



## ***Senna*** (UK 2010)

A case study in narrative and representation in  
documentary

Notes for teachers by Roy Stafford

## **Senna** (UK 2010)

*Directed by* Asif Kapadia

*Produced by* James Gay-Rees, Eric Bevan and Tim Fellner for Working Title Films, Midfield Films and StudioCanal

*Written by* Manish Pandey

*Cinematography by* Jake Polonsky

*Film Editing by* Chris King and Gregers Sall

*Original Music by* Antonio Pinto

*Sound Department:* Tim Cavagin, Stephen Griffiths and Andy Shelley

*Runtime:* 106 min

### **Leading players**

Ayrton Senna	<i>Himself</i> (archive footage)
Alain Prost	<i>Himself</i>
Frank Williams	<i>Himself</i>
Ron Dennis	<i>Himself</i>



## Introduction

*Senna* is in one sense a conventional film, classifiable as a **biographical sports documentary**. Its main focus is on the eleven years from 1984-94 in which the young Brazilian Ayrton Senna became arguably the best driver in the history of international motor sport. Any film that documented this career would find an audience of motor racing fans – but probably not many casual viewers.

However, Senna's career ended in a fatal road accident at the San Marino Grand Prix in 1994 – the last time a Formula 1 driver was killed in a championship race [since these notes were written the the French driver Jules Bianchi has died from injuries sustained in a crash during the Japanese Grand Prix of 2014]. At the time of his death, Senna was involved in two long-running struggles on the racetrack – one a sporting duel with another great champion, Alain Prost, and the other an 'institutional' struggle with the administrators of the sport and the politics of motor racing centred on what Senna believed were unfair and sometimes dangerous regulations forced upon the drivers. These two struggles 'personalised' the sporting story and gave it the potential to become a narrative much more familiar to a general audience – the quest of an attractive young hero to defeat his foes. This is clearly demonstrated in the promotional material for the film:

. . . his physical and spiritual journey . . . his quest for perfection and his ultimate transformation . . . to myth after the tragic events of Imola in 1994.  
(from the DVD sleeve)

The crucial decision made by the production team of the documentary was to dispense with any sense of an authoritative voiceover providing a commentary and a sense of direction of the events. Instead the archive footage has been edited so that it 'tells the story' seemingly by itself. Audiences largely feel that they are watching a narrative unfold, as if it was a story taking place 'now'.

The selection of sequences from thousands of hours of footage is in itself a form of 'directed' commentary and there are a number of statements and observations that have been specially recorded 'after the event' and inserted into the edited archive footage. This is what we would expect from the construction of a documentary. Nevertheless the '**narrativisation**' of the historical events and the presentation of that narrative produce meanings in the context of 2011 when concepts of documentary are extremely fluid and when audiences are recognised as **fragmenting** and **segmenting**. In this context, the success of *Senna* at the box office is remarkable. (Theatrical box office of over £3 million for a documentary in the UK is exceptional.)

## Documentary practice

The most well-known definition of documentary is that by John Grierson in 1926 when he referred to the "**creative treatment of actuality**". Up to that point films that recorded 'real events' on film were often known as '**actualities**'. Grierson went on to become the most important figure in the British Documentary movement of the 1930s and 1940s, perhaps British Cinema's principal contribution to global cinema. Grierson's definition was also important because he tied it to the importance of the **purpose** of documentary, which for him was essentially to educate by showing how the world works.

Much has changed since Grierson began to develop his ideas. These notes will not explore all the arguments about documentary practice or discuss all the different forms of documentary, but it is worth sketching out some ideas about approaches to documentary just to be able to contextualise *Senna*.

## Critical positions

The claim to 'realism' made by documentary filmmaking and the importance of the status of documentary as 'truth' has led to a range of critical positions attempting to theorise documentary practice. One of the most influential approaches has been that developed by the American academic Bill Nichols (1991), who suggested the following 'modes' of documentary:

### 1. The Expository Mode

Expository documentary is characterised by a 'voice-of-God' narration, (often in conjunction with intertitles), which directly addresses the viewer. The voiceover is God-like because it **anchors the meaning** of the images, explicitly states the text's **preferred meaning** and reduces the possibility of multiple meanings – but is never formally identified.

