



## Film *Argentina 1985*- History Revisited

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### Abstract

My effort in this paper is to highlight the historical happenings in the eighties of the twentieth century Argentina and to what extent the description of this transformative phase of Argentinian history unfolded through the film *Argentina 1985* by the director Santiago Mitre. This was principally described through the trial undertaken by the prosecutor Strassera for prosecuting the former dictators and how this trial is ably portrayed in the film *Argentina 1985*.

**Key words-** Argentina , 1985, Strassera, Mitre, Junta, nunca mas.

### I. Introduction

‘The past cannot express itself – it always needs to be spoken for and constructed.’  
(Jenkins, 1995: 34)

Perhaps the film *Argentina 1985* portrays a perfect description of what happened in Argentina during the historic trial of the military dictators by the civil appellate court. Looking into history Argentine President Isabel Peron was deposed in 1976 and was replaced by a military junta with Lieutenant General Jorge Rafael Videla. Everything including the National Congress, the trade unions were brought under the control of the military. Videla started campaigning against the dissidents whom he suspected. The Videla regime set up several detention camps all throughout the country imprisoning and persecuting citizens. This is known as the infamous Dirty War raging from 1976-1983 led by Videla and his clique against the left wing political opponents. Thousands of men, women and children were killed. Videla was followed by Roberto Viola, Leopoldo Galtieri and Reynaldo Bignone. Raul Alfonsin of the Radical Civic Union which was the major centre-left political party won the presidential election in 1983 and attempted to restore democracy. It was during the rule of Alfonsin that the plan to prosecute several members of the erstwhile military government including Videla, Viola and Galtieri was initiated.

(<https://www.britannica.com/event/Dirty-War>.)

Argentina in 1985, saw the Trial of the Juntas which was an important step towards attainment of Argentina’s democracy. The trial of the Argentinian Military junta members in 1985 is a historic event since it saw the prosecution of the dictators by a democratic government for the first time in Latin America. Julio Cesar Strassera was appointed prosecutor after the election of President Raúl Alfonsín in 1983. ‘Following the president's October 4, 1984, decision to have leading members of the military regime tried by a civilian court, Strassera was offered the post of Chief Counsel for the Prosecution by the Minister of Justice, Carlos Alconada Aramburú’.

([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julio\\_C%C3%A9sar\\_Strassera](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julio_C%C3%A9sar_Strassera)). The film *Argentina 1985* released on 2022 documented the famous trial. Hayden White argued that, ‘Historical events...are events which really happened or are believed really to have happened, but which are no longer directly accessible to perception. As such, in order to be constituted as objects of reflection, they must be described.’

(<https://chandlerozconsultants.wordpress.com/2015/10/21/the-language-of-history-part-one-defining-the-discourse/#respond> Accessed on 17.06 2024, 9.05 pm) My effort in this paper is to highlight the historical happenings in the eighties of the twentieth century Argentina and to what extent the description of this transformative phase of Argentinian history unfolded through the film *Argentina 1985* by the director Santiago Mitre. This was principally described through the trial undertaken by the prosecutor Strassera for prosecuting the former dictators and how this trial is ably portrayed in the film *Argentina 1985*.

In the film *Argentina 1985*, actor Ricardo Darin plays the lead role giving a wonderful performance as Julio Strassera, the Argentinian chief prosecutor who led the trial in 1985. The film depicts how two prosecutors Julio Strassera and his associate Luis Moreno Ocampo tried the military



leaders for committing war crimes and responsible for torture and disappearance of thousands Argentinians between 1976 and 1983. Strassera was a veteran prosecutor who was at first reluctant to take up the case since he was fearful of his and his family's wellbeing. Ocampo was young and idealistic and although he belonged to a prominent family with military ties he risked alienating those.

The Navy School of Mechanics or (ESMA) situated in Buenos Aires was used as a detention camp where Argentinian civilians were tortured and killed. The details of horrible torture were brought out in the trial after the end of the dictatorship. The verdicts were announced in December 1985. While Santiago Mitre's film *Argentina 1985* came out in 2022 depicting the trial, Ulyses de la Orden created a documentary using the original source material of the trial naming it *El Juicio* (The Trial) which was shown at the Berlin International film Festival. The compendium was created out of the condensed video footage of the court room. At the end of the trial prosecutor Julio Strassera calls 'the trial a "descent" - to a place "where the misery, and horror to reach a depth that one couldn't have imagined beforehand, and afterward can barely comprehend"'. (<https://www.berlinale.de/en/2023/programm/202303113.html>) Victoria Torras, the executive director of the human rights consortium states that the ESMA was a site of terrorism where civilians were held without any charges tortured and flown over the Atlantic.

