

A story is a story is a story, to paraphrase Gertrude Stein. *Ciclo*, a documentary film directed and edited by Andrea Martínez Crowther and released this year, certainly tells a great story.

It is about the journey made by the two Martínez brothers who rode their bicycles in 1956 across two borders: from Mexico (Pachuca, in the state of Hidalgo), across the United States, to Toronto, Canada: 3 500 miles in 82 days. It made the newspapers. It changed their lives.

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Photos in this section courtesy of Andrea Martínez Crowther.

They took with them two changes of clothes, their bicycles to transport their 22- and 25-year-old bodies, a leather-bound notebook, US\$100, a letter of encouragement from their mother, a developed gift for companionship, and the bold clarity of their goal.

Ciclo is, however, a story within a larger picture, of larger cycles containing several stories. It's as much about the roots as it is about the flowers. It is about family trees and individual pursuits. It's much like the Joshua tree growing in the desert that forms a new branch so it can blossom into freely offered renewal and beauty.

Ciclo

Once Upon a Border-crossing Bicycle Trip

Claire Joysmith*



As Andrea Martínez Crowther states in *Ciclo*, in voice-over:

Un viaje puede cambiar las ramas del árbol genealógico de una familia, puede originar otras texturas en la piel, en la cultura y en las costumbres, donde los colores de las banderas se mezclan y los nombres se eligen para pronunciarse en dos idiomas. (A journey can change the branches of a family tree, can originate other textures, on the skin, in the culture, in traditions and habits, where flag colors mingle, and names are chosen to be pronounced in two languages.)

Ciclo is about the traversings and travails of life, about memory, its lifelines and branching-offs. It is about genealogies and mobile identities, a kaleidoscope of interacting lives that influence each other with every gesture, every word, every silence. It is about how the bicycle feat of the Martínez brothers eventually turned into a story of migration, of diasporic displacement, of bilinguality and triculturality, of love found and love lost, of health and illness, of work and joy, of interwoven destinies, cycles and many journeys.

IN SEARCH OF TIMES PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

When I meet Andrea Martínez Crowther for an interview, she inevitably arrives on a bicycle, wearing a protection helmet, black bikers, and a short pleated black skirt. She smiles easily and her enthusiasm is contagious. She has been promoting *Ciclo* practically single-handed, Facebooking, posting photos and exclamation-marked encouragement to cultivate audiences and motivate people from a wide range of ages to go see the documentary film in movie theaters in 20 cities throughout Mexico (Mexico City, Guadalajara, Puebla, Monterrey, Querétaro, León, Tijuana, Xalapa, San Luis Potosí, and others), before blockbusters such as *Ironman 3* catapult it out of commercial cinemas. So far, it has reached across Mexico's borders to be shown in Ottawa and Palm Springs, but promises to go well beyond.

Andrea Martínez Crowther is by birth, life experience, and personality, a border crosser. Born in Canada, of a Mexican father and Canadian mother, she has lived for extended periods in all three countries of North America. In Mexico for the past 15 years. Tricultural and bilingual, she is fully aware of the complex issues at the root and in the blossoms of linguistic identity formation issues, of the grounding relevance of family; yet she recognizes the freedom afforded by not needing to belong to a particular country or culture. As she says, "I could live in Mexico or somewhere else and feel comfortable."

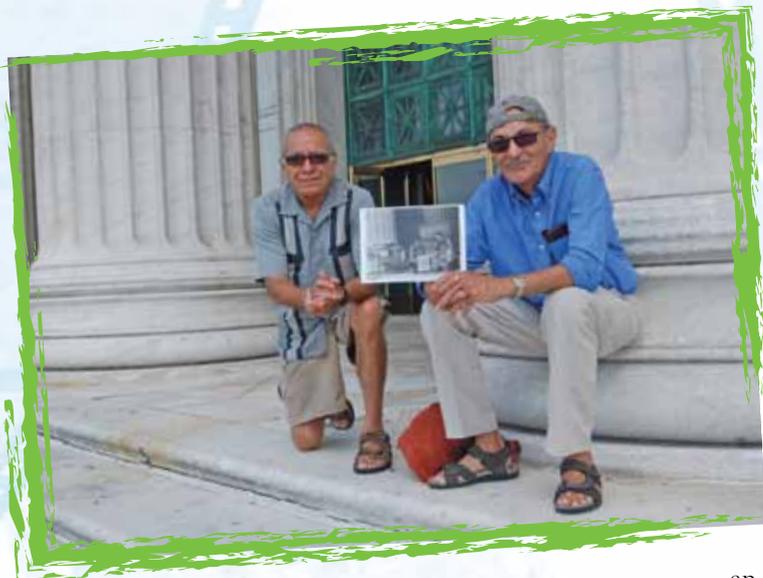


The two Martínez brothers rode their bicycles in 1956 across two borders: from Mexico, across the United States, to Toronto, Canada. It made the newspapers. It changed their lives.