The images of expository documentaries merely illustrate what the narrator is saying and appear to emphasise the 'objectivity' of that commentary; the images seem to show the voice-of-God is speaking the truth. For example, in wild life documentaries we are usually invited, by the commentary, to interpret animal behaviour in anthropomorphic terms and often have little difficulty in imagining squirrels having a domestic dispute or a snake slyly sneaking up on its prey. Of course, squirrels have no concept of domesticity and snakes are not sly.

Interviews may be included in expository documentary, but are always subordinated to the voice-over which, in effect, is speaking on behalf of the text. Clearly any dissenting interview voices can be edited out.

These documentaries are often structured by a conventional narrative, and are usually centred on a problem which needs solving. They also use dramatic techniques to heighten the suspense and so draw the audience into experiencing the text as entertainment.

### 2. The Observational Mode

The defining aspect of the 'observational' mode is that the camera is as unobtrusive as possible, although not usually hidden. Hidden cameras are usually used for forms of comedy ('candid camera') or for investigative purposes, the latter often 'expository' in form.

The 'observational' mode is very close to the 'window on the world' idea, it is as if the audience is allowed to see an **unmediated reality**. The techniques used to create this illusion are:

- indirect address to audience (speech is overheard and not directed to camera);
- synchronous sound (not post-dubbed);
- relatively long takes (shots) demonstrating nothing has been 'cut out'.

Any music must be diegetic, i.e. originate from the scene being filmed. **Continuity editing** is used if a scene consists of a number of shots. This is to ensure that the audience does not become disorientated, but as continuity editing is primarily a form of fictional representation then in such documentaries we are experiencing a spatial construction that represents the world as if it were fictional.

Because it is unusual to use more than one camera, it is easier to show events in one take. If the filmmaker attempts to use different positions within a scene it can be very difficult to get aural continuity. One way around this is for the documentary maker to request participants to do an action again – as is very common in news reports and interviews – but this is obviously totally against the 'observational' nature of this mode.

The ability to follow the action and record the sound simultaneously (synchronous) could not happen until the lightweight technology of the hand-held camera became available in the late 1950s. Today's camcorders are the descendants of years of technological progress towards smaller equipment.

However, the existence of the camera in a social situation immediately turns people into **social actors**. While it is possible that people will 'act naturally' in front of a camera (although most will feel self-conscious) once behaviour has been recorded then it is available for analysis to an extent that 'real life' never can be. An 'observational' documentary does not show 'real people', it shows 'social actors'.

(The observational mode describes what is more commonly known as 'fly-on-the-wall' documentary. This in turn has been taken as a more general term referring to *cinéma vérité* (cinema 'truth') and 'Direct Cinema'. In practice these were two quite distinct movements, one in France and the other in America at the end of the 1950s and the start of the 1960s. The French approach in fact had much more in common with the interactive mode set out below with its attempt to provoke and stimulate the 'real world'. 'Cinema truth' is a translation of 'Kino Pravda', the newsreel established by Dziga Vertov – see below. Direct Cinema made the claim to be purely observational.

### 3. The Interactive Mode

The 'interactive mode' acknowledges the presence of the camera and crew; it does not try to efface itself, as do the 'expository' and 'observational' modes. Easily portable equipment means that post-dubbing is no longer required and this allows the filmmaker to speak directly to her/his subjects. The documentary maker can involve himself or herself in the scene, indeed interact with what is being filmed. Because of this, 'interactive' documentaries focus on the exchange of information rather than creating a coherent view – an objective of 'expository' documentaries.

For example, in *The Thin Blue Line* (US 1988, dir Errol Morris) various witnesses give their views of events (which often contradict each other) concerning the murder of a policeman. It is as if the audience is left to make their own decision about the truth; although, obviously, the construction of the images – particularly in the framing and editing – is likely to create a preferred reading. Despite the fact that Morris does not intrude as an interviewer, the audience is constantly reminded of the existence of multiple viewpoints because they are placed in the position of an investigating journalist questioning the main participants for the story. This is in sharp contrast to the 'voice of God' omnipotence offered by the 'expository' mode and the 'matter of fact' neutrality of the 'observational' mode.

