translations and as varying degrees of transfers between systems within a polysystem.

What always helps in understanding these transfers is an "awareness of the tensions between strata within a system" (Even-Zohar 14) as heterogeneity is a "motoric impulse in the dynamics of culture" (Ben-Ari 144). Such an awareness has led Polysystem Studies to "the study of cultural interference and intercultural relations" (Ben-Ari 147) created through translations and furthermore, each turn in translation studies (the empirical turn, the globalization turn, the turn of technology, the ecological turn, etc.) continues to improve our understanding of the multiple layers within (poly)systems and the translational procedures that constantly happen across them.

In terms of the direct application of this theory for translators, it helps them develop an acute awareness of the various (poly)systemic layers and the multiple transfers happening across them in any translational procedure. To do so, drawing a diagram always helps. What follows now is a polysystemic diagram of *Project Ginsberg and Me: Ruminations on Freedom*—the experimental translation project that I had undertaken in the summer of 2016—a project that by no means sought to create an equivalence between a source and a target text, but rather sought to explore the signifier "freedom" by circulating it across several (poly)systemic layers by performing a series of translational procedures on them:

A Diagrammatic Skeleton

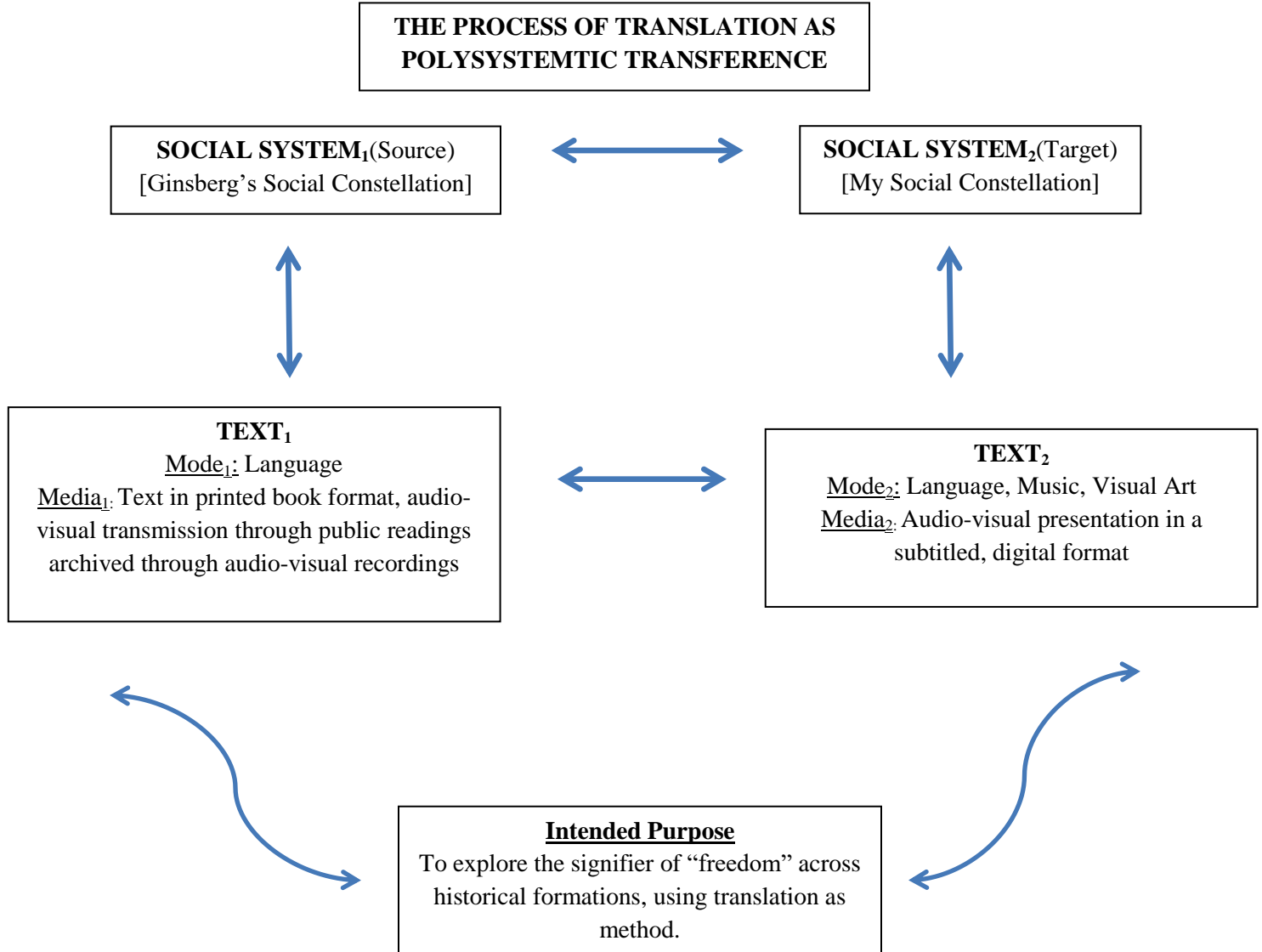


Fig. 1: Project Ginsberg and Me: Ruminations on Freedom

Project Ginsberg and Me: Ruminations on Freedom performs translational procedures at multiple levels of this polysystem through transferences between several systemic layers. In order to better understand these transfers, one must look at the various parameters involved in this translation process. For ease of description, these parameters have been divided into a social and an aesthetic paradigm. However, in actuality, the two must be understood as deeply enmeshed in each other as they cannot be isolated as separate phenomenon:

a) Social Parameters

The two social contexts involved in this project are:

- Allen Ginsberg’s social constellation: 1960s America—advanced capitalism in the West—Vietnam war—McCarthyism—Civil rights movements—student movements—black, feminist, queer rights—war on drugs—war on communism.
- My social constellation: Delhi, India in 2016—advanced capitalism in a post-colonial context—#standwithJNU—Nationalism/anti-nationalism binary—progressive attempts at a left, dalit, feminist solidarity against a right wing-neoliberal nexus—war on terrorism.

