

LEONOR ARFUCH

Memory and Autobiography

EXPLORATIONS AT THE LIMITS



*the limit,
the mirror,
the other*



Memory and Autobiography

Critical South

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Memory and Autobiography

Explorations at the Limits

Leonor Arfuch

Translated by Christina MacSweeney

polity

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The world that came like a bird
has alighted on my shoulder
and I tremble like a branch
under the weight of the song
and the flight, detained for an instant.

Rosario Castellanos (1998)¹

¹ El mundo que venía como un pájaro / se ha posado en mi hombro / y yo tiemblo lo mismo que una rama / bajo el peso del canto / y del vuelo un instante detenido.

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Introduction

Leonor Arfuch is one of the founding intellectuals of post-dictatorship thought in Argentina. Her work, like that of any great theoretician or thinker, reads like a gradual unfolding and deepening of certain questions that seem to have been there from the very beginning – questions about politics, art, language, memory, the image, ethics and the self.

Having lived through the tumultuous years of military dictatorship in her country (1976–1983) – years in which the persecution of leftist militants, torture, forced disappearance, exile and the kidnapping of children were commonplace – Arfuch's critical passions emerged as a response to a present in crisis, as a means to think through that present and intervene in it so as to open greater spaces for the democratization of thought and political action. It therefore shouldn't be surprising that a beautifully edited book she published in 2005 bears the title *Pensar este tiempo: espacios, afectos, pertenencias* (*To Think This Time: Space, Affections, Belonging*).¹ Edited during an academic stay in 2004 as a fellow of the British Academy, the book brings together essays by prominent intellectuals of Great Britain and continental Europe (Scott Lash, Doreen Massey, William Rowe, Chantal Mouffe and others) in an exploration of the relationships among politics, emotions and aesthetics in a political present in which the social bond is under siege by conservative

political forces and the power of capital. Arfuch's vision leaves no doubt about the far-reaching implications of her theoretical contributions and intellectual inquiry. The book's title is telling. To think about *this* time, *our* time – a time of crisis, inequality, globalization, capital, war, displacement of peoples, gender inequity, racism and xenophobia – drives her critical act and nourishes her writing to this day. In this sense, the problems she addresses are not just those of Argentina but those of Latin America and the world, always attentive to how *here* and *there*, *you* and *I*, connect with or diverge from one another.

Like many thinkers 'schooled' under dictatorship, Leonor Arfuch was, in a certain sense and by necessity, an autodidact. From the mid-1960s until the early 1970s, she expressed her political commitments by association with the left. Persecution, of course, was a frequent and constant threat in those years against anyone who openly identified with the left, and universities did not escape the repression. In an environment in which many university professors had been expelled from their posts or suffered direct reprisals by the military junta and its henchmen, Arfuch completed her undergraduate studies in literature at the University of Buenos Aires while the regime was still in power. Though her life in those years transpired with a certain degree of 'normalcy', a thoroughly violent atmosphere, coupled with her personal history of militancy, left her acutely aware of what was happening around her and inspired in her both a tenacious rebelliousness and a desire to critique that have marked her professional trajectory and writings. Under dictatorship, Arfuch worked with important mentors such as the famed Argentine critic Josefina Ludmer (1939–2016), whose 'underground' study groups became lovingly known in Argentina as the 'university of the catacombs' (*la universidad de las catacumbas*). In such spaces, many of the country's foremost intellectuals, like Arfuch, found their intellectual beginnings. With her extracurricular mentors she discovered Lacanian psychoanalysis, literary theory and the French School of semiotics and discourse analysis, among other subjects.