It could be argued that this mode is somewhat more 'honest' because no attempt is made to disguise the presence of the camera and crew which must be present in order for a film to exist. But while the 'interactive' mode acknowledges the presence of filmmakers, there remains the question of how far does this interaction influence what is being documented? The fact that the rhetoric of all documentaries – that we are seeing the world as it is – is in reality unattainable, holds true for this mode.

Many 'interactive' documentaries use the form of the interview, a hierarchical discourse with the interviewer setting the agenda, which immediately cast doubt on the 'reality' represented. Anything can be proved by asking 'loaded' or 'leading' questions (and choosing who to interview). Similarly, although the 'vox pop' form of interviewing signifies itself as authentic, who, if anyone, checks up on the 'truth' of what is said? So it is clear that the interactive mode is as constructed as those described earlier.

#### 4. The Reflexive Mode

The aim of the reflexive mode is not only to represent its subject but to demonstrate itself in the act of representing; in other words, the mode draws attention to its own codes. A documentary about, say, an election campaign, is also a documentary about making a documentary about an election campaign!

In a sense this is the direct opposite of the expository and observational modes, both of which attempt to convince us that we are not watching a carefully constructed documentary but rather have access to a 'window on the world'. The reflexive mode problematises what we are seeing by acknowledging the medium.

*Man with a Movie Camera* (USSR 1929), Dziga Vertov's most famous work, is an excellent example of the reflexive mode. It is an ebullient and invigorating city tour, a mix of Moscow, Kiev and Riga, in which the hero, (although Vertov professed to eschew such bourgeois conceptions), is the eponymous observer of events. Vertov's self-reflexivity (a modernist characteristic) consists of a number of techniques which draw attention to themselves. Vertov is even self-reflexive about the cinema experience: his film opens by showing an audience entering the theatre and watching the film begin.

Other sequences emphasise the constructed nature of the film by:

- showing the cameraman filming events we see on the screen, sometimes as a reflection in a window or using eyeline match editing;
- inanimate objects are animated using stop-motion photography;
- an eye is superimposed on the camera's lens (the kino-eye indeed).

While the interactive mode emphasises the relationship between the documentary maker and her/his subject, the reflexive mode is more concerned with the encounter between the documentary text and its audience. There is, of course, a danger that by drawing too much attention to its own mode of construction, a documentary may cause the audience to lose sight of its subject; the medium can obscure the message.

That said, at least this mode makes the clear statement that representing the world cannot be other than problematic, and that to suggest otherwise is a form of lie.

#### Bruzzi's Critique

Stella Bruzzi (2000, revised 2006) takes Nichols to task for implying a simple linear progression from 'Expository' documentaries in the 1930s through 'Observational', 'Interactive' and 'Reflexive' to the **'Performative' mode**, which Nichols added in 1994 and which refers to documentaries with on-screen investigators like Michael Moore or Nick Broomfield. This is a progression from 'objectivity' (trying to commentate on what is 'out there') to 'subjectivity' (the filmmaker becoming part of what is happening 'out there'.) She also sees Nichols as implying that documentarists have always sought to find a 'better' means of putting 'reality' on screen. The perceived failure to do this successfully creates a climate in which either all documentaries are undermined because they can't be objective, or documentarists live in hope that one day a technology will be developed that will allow the 'perfect' representation of the real.

Bruzzi argues that all types of documentary have existed at different times (e.g. Vertov in the 1920s, interviews to camera in *Housing Problems* in the 1930s etc.) and that practitioners have often mixed styles together. Now that digital technology can represent events that have never happened as if they were 'documentary' images, and can offer filmmakers the chance to record sounds and images in virtually any environment and set of circumstances, what is the point of worrying about the representation of authenticity?

Bruzzi argues for a more open acceptance of 'hybrid' forms to communicate meaning about 'real world' events.

By the time the second edition of Bruzzi's book was published in 2006, it was clear that the fluid and hybrid qualities of contemporary documentaries that she had foregrounded were leading to brief periods of 'fashionability' for new forms of global television documentaries. The 'docusoaps' which flooded the schedules in the late 1990s were quickly replaced by *Big Brother*-styled 'reality programming' and what Bruzzi terms 'formatted documentaries' like *Wife Swap* and *Faking It*. The most recent hit has been *Educating Essex*. The success of documentaries designed for cinema release following the success of *Bowling For Columbine* fronted by Michael Moore (US 2002) is in some ways related to the trend in television 'factual entertainment' but in other ways refers back to the impact of big screen documentaries prior to the emergence of TV as a mass medium in the 1950s (in the UK and US). The technical and institutional features of cinema documentaries (e.g. big screen, excellent sound quality, large audience, concentrated viewing) are particularly important in the case of *Senna*, as we will see.