These are not mutually exclusive constellations as several processes of transference (like the transplantation of the American neo-liberal capitalist model in India in the 1990s) have been going on between them much before this project was ever conceived of. These pre-existing systemic relations form the horizon under which this project got crystallized. The process of translation (represented by a two-directional arrow between the two social constellations in Fig.1) interacts with the cross-pollination that already exists between the two social contexts and also goes beyond these pre-existing relations by bringing them into a new dialogue.

A common trope that circulates between these two contexts, with respect to this project, is the figure of the liberal arts university student (visualized through the titular “Ginsberg & me”) oscillating between nihilistic frustration and ecstatic epiphanies in the quest for freedom, both at a social and existential level.

b) Aesthetic parameters

The aesthetic dimensions of semiotic phenomenon can be classified into two sub-parameters—mode and media. Although these two parameters are closely related, they are not exactly the same. Mode is an expressive resource that allows for the externalization of one’s cognitive experience through the deployment of material resources or media. Phenomenon like language, music, dance, image, etc. are types of modes in which one can externalize one’s cognitive content and this externalization can be achieved only through a deployment of media. For example, the mode of language can be crystallized through written or oral media, while the mode of music can be actualized through the medium of live performance or audio recordings, etc.

Each mode has its own internal classifications (the language, for example, could be Hindi, English, etc., while the music could be Hindustani classical, blues, etc.). Apart from such typographical classifications, one also needs to be aware of the fact that each mode operates with its own laws to provide a unique semiotic experience—“images, for example, are perceived holistically; language is perceived gradually in the form of words and sentences” (Kaindl 265). Similarly, internal stratifications exist in media forms as well—the written medium, for example, can exist in printed or digital forms.

Translation studies was initially a mono-modal and mono-medial discipline as it looked primarily at translations only between linguistic texts, largely of the written, printed variety. In the last couple of decades, however, developments in cultural and media studies have made translators more and more conscious of the multi-modal and multi-medial nature of semiotic phenomenon. The impact of this on translation studies has been the rise of an awareness of the parameters of modality and mediality in both the study and practice of translation.