With the dawn of democracy in 1983, the Argentine military junta languished disgraced because of its loss of the war in

the Malvinas Islands; this dire loss of prestige paved the way for an initial wave of public discussion on memory, human rights and the need to address crimes that had occurred in Argentina's recent past. In a historical moment in which truth and justice were topics on everyone's lips, in which public trials of the military were recently underway, and in which a truth commission had been convened that would later produce the landmark *Never Again Report* (Nunca Más, 1984), Leonor Arfuch launched her formal academic career as a professor and researcher in the Department of Sociology. By 1988, she had also been appointed as a professor of Communication in Graphic Design. Such a position might seem unusual for someone whose formation was largely influenced by discourse analysis, sociology, language and theory. Yet all of that background served to fuel hybrid, creative, interdisciplinary thinking, something that was particularly noteworthy in a political environment that, by that time, was marked by conservative backlash. We can't forget that the late 1980s and the entire decade of the 1990s were characterized by the privatization of industry, the advancement of neoliberalism and the curtailment of much of the progress that had been made to that point in the areas of truth, justice and reparations for the dictatorship's victims; this same period also saw the approval of Argentina's 'Full Stop' (Ley de Punto Final) and 'Due Obedience' (Ley de Obediencia Debida) laws, which essentially put an end to the possibility of trials until the mid-2000s.² In that context, Arfuch championed the design of the 'Cultural Critique' course at UBA, which pioneered the idea that critiques of visual communication, art and graphic design could be applied to the study of areas as diverse as education, communication and memory. These new approaches – and the emergence of cultural critique as a unique mode of inquiry that could be deployed to unpack the complex relationships among politics, aesthetics, ethics and society – impacted an entire generation of students and faculty and left an indelible mark on the tenor of Argentine intellectual life from that moment onwards.

Arfuch's earliest critical work was born in the time of 'democratic spring', a time that, in her own words, saw the 'semiotic opening of physical meeting places in the city: the street, the plaza, cafés, tables on the sidewalk, and

bookstores'.³ It was a time in which many voices that had once been silenced re-emerged and began to be heard again: voices of Argentinians who had lived for years in exile or of those who had survived torture or suffered first-hand in the country's vast network of detention centres. This cacophony of voices spoke in genres ranging from *testimonios* to memoirs to interviews (both in the written press and on television or the radio), revealing intimate aspects of experience that gave substance and depth to Argentinians' understanding of history and attuned them to the many challenges that lay ahead.

From a young age, Arfuch had been fascinated by journalism – in fact, in the mid-1960s she thought she might become a journalist. That early passion never left her and perhaps inspired her first two major works, *La interioridad pública* (*Public Intimacy*, 1992) and *La entrevista: una invención dialógica* (*The Interview: A Dialogic Invention*, 1995), both of which engage the 'return of the subject' that dominated the social sciences in the 1980s.⁴ Specifically, Arfuch fixed her critical gaze on how this 'return of the subject' took shape in dialogue with public narratives around the economy, human rights and democracy in post-dictatorship Argentina. Her reflections on the interview as a 'speech genre', in the Bakhtinian sense, gave us the first ever, comprehensive, semiotic and interdisciplinary study to probe the dynamics of the interview: its interlocutors, its power differentials, its silences, its hidden meanings, stagings and performative aspects. In short, the interview appears in Arfuch as an *intersubjective genre*, a dialogic form in which the self acknowledges the other as radical difference and in which responsibility and ethics (or the lack thereof) play key mediating roles.

Arfuch's early work on subjectivity, intersubjectivity and ethics set the stage for a major expansion of her inquiry into first-person genres that would follow on the heels of her first two books. That expansion led her to coin a critical concept that has now become the centrepiece of her work and has gained her notoriety throughout Latin America and beyond: the *biographical space*.