### **Senna and documentary practice**

The origins of *Senna* can be found in the personal memories of producer James Gay-Rees, whose father had been an important executive associated with the sponsorship of 'Team Lotus' by Imperial Tobacco via the 'John Player Special' brand in the 1980s. Gay-Rees had the background and contacts which in turn enabled writer (and Formula 1 fan) Mandish Pandey to outline a treatment. However, the unique approach to the story would not emerge until the pair approached Asif Kapadia. As a fiction filmmaker rather than documentarist/journalist, Kapadia brought a visual filmmaker's eye to the project, recognising very quickly that because there was so much archive footage available it would be possible to 'tell the story' without the need to dramatically reconstruct events or to conduct too many interviews (i.e. 'talking heads').

Two important features of the media coverage of Formula 1:

- every race is routinely filmed for broadcast (along with interviews and coverage of qualifying/press conferences etc.);
- a single organisation, FOM (Formula 1 Management), holds all the official material and Bernie Ecclestone was willing to allow access for the crew.

In addition, as Formula 1 developed as a spectator sport and an advertising and promotional tool, it attracted media coverage away from the motor racing circuit, especially when certain drivers became personalities/celebrities. This material is also accessible from various film libraries. As a genuinely 'international sport', Formula 1 is also fertile ground for the construction of 'national heroes'. Brazil has produced several world famous drivers starting with the Fittipaldi brothers Wilson and Emerson in the 1970s and including Nelson Picquet who appears in *Senna*. Most of the Brazilian drivers have come from relatively wealthy families and in the case of Ayrton Senna there was 'home movie' material as well as footage from the Brazilian TV station Globo.

Kapadia chose to tell the story primarily through the use of archive or 'found' footage. What at first seemed like a problem – the relatively poor quality images of video, 16mm and Super 8mm from the 1980s, never intended for cinema projection – became something of a plus artistically in the editing process which tried to use the grainy texture positively. Kapadia was also supported by sound engineers who re-mastered the sound quality and by a music score by the Brazilian film composer Antonio Pinto.

### **Which mode?**

*Senna* does not easily fit any of the five modes outlined above. There certainly is an 'exposition' about what happened to Senna, but no anchoring voiceover. Instead, several (potentially) competing voices are heard, none privileged over the others. (There are some contemporary 'memories', e.g. by Richard Williams, but these are usually placed over other footage.) To some extent the style is 'observational' by default since the footage was not captured by the director of this documentary, although it has been carefully 'selected'.

The filmmakers cannot interact with their subject since these are historical events – they can only do so at one remove via the clips they select. The 'reflexiveness' of the documentary is interesting. The cinema film itself resists reflection in its attempt to tell a coherent narrative, assisted by the editing style and use of music. However, the DVD reveals the constructedness through its director/producer/writer commentary. Finally, there is no involvement of the filmmakers directly in the story – no Moore or Broomfield provoking the action. On the other hand, like the Direct Cinema films of the 1960s – which were often about 'stars' of one kind or another – Ayrton Senna himself, as seen in the film, is nearly always aware of his own 'performance', just as many of the situations that are presented on film are highly manipulated 'media events'.

### **Narrativisation**

All documentaries have a narrative structure of sorts. It is a basic tenet of film and media studies that all media texts can be studied in terms of narrative theory whether they 'tell stories' directly or indirectly. At the most obvious level, a film like *Senna* tells the story of one central character who becomes the protagonist of his own story. He fills the role of hero, he goes on a 'journey', he develops as a person/as a character. The story inevitably develops its own drama through the hero's interaction with others who help him or who work against him.

*Senna* works hard to present a narrative that is close to its fictional model, the sports biopic. The hundreds of hours of footage could have been assembled and edited to tell other stories or indeed 'multiple stories' about a range of characters. They could also have been used to tell the story of motor racing both as a sport and/or as a cultural/political institution (e.g. as in the mode of institutional documentaries directed by Frederick Wiseman). The conflict between Senna and the administrators does indeed become an element in the narrative – but it doesn't in itself determine the narrative structure.