With respect to this project, the source polysystem's texts (the poems of Allen Ginsberg that have been selected by me) exist primarily in a linguistic mode (English) crystallized through two media—written, printed books as well as audio-visual transmissions through public poetry readings which were archived as audio-visual recordings by Ginsberg's peers.

At the level of mode and media then, this projection performs the following translational procedures on a selection of Ginsberg's poems:

- a) inter-modal translation—translating language into a mix of language, image, and music.
- b) inter-medial translation—translating written, printed and oral poetry into a subtitled, audio-visual, digital format.

Furthermore, one must specify exactly what kinds of language, image, and musical practices are in play here for which an approximate mapping of the aesthetic horizon of both social constellations involved in this translation project becomes important—

- i) Allen Ginsberg's aesthetic constellation: Beat poetry—Hippie phenomenon—Counterculture—Rock n roll/blues music—Television revolution.
- ii) My aesthetic constellation: scattered experimentations in literature heavily influenced by Beat and modernist poetry—post-rock/alternative music—Internet revolution.

One must look at a, b, i, and ii as interconnected layers that form the aesthetic horizon of this translation and then understand the precise translational procedures that have been performed at the level of the following constituent systems:

- A) Language: While Ginsberg's language has not been translated here in the sense of a traditional translation from one language to another (which would be the case if I were translating his poems from English to Hindi for example), nonetheless two translational procedures have been performed on it. The first involves a collage-like extraction of linguistic content from a selection of his poems, which inevitably alters their original form. The second involves a clashing of these linguistic elements against linguistic content from my own constellation (like Rohith Vemula's suicide letter and various news recordings on #standwithJNU)—a process of juxtaposition that produces new meanings by altering the original semiotic environment of Ginsberg's poetry, producing a postcolonial Beat aesthetic of sorts.
- B) Music: While Ginsberg's poetry did make extensive use of a musical mode in the latter half of his career (to the extent that several of his poems come with musical notations set down by him), the poems that have been selected for this project did not originally involve a musical dimension. Thus, rather than occurring between two musical forms, the translational procedure involved here was one between language and music. This presented certain difficulties. Initially, I had trouble as I tried to force equivalences between a lexical and a musicological unit. What could be the musical equivalent of the linguistic phrase—"I saw the best minds of my generation..."? What would be the nature of the entities being transferred between them?

Since there could be no semantic equivalence between these two modes, I then tried to

perform a translation at the level of rhythmic form where I attempted to create equivalence between the rhythm of Ginsberg's verse and the rhythmic structure of my song—a laborious and unfruitful endeavour. Finally, I decided that if there was to be any translation between a lexical and a musical mode, it could happen only at the level of affect. I strived hard and tried to get inside Ginsberg's mind to ascertain the emotions that he must have felt while writing his poems. After a point, I realized that this was pointless. Rather than Ginsberg's intended affects, the only resources that I had access to were the affects that I experienced while reading his poems. These affects appeared at some sort of a meeting place between his mind and mine. This is what I could further translate into a musical form. Having this clarity was important. Once you realize that there isn't any "original" and what exists is only your subjective experience of the absent presence of an original, you start to move beyond any misguided attempts at trying to create equivalences through translation.

The predominant affect present in the poems that I had chosen (something that had in fact determined their selection in the first place) was that of an amorphous mass of feelings arising from the dialectical tussles between a yearning for freedom and the frustration of confinement. Transferring this affect into a musical form involved the creation of a song made up of distorted guitar tones, melodic synth harmonies, tight but simplistic drum grooves, and a melancholic bass lick—all of which flowed together not in a linear but a sluggish, cyclical manner with a rising and falling tempo such that the music, rather than moving forward towards a resolution, seemed to be coiling upon itself—thereby producing what I felt was a sonic representation of the affects predominant in the texts that I had chosen.

In terms of musical form, rock music prevalent in Ginsberg's own times was characteristic of an energetic, linear thrust towards a climactic sonic resolution, which is why it could not be used for the purposes of this project. I instead chose post-rock, a genre that has developed in recent times out of critiques of rock. This genre abandons rock's fetish for teleology and instead creates sonic spirals that constantly coil upon themselves. This is why the musical content of this project was inspired by post-rock.