In her seminal book of 2002, *El espacio biográfico: dilemas de la subjetividad contemporánea* (*The Biographical*

Space: Dilemmas of Contemporary Subjectivity), Arfuch examines the place of the subject and the role of biographical and autobiographical genres within contemporary culture, arguing that such forms of expression, which range from interviews, autobiographies, memoirs and *testimonios* to talk shows, reality shows, subjective documentary films, social media and *autoficciones*, are part of the structure of feeling of the contemporary era and have proliferated to such an extreme that they can be understood as both symptomatic of and contributors to a reconfiguration of subjectivity itself.⁵ She holds that the contemporary ubiquity of private and intimate histories can be read, in part, as a countervailing force to the impersonalizing dynamics of market logics in the neoliberal era. Autobiographical genres are thus not simply an exercise in self-representation or self-aggrandizement but instead harbour an intersubjective dimension that is crucial to acknowledge. The *I* who speaks and shares his or her intimate life wants to be read, heard and validated by another; and the *other* who reads or watches the autobiographical act discovers in the narrative possible points of identification and disidentification.

Yet autobiographical genres are not simply meant to be read transparently. Instead, critics such as Arfuch, in dialogue with others like Philippe Lejeune, Paul de Man and Sylvia Molloy, have argued that they should be interpreted and deconstructed, their framing mechanisms assessed, their temporalities obviated and their authors even desacralized.⁶ Autobiographical genres, including those that border on fiction in a more obvious sense, thus become spaces in which the singularity of experience opens onto the collective in ways that allow reflection on the ethical, narrative, political and aesthetic dimensions not only of the act of self-representation but also of life itself. Put differently, the biographical space invites an 'intimacy between strangers', as Michael Holroyd has suggested, that occurs when the *I* of autobiography resonates with or in the *other* and generates diverse reactions ranging from intimacy, affective ties, empathy and solidarity to outright rejection or abhorrence.⁷

The potent idea of the *biographical space* permeates Arfuch's *oeuvre* and is indeed a foundational concept (and even a starting point) for understanding the essays contained

in *Memoria y autobiografía: exploraciones en los límites* (2013), the first of her books to be translated into English.⁸ Consider, for example, the following passage:

But here, in the genres discussed, there is something extra that Bakhtin called *biographical value*: that thing which, in every story, every attempt to give – verbal or audio-visual – form to a life questions both the narrator and narratee with respect to their own existence in terms of ethics, aesthetics and, we might even say, politics. That ephemeral communion, that virtual tuning-in, is what surely feeds the constant desire to glimpse ‘real lives’, while being aware of how vain that desire is, how intangible that reality, how inevitably fictional the whole story.⁹

The passage reveals a key insight that guides Arfuch’s thinking: that all autobiographical acts are, in a sense, fictional. They are self-figurations that imply a putting into form that, in turn, necessarily invites critical analysis.

The ‘biographical space’, as a concept, has far-ranging consequences that extend both backwards and forwards in time. Its roots lie in the birth of the modern subject, which critics like Arfuch have often equated with the publication of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Confessions* (1766), a book that introduced readers to the internal dynamics of a first-person narrator struggling to expose the intimate aspects of his life and emotions but who spoke with sincerity and sought points of identification with readers. Mindful of this history, Arfuch sees in contemporary first-person manifestations, those of our own times, a straying away from the sincerity of the original Rousseauian gesture; instead of an easy conflation between the author and the ‘character’ on the page, she understands the first-person as a ubiquitous presence in our daily lives, capable not only of narcissistic self-fashioning but also of an ability to form alliances of solidarity with a range of imagined interlocutors. The subject who speaks the word *I* is not a coherent whole but rather a series of fractured, multiple selves engaged in a ‘search for intimacy [with another] in the face of anonymity and the uniformity of everyday life’.¹⁰ The subject’s demand for self-realization in a moment in which collective political projects have foundered or find themselves under constant threat from countervailing political forces

begs questions about the responsibility that *I* have to *You* and that *You* have to *Me*. We are constantly bombarded by stories of precarious lives, of lives that struggle to matter, to be seen and heard. How we respond when faced with those precarious lives – whether we'll identify or disidentify with them, value them or shut them out – is an ethical challenge that Arfuch raises for her readers, in line with other contemporary thinkers like Judith Butler who also understand the first-person utterance through the lens of multiplicity and intersociality.¹¹