The result of this 'streamlining' of the story is that the film's narrative structure and its editing and presentational style work hard to keep the viewer/reader focused and to exclude interest in other possible stories. Only by looking for alternative stories do we realise what might have been. For instance, British audiences may be surprised by the virtual exclusion of Nigel Mansell from Senna's story. He appears only a couple of times even though he was arguably the other major driver in the period who challenged both Senna and Prost and who was involved in many key races – but he wasn't perceived as a character in the same way as Prost (i.e. as the 'villain').

Kapadia, Pandey and Gay-Rees state quite openly that they structured the film like a fiction narrative with a classical three act structure. Act 1 introduces the central players (Senna, Prost, the Senna family, the sport's administrators) and deals with the emergence of Senna as a potential champion, Act 2 focuses on Senna as a champion driver involved in his two main battles and Act 3 deals with the climactic events at Imola in 1994.

### **Representation**

There isn't space here to explore all the representation questions that the film raises so we'll focus on just three:

- How do we assess the film's presentation of the historical events of 1984-94 featuring Ayrton Senna's career, the **re-presenting** of actuality?
- How do the filmmakers present Prost as 'villain' of the story – a **typical character** in a narrative?
- How is Brazil represented in the film – to what extent is Ayrton Senna seen as a '**representative**' of Brazil?

Again the DVD commentary is invaluable in giving insights into the production process and the crucial creative decisions taken by the production team. As far as possible they tried to let Senna tell his own story – either directly through the statements he made that were recorded or by his appearance in the huge variety of film clips. At the same time, the other major characters in the drama are seen on screen as far as possible – only Richard Williams, whose voice we hear on the soundtrack, is 'invisible', simply because as a print journalist he didn't feature in the TV or film coverage. As far as possible the voiceover comments are therefore 'authenticated' on screen as taking place at the time. What marks out *Senna* as a documentary is the sheer scale and diversity of archive material which is available. On the DVD commentary Kapadia says at several points that the archive footage, often taken for very different purposes, provided the perfect shots for his purposes – better possibly than he might have chosen to shoot himself. One key sequence, when the administrators are meeting to decide whether Senna should be disqualified after 'winning' the Japanese Grand Prix – is seen from outside the building with key figures framed through the windows as in a thriller. What we might conclude from this is that while the production team clearly **select and manipulate** the material, there is also an element of chance or **serendipity** in the way that the actuality footage has emerged – which in turn signifies authenticity.

The narrative requires typical characters and as well as Prost we might identify Senna's 'friends and helpers' including the circuit doctor, his father figures such as Ron Dennis (as well as his own family of course) and the 'blockers' such as the racing administrators. However, it is clear that the most consciously 'typed' figure is Prost. The 2nd disc in the DVD package includes several detailed interviews with the characters from the story including Alain Prost and his position is, if anything, made even more complex by the further revelations. As a character, Prost has several qualities/traits which invite audiences to consider him as Senna's opposite:

religious belief v. rational, non-religious  
 younger v. older  
 instinctive, daring v. methodical, calculating  
 Brazilian v. French

etc.

To some extent, the rivalry between drivers is built into the sport. When the two best drivers are on the same team, they become each other's main rival. They know that since they both have the same car, whoever wins is going to be seen as the better driver. In this sense, spectators will be more or less forced to favour one over the other. But the film deliberately sets out to emphasise the differences between the two drivers since this makes a better narrative. We might analyse sequences to see how the found material has been edited and to what extent the selection of clips contributes to the sense of more than just sporting rivalry between the two. But also note that at the end of the film the credits reveal that one of the trustees for the foundation that supports the welfare of children in Brazil set

up by Senna's sister in his name is Alain Prost. Does this re-inforce the idea of Prost as 'calculating' or suggest that he wants to be associated with a man he respected?

