

Taking a—media—spin on ‘JonBenet’s Tricycle’

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Murder victim JonBenet Ramsey’s tricycle makes an appearance at the Boulder courthouse in a new movie that plays the Denver Film Festival next month. Photo courtesy of Andrew Novick

Offbeat local documentary to premiere at Denver Film Festival

BY PETER JONES
NEWS EDITOR

Perhaps the strangest thing about Andrew Novick is that JonBenet Ramsey's tricycle is not even the strangest thing he owns.

"I mean, I have a dead bat in a jar," he said with a laugh, after pausing to mentally sort through his eccentric collection of macabre and unusual pop culture.

The former Cherry Hills Village resident was always the odd man out, particularly at Cherry Creek High School, where he says he scored in the top 4 percent of his 1987 class, but turned down an opportunity to join the Honors Society.

"I was like, 'I don't feel like I'm in the elite ranks of this school, other than academically,'" he said. "Needless to say, I didn't really fit in in the neighborhood and Cherry Creek High. I was the punk-rock/new-wave kid who got teased and called names and stuff."

Even then, this son of an entrepreneur was on a path that would lead him to the three-wheel curiosity that gives the title to his new documentary. *JonBenet's Tricycle* will receive its Colorado premiere, Nov. 11-12, at the 40th Denver Film Festival.

For decades, Novick has been amassing the subpar to the ridiculous when it comes to oddball collectibles—from board games for *The Patty Duke Show* and Mr. T to an O.J. Simpson record album and the unreleased music of Charles Manson.

"I say I collect everything," the filmmaker explained. "But really, I collect anything I find that has some ephemeral value. I like them for the design aspect, the artwork and the pop culture."

The pink toy at the center of Novick's movie found a home in his eccentric collection 20 years ago while the University of Colorado graduate was still living in Boulder, about nine blocks from the house on 15th Street where 6-year-old JonBenet was found murdered on Dec. 26, 1996.

By the time the tricycle landed in the collector's possession, the Ramseys had left town, abandoning several items in their once paparazzi-filled yard before moving to Georgia. Novick even wound up with some of the outdoor candy canes that had dotted the front yard, and oddly enough, some discarded unused microwave popcorn.

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On a superficial level, Novick’s movie is about innocuous objects, much as Andy Warhol explored them in his pop art—though in this case the filmmaker is more interested in the power of everyday items to rouse complicated emotions, once people learn their darker origins.

“It’s the same piece of plastic. It’s the same physical atoms. Now I gave you some information about it and it changed how you viewed it,” he said.

To test whether the objects had any intrinsic properties, Novick invited several professed psychics to see, touch and interpret them—as well as a bland sock puppet long-owned by one of the documentary’s producers.

As it happened, all the mediums projected a dark history onto the tricycle and candy canes, sometimes with uncanny accuracy—but they also ascribed similar, though wholly inaccurate, histories to the producer’s innocuous sock puppet.

“I’m glad the movie wasn’t about the sock puppet because it wasn’t that interesting,” Novick said. “Ironically, the most expensive psychic, \$200 an hour, I thought was the worst one. I was amazed by some of the things they said. I found myself rooting for them to get things right and I don’t even believe in them.”



Eclectic collector and Cherry Creek High School graduate Andrew Novick has turned his passion for the strange into a new documentary about his most notorious find—a pink tricycle once owned by JonBenet Ramsey. The movie plays the Denver Film Festival Nov. 11-12. Photo courtesy of Denver Film Society

The quirky *JonBenet's Tricycle* is not without irony. The unsolved child murder that prompted it was tabloid fodder that raised questions about the media's priorities and the public's ability to turn true crime into showbiz, with programs like *Entertainment Tonight* finding ways to endlessly update the sordid story of a murdered child beauty queen.

"Think of how many other crimes happened that same day. You didn't hear about the inner-city crimes," Novick said.

The filmmaker is no high-flown media critic, however. He is quick to concede that his movie is as much a critical exploration of prurient fascination as it is a professed example of it.

"People want to know every detail. They want to know what people had for breakfast," he said. "I comment on it fairly harshly. This is crazy. But I'm also very much a part of it."

In the end, the film's tricycle becomes a darkly bittersweet symbol of happier moments in the short life of a child whose career in pageants arguably belied a traditional childhood. At one point in the movie, Novick brings the bike to JonBenet's graveside.

"We were kind of awestruck sitting next to her grave with her tricycle, bringing it back to her in some sense," the filmmaker said.

Beyond all the tabloids, theories on the culprit, and the bizarre popular culture surrounding an enduring murder mystery, Novick remains conscious of the human cost at the core of the story.

"I thought about that for 20 years," he said. "I was so embedded in Boulder at that time. I was very upset. She was just a kid. She probably had fun doing the pageants and the performing. I think she probably liked it as much as she liked riding her bike."

At the same time, the filmmaker is unafraid to promote his documentary's new spin on a tragedy that has already seen far more than its fair share of "entertainment."

"I'm definitely hoping that the popularity of the case makes people want to see the movie, whether they're skeptical or sick of it or whatever," he said. "It's definitely a new take on it. We cover a lot of angles. There's something in it for everyone."

JonBenet's Tricycle will screen as part of the Denver Film Festival on Saturday, Nov. 11, at 4 p.m. and Sunday, Nov. 12, at 2 p.m. at United Artists at Denver Pavilions on the 16th Street Mall in Downtown Denver. Filmmaker Andrew Novick will appear in person. For tickets and a full festival schedule, visit denverfilm.org.