Intersubjectivity is not only a key theme in Arfuch's work but also an integral part of her own life and intellectual trajectory. On the one hand, her thinking dialogues with particular intellectual genealogies in which her work is inscribed (e.g. Mikhail Bakhtin, Philippe Lejeune, Walter Benjamin, Paul Ricoeur, Roland Barthes and others), while on the other hand it finds inspiration in (and inspires) certain contemporaries with whom she has long shared close affinities and conversations – *sus compañeras y compañeros de ruta*. Many names come to mind, among them Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, Judith Butler, Nelly Richard, Beatriz Sarlo, Doreen Massey and Nicolás Casullo, as well as contemporary artists such as the Chilean visual artists Alfredo Jaar and Nury González and the Argentine film-maker Albertina Carri, whose works she has examined in depth. In fact, some of Arfuch's earliest articles on art and memory appeared in Beatriz Sarlo's journal *Punto de Vista* (*Point of View*, Argentina) and Nelly Richard's *Revista de Crítica Cultural* (*Journal of Cultural Critique*, Chile), two publications that served as barometers and pioneering spaces for post-dictatorship debate in the Southern Cone; they tackled topics such as the fierce battles over memory, the paucity of truth in the post-dictatorship, the role of art and literature, the challenges of *testimonio*, the lack of justice and the urgent need for a deepening of democracy. Several chapters in this book continue and broaden these discussions on memory, particularly Arfuch's valiant reflection on the controversial case of Óscar del Barco, a former Argentinian revolutionary from the 1970s whose writings in the early 2000s unleashed bitter debates among militants and intellectuals about both the memory and legitimacy of armed struggle (chapter 5).

In recent years, Arfuch has dedicated much of her writing to the subject of art and memory, attentive to the forms that representations of human suffering have taken in contexts ranging from the Holocaust to Chile, Argentina and the US–Mexico border. Sceptical of sutured, transparent narratives that tend to close off meaning – in critical affinity with her colleague and friend Nelly Richard in Chile – Arfuch has paid special attention to films, art installations and literary works that take distance from direct (sacrosanct) experience and suffering and that approach it in ways that allow the spectator or reader to be interpellated by the text or the image rather than alienated by them. In other words, she is specifically attuned to art that questions us and puts signs into play in ways that don't ossify meaning. Even when she analyses works whose enunciation occurs in the first-person singular, it seems to be less the first-person singular that interests her than the possibility that an intimate life story might open a chance for the *other* to become involved or questioned. This perhaps explains her critical affection for works like Chilean artist Alfredo Jaar's *Geometría de la conciencia* (*Geometry of the Conscience*, analysed in chapter 7), in which a spectator, enclosed in a dark room, confronts an infinite prism of unnamed faces of victims of tragedies from around the world and wonders what his or her relationship to and responsibility for those disappeared/reappeared faces might be. Are they the faces of precarious lives that we don't wish to see or that are too painful to acknowledge? And what relationship do those faces bear to us and to one another? Through what mechanisms, power differentials and dynamics are the trans-historical genocides and tragedies of the contemporary world linked to one another or unique in their specificity?

Like Alfredo Jaar's work, which moves freely from one geography to another – naming, questioning and critiquing – Leonor Arfuch's pen moves with equal freedom and a deeply poetic prose. This is evident on every page of *Memory and Autobiography*. The book the reader has in hand is not a collection of standard academic papers but rather a series of essays in cultural critique, texts in which images and metaphors as well as rhetorical questions open spaces to interrogate the reader, much like the polyvalent works of art, literature and film that serve as the author's objects of inquiry.