The layering of Ginsberg's verses (recorded in my voice) onto this music would, I hoped further intensify these affects. The key here, however, was to realize that anyone who hears my translation will not magically experience these intended affects, the way I can never access the exact affects that Ginsberg felt and intended in his poetry. The subjective nature of all affective response would ensure that listeners would not fully interpret this co-mingling of Ginsbergian texts and a musical approximation of what I think are their pre-dominant affects in ways that I imagined, but would rather create a third space that would include Ginsberg, me, and the listeners which would further intensify the process of systemic transferences. Once one moves beyond ideas of equivalences, one realizes that this constant slippage into newness that translation accelerates is the real potential of translation.

- C) Image: Ginsberg's poems are accessed today primarily in a written form, that does not contain a non-lexical, visual dimension. The other form in which they can be accessed—

the audio-visual recordings of his poetry—does contain a visual dimension but their intention is bent more towards archiving the historical Ginsberg and his poetry, rather than towards adding new translative dimensions to them. The only visual experimentation with Ginsberg's poetry that I have so far come across is the brilliant animated rendition of the poem, "Howl" in Rob Epstein's 2010 film by the same name starring James Franco as Ginsberg. Visual phenomenon seem to provide a level of stimulation to our minds that textual ones cannot always compete with and the deployment of both resources together in order to produce a multi-modal text adds new dimensions to a work of art.

Keeping in line with this idea, Yatin Dawra (my musical partner in this project) and I approached Dhairya Gupta (a visual artist who experiments with camera techniques) to add a visual dimension to our project. The result was phenomenal. The visual art piece that forms the background to this translation is a video recording for the 4th of July fireworks in Seattle, U.S.A, rendered through a camera technique called "bokeh" which constantly focusses and un-focusses the lens of a camera in order to produce a splintering of light into multiple, blurred entities.

Apart from a thematic connection of the visuals (the video being an archive of the American nation celebrating its national "freedom"), in terms of visual aesthetics too they worked for us as they represented the idea of a polysystem quite efficiently—multiple, radiant particles interacting with each other in a kaleidoscopic fashion to produce dynamic relationships. These visuals were thus added onto the linguistic and sonic layers of the translation in order to further expand its aesthetic horizon.

Connecting the Dots

If we now go back to the skeletal diagram in Fig.1 as well as the preliminary definitions with which this paper started, this project should start to become clearer.

Project Ginsberg and Me: Ruminations on Freedom exists in a liminal third space between a whirlwind of socio-aesthetic phenomena culled out from the respective polysystems of Ginsberg and me. The two polysystems are brought into a new dialogue through transcultural, multi-modal, and inter-medial translations happening across their layers. These translational procedures generate a dynamic, kinetic force from which this translation (which is itself a polysystem) has come into being—a genesis which, even if in a minuscule capacity, leads to the evolution of the overarching polysystems involved in its birth.

Furthermore, the primary thrust for any translation is the purpose, whether conscious or unconscious, for which it is undertaken. As stated in the diagram as well as the preliminary definition, the purpose of this translation was to explore the signifier of "freedom" across historical formations using translation as a method. What exactly do I mean by this?

The key signifier of "freedom" which is the thematic glue that holds this project together is a signifier that has gained immense semantic intensity in our present times. Due to the events of 9th February on the JNU campus, one has seen (and in fact continues to see) immense mutations of this concept under the pressures of several polysystemic energies that emerged around it in the Indian public sphere. Instigated by these happenings, I pondered over this

phenomenon at length which de-familiarized my erstwhile understandings of “freedom”. What exactly is *azaadi*²?

If one experiences *Project Ginsberg and Me*, one sees several kinds of desires for freedom, and their frustrations, clashing with each other in a collage-like manner. There is a range of historical continuities and discontinuities between the different material contexts of “freedom” that one may glean from this experience. That is what a traditional literary-historicist analysis of this project might reveal to us. That is not, however, the most exciting reading that this project makes possible.