Witnesses of the trial spoke of 15 year old students who were raped and murdered, expectant mothers executed after giving birth and the babies being handed over to the military families among other brutal tortures. These captivities were never acknowledged and so the victims were known as the disappeared. Newspapers like *Buenos Aires Herald* told judges that instead of taking steps against the killing, the military regime tried to stop the people from reporting the killing. (*El Juicio* (The Trial) details the 1976-'83 Argentine dictatorship's reign of terror- Bob Mondello) It was prosecutor Julio Strassera who while summing up the proceedings of the case against the military dictators concluded by saying 'nunca mas' meaning never again. (*El Juicio* (The Trial) details the 1976-'83 Argentine dictatorship's reign of terror- Bob Mondello)

The narrative of the film *Argentina 1985* begins with the military commanders asking for trials to be conducted in the military court. It is this moment which was the biggest event since the Nuremberg Trial, that prosecutor Julio Strassera comes in the scene. Santiago Mitre's 'writing and dialogue reveal that virtually no one in Argentina

was left untouched by the violence of the dictatorship. Whether a direct or indirect victim, a sympathizer of the armed forces, an elder or a primary school student, the dictatorship was a daily fact of life for nearly a decade.' (Humberto J. Rocha May 5, 2023). The trial was televised and broadcasted for about three minutes a day and that was too without sound. Santiago Mitre has researched through the archival documents and tried to portray a detailed description of what actually happened in the courtroom.

As Rocha comments that Darin's portrayal of the role of Strassera and his eleven minutes speech 'marks the film's emotional and dramatic zenith'. The phrase 'never again' or 'nunca mas' was a line taken from novelist Ernesto Sabato and used by Strassera during his closing arguments. (Humberto J. Rocha May 5, 2023) Here he said, 'I wish to waive any claim to originality in closing this motion. I wish to use a phrase that is not my own, because it already belongs to all the Argentinian people, Your Honours: Never Again!' ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julio\\_C%C3%A9sar\\_Strassera#:~:text=Strassera%20presented%20closing%20arguments%20on,Your%20Honors%3A%20Never%20again](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julio_C%C3%A9sar_Strassera#:~:text=Strassera%20presented%20closing%20arguments%20on,Your%20Honors%3A%20Never%20again))

He dared to prosecute those military personnel who were involved in the killings and kidnappings of the innocent civilians. Most of the civilians who testified were women who were subjected to atrocities indescribable and unimaginable in the 'civilized' human world. The film is all about the courage of a handful of individuals led by Strassera who fought the Argentinian military might and resorted to every means to prove the atrocities and to hand out punishments.

The film, begins with a muttered complaint that the military leaders would be tried in the civilian court instead of a military one. Julio Strassera was given the task to try the military commanders responsible for the atrocities. He was ably assisted by Luis Moreno Ocampo played by Peter Lanzani and a band of young lawyers. The film ends with Strassera being able to provide justice to the sufferers of the military regime and the ideals of truth and justice were visibly restored in Argentina. The film is exceptionally brilliant in the sense that it actually captures of the sentiments of the public who suffered in the military regime as well as the initial audacious behaviours of the military commanders who were being tried.

Watching the film is a captivating and enthralling experience. Santiago Mitre has done a neat weaving of the story which assures the viewers



of an end that is bound to be victorious for democracy and voice of the people. Ricardo Darin has portrayed his character so well with his demeanour, it sometimes seemed that he was originally Julio Strassera who was threatened along with his family from all sides. The performances of the other actors along with the screenplay is the key to the success of the film. The camera work brings out the meticulous detail and deserves special praise and attention.

The film received the Golden Globes on January tenth of this year for being the best non English film. 'Argentina 1985' is an example of how a true story can be portrayed in a realistic way but at the same time keeping all the nuances of a cinema like cinematography editing etcetera intact. Santiago Mitre should be given due credit for for endowing the world viewers of cinema with a chunk of Argentinian history of transition which would otherwise be reduced to oblivion. The film has helped to give new dimension to the military regime and the democratic regime that sprang after that. The film again a learning experience for the posterity regarding not lose hope and always to speak up and to fight for the rights of the humanity and justice of the people.

The trial and its documentation in the film serve as a reconstruction of the actual historical happenings. Although rare debates surrounding the historical accuracy of the film exists, the narrative presents itself as story (histoire) leaving little to no trace for mutability or reconstruction (<https://www.qualityresearchinternational.com/socialresearch/histoire.htm> . Accessed 17.06.24, 11.19 pm)The film Argentina 1985 by Santiago Mitre thereby serves as an essential reference point for one looking back in time, along with other relevant source materials and documentations on the subject.

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