Arfuch's writing is transdisciplinary, undisciplined and fluid. It seeks correspondences and probes humanity's and society's open wounds, weaving metaphor upon metaphor and illuminating both the traps and releases of language and form. It's clear that Arfuch is inspired by Walter Benjamin's method of opening debate through juxtaposition and dialogue (what she calls 'digression as method', *el rodeo como método*), a way of surrounding the object of inquiry, blanketing it, testing it, to open it up and illuminate it.¹² In this way, she creates a constellation of images and words that speak volumes about the contemporary world, moving from the Holocaust (in her analysis of the French artist Christian Boltanski's work) to the polyphonic testimony of five female survivors of the ESMA concentration camp in Argentina, to the troubled borderlands between Tijuana and San Diego. In her analysis of the ESMA survivors' testimonial act, Arfuch illuminates the complex relationship between trauma and autobiography and thinks in dialogue with feminist intellectuals such as Leigh Gilmore and Sidonie Smith.¹³

Arfuch's most extensive chapter (chapter 2) creatively juxtaposes Boltanski's work on the Shoah with Holroyd's reflections on life writing and the work of the famed German novelist and resident of England, W. G. Sebald (1944–2001), taking us on a historical and poetic journey through Sebald's Norwich. Chapter 3 expands the discussion of these same authors, this time by evoking Sebald's main character in *Austerlitz* (2001), who goes by a 'name that is not his own', as well as Boltanski's 1989 art installation titled *Storage Area of the Children's Museum*, which features racks piled with children's clothing, an image that recalls the sheer magnitude of the disaster and the way in which the Shoah stripped its victims of their individuality, identity and dignity. The reference to Sebald evokes the 10,000 orphans who arrived at Liverpool Street Station in London (1938–1939) escaping Nazi persecution. Placed in conversation, these references allude – transnationally, transhistorically, elliptically – to the case of the children stolen by the military and their supporters during Argentina's most recent dictatorship. Today, these children are adults who struggle to recover their true identities, aided in their quest by the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo. In each of these instances, Arfuch shows how

artists rescue singular bits of memory and experience, *naming* phenomena that would assuredly otherwise be relegated to the dustbin of history. In so doing, she allows us to understand not only how difficult it is to represent past trauma and violence – to *name* experience – but also how vitally necessary it is to do so as a political strategy for combating the tides of forgetting and for finding ways of being in common. Art and memory, like the ‘biographical space’, become possible strategies for building community where it has been torn asunder by greed, power and violence.

Children of dictatorship who struggle to reconstruct their traumatic pasts, torture survivors, leftist militants trying to make sense of their participation in the armed struggle of the 1970s, migrants excluded from place and territory, history’s forgotten: these are the protagonists of *Memory and Autobiography*, the voices and experiences that Arfuch dignifies and explores through her writing. Writing as an act of debt, writing as an act of thought and inquiry, writing as an act of resistance, writing as an act of justice where there is no justice, writing as an elusive framing of the grey zones of human experience: all of these senses converge in Leonor Arfuch’s own critical-biographical space, one that invites us into a conversation, into a community, to share in the pleasure and pain of the text and to be transformed by it.

Michael J. Lazzara

Prologue

This book was, before any form of exploration, a promise: the hope of being able to respond to questions swirling around a heteroclite set that could be summed up by an abstract, inclusive signifier: narratives from the recent past.

Narratives that in the diversity of their registers – writing, films, debates, performances, visual artworks – displayed, with symptomatic insistence, the peremptory mark of a past like an open wound, whose urgency came to light, as Benjamin might express it, in voices, images, polemics and gestures. Cries and whispers.

A symbolic plot in which the self-referential undoubtedly predominates, in a range that extends from canonical forms of testimony, memories, biography and autobiography, interviews, life stories or trajectories to hybrid, interstitial forms that at times cross generic boundaries or the thresholds of the personal: autofictions, notebooks, prison diaries, letters, agendas, obituaries, photographs, memoirs. The voices of the victims of the dictatorship in Argentina (1976–1983), of children of the disappeared, of former militants, of those living in exile, of witnesses, of authors who question themselves about their ancestors, of intellectuals who stir their memories, of inquisitive youths, of creative individuals who opt for lyric, allegorical or experimental modes, of thinkers who re-examine lost paths, utopias and disillusiones ...