Ciclo was initially conceived of 10 years before the parallel follow-in-the-tracks trip and film shoot took place. Whereas the initial trip took 82 days, the filming took 5 weeks. Whereas the Martínez brothers went alone on their journey, this time the film crew and five vehicles followed in their wake. Whereas the first trip took place in May-June 1956, the documentary was filmed during the same months, over 50 years later.

"*Ciclo* is about the passing of time," Martínez Crowther says. And she clocks in almost half a century by initiating a parallel odyssey, camera in hand, alongside the two Martínez brothers, who are, in fact, her father Arturo and her uncle Gustavo. Together, they are the main characters in a journey that becomes a documentary road movie rare in its genre.

This is a carefully yet organically directed film of unusual charm about the malleable sweet-and-sour nature of change, about how it is faced, redefined, and explored within the framework of two parallel storylines. It is about resilience, about confronting the elusive though inevitable traces and bicycle tracks of time and cycles, for which the bicycle wheel is an excellent metaphor, visual and otherwise.



DOCUMENTING LIVES AND CYCLES

“I wanted to know what went on in their minds, what kind of things they thought,” Andrea Martínez Crowther responds to a question about why she made this film into a documentary rather than a fictional film, which was the case of her extraordinary *opera prima*, *Cosas insignificantes* (Insignificant Things). “How could I possibly presume to invent them more faithfully than how they really are?” In other words, she sets out not to create characters that actors would have to portray, but, rather, to explore the protagonists as they journey through a revisited biography of sorts, relive memories literally on the road to self-knowledge, on a journey of inner discovery—which is also hers, as she states as self-designated narrator in voiceover moments—and which is shared for us as audience to make it our own. This kind of bee-line to the roots and to the flowers makes this documentary compelling, poignant and, as the director comments, “makes the personal, universal.”

In the film Gustavo states emphatically—and spontaneously, off-script, in fact, as Martínez Crowther reveals—that “La memoria es como tratar de salir de la tumba para ver lo que eras” (Memory is like trying to climb out of the tomb to see what you used to be).

Memory as a reservoir of willpower, of inspiration, of self-confrontation is at the heart of *Ciclo*. Memory that fuels dreams and the future. Memory that transmutes framed fading newspaper clippings into vibrant new film frames alive with

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the textures of change. Memory that brings into focus the tragic fading of recall through the onslaught of Alzheimer's, another cycle addressed when alluding to the director's mother and her illness. As she states in voiceover, “Pues mientras yo evoco recuerdos que no viví, los de ella se van desvaneciendo” (As I evoke memories of that which I have not lived, hers are gradually fading); and, “Mi mamá aún vive pero se está olvidando de todo, de respirar, de que existe, de que nació...” (My mother is still alive but she's forgetting it all, to breathe, that she exists, that I was born...).

BICYCLE RHYTHMS

The image and dialogue at the start of *Ciclo* might seem overly simple. The initial scene of the two brothers bending over a map and joking about how easy it is to track with a felt pen the long and arduous journey they traced with bodies and bikes is a good example.

Simple, perhaps, yet one of *Ciclo's* great charms lies in that the entire cycle it takes for the film to unroll, successfully sustains an unpretentious seamless simplicity, a tone and tempo that lure the viewer into sitting back to enjoy, eyes and mind wheeling along with bicycles, car, and camera. The paced rhythm emulates the movement of bicycle tires on the road, of strong muscles on the go, of determination undeterred, of a simple and clear goal. In this sense it is also an ode to the slow steady enjoyment of nature, of the wide-angled vistas gifted to eyes unhurried.



The stops and starts of the journey become the narrative's punctuation. The director's father, Arturo, and her uncle, Gustavo, stop to taste an avocado taco on the way, talk to elderly folks in places visited half a century ago, chat casually about a generations-old small family business, enter a town peopled only by the elderly, compare sepia photos to present day Technicolor sites. The now-then counterpointing also becomes a way of revisiting homes and places now torn down, abandoned, modernized, rebuilt; the sense of change into decline, newness, the forgotten, the restored, into the multicolors of memory, of new cycles to come.

Andrea Martínez Crowther's aim was to blend, as she explains, a variety of visual textures to enhance a full appreciation of the different moments and tones in *Ciclo*. “HD was

important because it's a cheap format and I wanted to be able to shoot and shoot and shoot so that Arturo and Gustavo would be comfortable with the camera and the crew. We had them wired with microphones almost all the time. 35mm was something the producer, photographer and I spoke about using so that we could better capture the beauty of the changing landscapes as we travelled across North America. I knew that I wanted moments of repose and contemplation and 35mm seemed the perfect format for this. Super8 is a format that has such a nostalgic feel and so it seemed perfect for the re-creations of the cyclists. To somehow feel we are there, at that moment, riding with them along the highways. It turned out that there was more original Super8 material that I didn't even know existed. I also included this archival material in the film." All in all, she recalls, she now has over 100 hours of film to store!