Senna's Brazilian nationality is an important element of the film. Formula 1 is an international sport but most champion drivers have come from Europe with the Brazilians as the main 'outsiders' – and therefore by default the champions for fans everywhere outside Europe. Brazil and Japan have a special relationship based on historical periods of migrations between the two countries. The Japanese Grand Prix is the focus for several key scenes in the film. For audiences in Europe and North America, Brazilian culture is still relatively unknown and often represented via sport (football as well as Formula 1), carnival (music and dance) and violence (political and criminal). *Senna* is rooted in the first of these and the film also references the other two, placing fan adulation of Senna in the context of both Brazilian popular culture and the political upheavals of the 1980s. Senna's own family is seen to be wealthy and privileged in a society with unequal wealth distribution. None of this representation of Brazil seems gratuitous but it is marked by the need to reinforce the opposition between Senna/Brazil and Prost/France. Overall the film attempts to maintain an objective stance by selecting its journalist commentators from Brazil, France (Belgian working for French TV), US and UK.

As an exercise for students, it would be useful to look closely at the construction of Senna's home life and his presentation via the Brazilian footage from Globo and home video and how this informs (or contradicts) the way he is presented via the material shot around the Grand Prix meets.

### **Institution and Audience**

Further work could consider the film as a case study for other aspects of the film and media specification. In production terms, *Senna* benefited from the early (and supportive) involvement of Working Title. As the leading British film production company over 25 years since the mid-1980s, Working Title has developed a strong relationship with the Hollywood studio Universal (which has a controlling interest in Working Title). Universal was once owned (in the late 1990s) by the French utilities group Vivendi and as a result Working Title became a long term partner with Canal Plus, also then owned by Vivendi. The recently re-branded StudioCanal is now emerging as Europe's 'integrated studio operation'. Under the aegis of Universal and StudioCanal, *Senna* as a production had both the resources and the contacts necessary to develop the project and now to distribute it successfully in the international market. (The film made at least \$11.5 million at the global cinema box office.)

Questions about the audiences for *Senna* inevitably focus on the success of the film in reaching beyond the motor racing fan to broader 'demographics' – audiences who know little about Formula 1 but recognise the star/celebrity status of Senna and the human story that the film's narrative presents. The DVD release of the film throws this distinction between 'fan' and the broader audience into even sharper focus. So far, film studies is still in the relatively early stages of dealing with the different audience responses to films on cinema screens and in other forms of distribution (i.e. download, DVD, YouTube streaming etc.). Most attention has perhaps been on the different ways audiences might engage with the same film, although Barbara Klinger (2006) does point a way forward in her discussion of DVD culture.

*Senna* has been fashioned as a film that can be understood and enjoyed by a general audience, but the DVD 2 Disc edition offers interviews totalling as much screen time as the whole film, with each of the journalist commentators and others such as Alain Prost and Ron Dennis. As Kapadia says on the commentary, the fan response to the film has been overwhelmingly positive but always with a desire for 'more information'. The DVD edition goes some way towards meeting this request (although no more racing footage is available

apart from a few minutes of home video). The extra interviews serve the fans, but also possibly serve to emphasise the extent to which the film itself has such a tight focus on its specific story. These interviews are very different to those in the film since they are all retrospective (like the 'witness statements' in historical documentaries) and are shot against plain backgrounds rather than being in situ. They probably won't interest the general audience but could offer the fans a different perspective. The film is likely to be read differently in some way after listening to the interviews. Again, as an exercise, it might be useful to listen to Prost's interviews on Disc 2 before watching his scenes in the film again.

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## Discussion questions

These are examples of some of the questions that students could be asked to discuss following a screening of the film:

1. How noticeable is the difference in quality between the various archive clips in the film? Did you find that you forgot about their status as archive as the film went on? What techniques did you think the filmmakers used to make the story flow and the different clips work together?
2. Is there a commentary on the film? Is there a clear sense of whose perspective on the story we are supposed to adopt?
3. If Ayrton Senna is the 'hero' of the story, Alain Prost is arguably the 'villain'. How did you feel about what you saw of Prost and heard from him in interviews?
4. The chief administrator of Formula 1 in 1989, Jean-Marie Balestre, was described by the production team of *Senna* as a "gift for filmmakers". Watch again the scene in which Balestre talks to the drivers before the Japanese Grand Prix (Chapter 6 on the DVD). How does Balestre come across. Why did the filmmakers think that he was a 'gift'?
5. What difference do you think that there might be between a Formula 1 'fan' watching the film and anyone else who is not a fan? Would they see the same film?

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