As a researcher in literary studies/social sciences, one is usually conditioned to develop an affinity towards one or more forms of historicist-materialist methods when dealing with semiotic phenomena. This method usually leads one to perform a rigorous contextualization of a subject of enquiry into the material conditions from which it arises. There is immense diversity in the ways in which this overarching method may be practiced and while there are clear merits to such a method, one gradually starts to see the redundancy involved in limiting one’s critical activity to bracketing off a subject of enquiry into what one believes to be the material conditions from which it arises. Should the study of Ginsberg be limited to simply stretching his body of work around the dots of the American 60ies, the Beats and the Hippies? Isn’t there anything else that a researcher in literary studies may do? Can Ginsberg be deployed to study not just his, but also other social realities that are connected to the polysystems that gave rise to him? Can one use different texts, not just to study their respective historical realities, but phenomenon that lie beyond them, and in fact tie them together? Thinking deeply through translation processes allowed me to start thinking in these interesting new directions.

Project Ginsberg and Me allows the reader to abstract out from the particularities of the various struggles for freedom represented in it, and ruminate over the metaphysical substance that lies within all of them—something which allows us to see them as connected, which is the concept of “freedom” itself. When one translates X into Y, there comes a moment, when one is forced to ponder over that semiotic surplus which lies beyond X and Y and connects them together—that which is being translated between them—something which cannot really be articulated, but only felt. The concept of freedom is that semiotic surplus which lies beyond the various historical instances of freedom contained within this project and true potential of this project lies in its ability to make that semiotic surplus tangible enough for readers to experience. This becomes most evident in the final part of the song.

The Sonic Chaos at the End of the Tunnel

“Translation alone possesses the mighty capacity to unbind it [language] from meaning, to turn the symbolising element into the symbolised itself, to recuperate the pure language growing in linguistic development. In this pure language—which no longer signifies or expresses anything but rather, as the expressionless and creative Word that is the intended object of every language—all communication, all meaning, and all intention arrive at a level where they are destined to be extinguished.”

²Editor’s Note (herein after called Ed. N.): freedom

Walter Benjamin, *The Task of the Translator* (261)

It is the final section of my project that most interests me. Here, all the voices and sound samples that had been used throughout the song are rubbed against each other to produce sonic chaos that I believe forms the metaphysical core—the magical substance—that runs behind this entire project.

It is here that one lies in the pure immanence of a whirlpool of sounds, fragments, meanings, ideas, languages, and desires that had been conjured up by this translator around the specter of freedom.

It is here that the process of transference between utterances is intensified to the extent that it starts to unstitch and dissolve them altogether.

It is here that language folds back upon itself and is wrenched out of the realm of meaning, which extinguishes all its semantic content.

It is here that the vulnerability of my translation struggling to hold itself in the whirlwind of socio-aesthetic energies circulating around it caves in and provides a brief, illuminatory flash into something that lies beyond either of the polysystems from which it was birthed.

This un-stitching is a liberating process—a moment of intensity which cannot be quantified into a set of thematic resolutions but is rather something that can only be felt. Any formal containment, whether political, social, or aesthetic leads to incarceration. Giving form is a violent act. Usually the struggle for freedom involves the replacement of one form with another, rather than the dissolution of forms altogether. Freedom, as a philosophical idea, perhaps lies in the dissolution of forms altogether.

The embracing of chaos—to *experience* without any formal conceptualization—to realize the ur-form which is formlessness itself—that would perhaps be freedom in its true, naked sense.

Enabled through a method of translation, “freedom” in this final moment acquires a theo-linguistic dimension as it gestures towards the freeing of language from meaning itself.

Afterthoughts

What one sees in this project is the early gestation of a new practice—the use of translation as a research method. The idea here is to take the subject of research (in this case, the signifier of “freedom”) and refract it across the veins of several polysystems by performing translational procedures at multiple systemic levels in order to a) understand the phenomenon and the polysystems around it better and b) generate a creative newness, a surplus energy which not just studies, but also alters and evolves the polysystems in question, in whatever capacity.

While the contours of such a method, in its current nascent manifestation are still blurry, one hopes that this will mushroom out in the future in interesting new directions.

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