



Film

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Dancing with Death

NOTHING can separate me from God" – this epitaph is written on the grave of Brazilian racing driver Ayrton Senna, who was killed in a crash while leading the San Marino Grand Prix in 1994. And what strikes you while watching *Senna*, Hackney-born Asif Kapadia's riveting documentary recently released on DVD, is the inevitability of it all. Of course, we all die, and in Senna's case we know he did. But it's something more than that here – as if Senna himself expected it, indeed courted it.

Perhaps anyone who is obsessed with speed has a death wish, but Senna seemed to have it more than most. On the race track he was both ruthless and reckless, as well as being possibly the greatest racing driver of all time – he is described by a commentator in the film as being able to 'dance a dance' on the corners. In the 1990 Japanese Grand Prix, he ploughed into his arch-rival Alain Prost and both cars crashed out of the race. Clearly, he could have killed himself and Prost (the latter had been the guilty party the year before when Senna's unfair disqualification lost him the title).

The really telling footage, however, is the final act in the drama, the weekend of the fatal San Marino Grand Prix at Imola. There were two incidents prior to the race. The first, during a qualifying session on Friday 29th April, involved Senna's compatriot Rubens Barrichello. His Jordan car became airborne at a chicane and slammed into the tyres and fence. Barrichello suffered a broken nose and arm. Senna's concern was so great that he rushed over and climbed a fence to be by his side.

Then, the next day, Saturday 30th April, Austrian driver Roland Ratzenberger was killed in qualifying when he hit a concrete wall while taking a right-hand bend. An obviously distraught Senna requested a track marshal to take him to the site of the crash, where he was met by FIA's Medical Chief Sid Watkins, who recalled that Senna was crying. He then told Senna that they should both quit and spend their lives fishing instead, to which Senna replied: "Sid, I can't quit".



Throughout that weekend, we see Senna brooding and morose, rarely smiling, as if he had a premonition of his own death. We then follow him with the cockpit camera on his final journey, leading the race, and then suddenly on the Tamburello corner on lap seven leaving the track and shooting over to the concrete barrier in a crash that still remains a mystery, though a steering failure is the usual explanation. Is there a possibility that Senna killed himself?

Prost's earlier words are often seen as prophetic: "Ayrton has a small problem. He thinks he can't kill himself because he believes in God. And I think that's very dangerous". Yet perhaps he was all too well aware of his own mortality but his religious obsession was the very thing that propelled him to his tragic end. To suggest that Ayrton Senna committed suicide might seem perverse but if you have a death wish, that is ultimately what you want to do. His recklessness, his genius in the rain, his morbid concern over other people's accidents, his intensity and, above all, his screams of ecstasy when winning, all point to a man possessed by the sado-masochistic desire to push his own life to its very limit. Who knows, but perhaps in a moment of madness he deliberately headed towards that wall.

When he won the Japanese Grand Prix in 1988 and the first of his three World Championships, Senna said that he saw God, which is another way of saying that the intense ecstasy he felt was like something in another dimension. Mick Fitzgerald felt something similar when winning the

Grand National on *Rough Quest*, famously describing it as 'better than sex'. Senna himself said that the feeling was 'so strong and so intense', and we vicariously share it with him in the 1991 Brazilian Grand Prix as he yells approaching the winning post, having driven the final laps in excruciating pain with the car jammed in sixth gear, causing muscle spasms. "God gave me the race", he claimed afterwards. We suspect that 'God' had nothing to do with it but rather a madly intense will to win in his home country.

Kapadia, who spent four years cutting down 15,000 hours of archive clips and home movies to 105 minutes, has produced one of the great sporting documentaries. You don't have to be a Jeremy Clarkson petrol-head to appreciate the compelling and tragic story of this James Dean or Elvis Presley of Formula 1. Like Icarus, who sailed too close to the sun, Senna the daredevil speed merchant dived with death once too often. The end is deeply moving, and at his funeral in Sao Paulo the whole of Brazil mourned, evoking memories of JFK or Diana.

Prost was a pall-bearer and is also a trustee of the charitable Senna Foundation, and one criticism of the film is perhaps that it casts him and his French compatriot Jean-Marie Balestre, the President of FIA, as the villains of the piece. Senna himself comes across as an enigmatic yet intelligent combination of sweetness, humility, religion and ruthlessness.

Senna leads to the inevitable conclusion that an unhealthy obsession with a deity can indeed prove fatal.