Ciclo's soundtrack is an added asset to the documentary. A parallel geographical and emotive journey that moves with the rolling landscapes, accessing the privileged gaze of a bicycle rider, swooping down widening curves and opening vistas. As the geographical landscapes change, so do music, lyrics, linguistic codes, cultural codes.

Although the film is mainly in Spanish, the protagonists move into English naturally as they cross the border into the U.S. and then into Canada. Yet Spanish remains the primary language, at the root of the two brothers' lives and journeys, a language Martínez Crowther chooses should be the protagonist. This is also revealed in the subtitling of the English dialogue, a marker of translational cultural politics; after all, Martínez Crowther is also a professional translator. In this sense, the film can be regarded as a translation of stories, of cultures, across borders, their nuances expressed visually and language-wise.

She talks about her intentional thematic multi-layering, her carefully scripted story narrated in three defined segments, about the ways in which she worked closely with this "structured" format, as she refers to it, in tandem with a spontaneous flow during the live filming of what was developing before her own eyes, for the camera eye to capture.

As the film rolls, the emotional textures shift and deepen, the close-ups become more frequent, a more confessional tone is introduced. Secrets are revealed, old wounds laid bare, illness, pain, and death enter the scene. Intentionally part of



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Martínez Crowther's written script, they nevertheless find expression spontaneously, another of the film's assets and one of *Ciclo's* most moving gifts. Intense emotions are gently curbed, framed and refocused. It becomes clear that this is about—to use a *Ciclo*-related metaphor—the spokes in the bicycle wheels of life.

It is also about grounded feelings revealed in subtly changing countenances. When Arturo's tears flow, the emotional texture is immediate and real. These are not actors. They are real, feeling people on screen, brave and trusting enough to tell their story to an unknown audience.

A courage Andrea Martínez Crowther shares as she tracks and frames her own genealogical maps. In making "a personal story something others can identify with, whatever their age or country." In this sense, the film introduces a family story into the realm of the mythical, without losing a grounding focus.

"There is no particular target audience," Martínez Crowther explains. She has found that, so far, the response to *Ciclo* has come from younger as well as older generations. Although a

striking effect, she adds, is its inspiration for younger generations, who see the two brothers' courage as exemplary. A story, we might add, that would remain unknown had not the director determined to make a film about her father and uncle, "no matter what," as she puts it.

CROSSING REAL TIME BORDERS

Andrea Martínez Crowther narrates how the real time border crossings in the film are a story in themselves. In *Ciclo*, the 1956 border crossings are seamless, punctuated by the classic photograph of men and bicycles, the border-crossing point in the background. Gustavo recalls in the film that the Mexico-U.S. border customs officer welcomed them with a big smile, offered in admiration for their courageous venture. Inconceivable nowadays, when Mexicans are regarded with suspicion, mistreated to alarming degrees, and visas are required and so often denied.

The director mentions how she has always feared crossing a border due to the perplexity and less amiable reactions from customs officers every time she did—in whichever

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direction due to the multinational baggage the family members carried with them. A fear not allayed by the story behind the film scenes that accurately document the realities of our times. As Martínez Crowther tells it, "I get this immigration officer at the American Embassy who says, 'Wow, so they made this bicycle trip from Mexico and now you're making a film about that!' And he gave a media visa to half the film crew." But, she continues, the other half of the crew came across another immigration officer who denied them visas. And she adds that the filming coincided with Canada's policy changes regarding compulsory visas for Mexicans, complicating things for the crew. Determination and letting change ride was once again the only road to go.

CYCLES, BICYCLES, AND CYCLOPS CAMERAS

There is no doubt this is a key contribution to transnational, transborder, transcultural relations, to portrayals and documentaries in the long history of these three countries, these two borders, and their more recent attempt at an economic union of sorts. In these twisted post-9/11 times, in an age when cyberspace has, as never before, opened up borders virtually, the true tragedy is that geographical, cultural, political insight has not inched toward a similar opening mode but, on the contrary, has become more hermetic than ever.

The sheer determination and courage of the two Martínez brothers' initial bicycle trek over these borders over half a century ago paralleled by their outer and inner voyage as seen through the consistent poetic camera eye in *Ciclo* provide fresh and inspiring insights into the need to build bridges rather than walls, to deepen understanding of what cycles we move into and out of in continuous moment-to-moment change.

Ciclo is a story about border crossings of several kinds. A story of love, friendship and family, of loss and gain, joy and pain, of natural cycles, of roots and flowers, of the camera eye and heart. It is a bright beacon of light, a source of inspiration, an ode of gratitude, a singular and subtle labour of love. A poem set in cyclic motion. **MM**

Arturo Martínez passed away shortly after *Ciclo* was first shown in Mexico. Friends and a *trío huasteco* (a traditional musical trio from the Huasteca area) celebrated his departure.

