



That Sugar Film Discussion Guide

Director: Damon Gameau

Year: 2014

Time: 90 min

You might know this director from:

This is the first full-length feature from this director.

FILM SUMMARY

Close your eyes and imagine sugar. What comes to mind? Chocolate, jelly beans, cotton candy, cakes, and ice cream. The usual culprits. What about fruit smoothies, baked beans, granola, apple juice? Sugar lurks everywhere in our modern culture. Australian actor and first-time feature documentary director Damon Gameau scares sugar out of its many hiding places and dispels the myths about this pervasive and addictive substance in THAT SUGAR FILM.

Having spent the most recent 3 years of his life in a sugar-free state and awaiting the birth of his first child, Gameau contemplates the effects a more “average person diet” would have on his body and mind. Compiling a team of doctors, scientists, and other health-related specialists, he decides to eat 40 teaspoons of sugar per day for 60 days – the amount an average Australian consumes on a daily basis.

Gameau doesn't throw back milkshakes, candy bars, cookies, and slabs of velvety rich cake. He ascribes to what is perceived as a “healthy” diet, packed with kid's cereals, teriyaki smothered chicken, and low-fat yogurt, and snack bars, eating as many if not less calories than before. Beginning in his homeland, he watches as the pounds pile on and then travels to the U.S., the bulging birthplace of sugar-fuelled obesity, where he witnesses the state of play in the sweet mecca of the world, rotten teeth and all. Upon completion of his 60 days, Gameau is a heavier, unhealthier, crankier version of his former self, and anxiously returns to his sugar-free ways.

This saccharine-powered story, full of scientific facts and industry tidbits, is made all the more digestible through humor and role playing, resulting in 90 minutes of seductive viewing, encouraging us all – healthy or not – to reflect on our own relationship with the sweet stuff.

FILM THEMES

There's no escaping it. Sugar pervades modern culture in the slickest, sweetest of ways. With the sticky relationship between science and industry fuelling unhealthy addictions, our health pays the price.

SUGAR SUGAR EVERYWHERE!

Biologically speaking, our bodies were programmed to consume a teeny-weeny amount of sugar, the same amount that was available in nature. As we pummel our systems with sugar in its multiple forms these days, our physiology struggles to adapt. How can the average individual avoid the saccharine shortcuts? When 80% of supermarket items contain added sugar, and manufacturers disguise the sweet stuff behind an alleged 115 various names, it takes a savvy consumer to decipher the conflicting messages and tow a sugar-free line, and even the "healthy" amongst us are slurping down more sugar than they are led to believe.

SWINGING ON THE SWEET STUFF

Panic attacks, mood swings, mania. These disorders belong to the field of psychiatry, where mental imbalances are traced to their physiological roots and managed with medication. But what do "sugar high" and "sugar low" refer to? Much like the highs and lows of drug addiction, sugar is processed by our systems in a similar fashion, pumping us with adrenalin and leading to panic, anxiety, and depression. In the words of Thomas Campbell, "The brain and body run on glucose. If the glucose level is going up and down, swinging high and low and back and forth, then your mental function is unstable." Serious food for thought.

SCIENCE + INDUSTRY = DECEPTION

The global sugar trade is worth billions of dollars. When a scientist reveals that cravings are not related to hunger but to emotional triggers, the industry gobbles up this information and feeds it out to the public in a sugary sweet packaging. Why invest in educating people on the bitter facts when the syrupy story keeps the money rolling in. With the major manufacturers funding scientific research, scientists are more prone to create addictive products that fuel the steady stream of finance rather than teaching the public to make balanced healthy choices. It's time to read the fine print behind the research in order to make sense of the slanted information available.

A CHALLENGE

Over the course of 60 days, Gameau displayed the dangerous affects of foods that are perceived as "healthy" can have on a functioning system. Morphing from a shiny example of good health to someone ruled by cravings and mood swings, his diet made even the experts cringe. Rather than sulking in a sad state of sickly abandon, Gameau and team set out to inspire us all to invest in our physical and mental states by leaving added sugar on the supermarket shelves and opting for another sort of lifestyle. No matter the extent and level of deception we've been sold - with sugar being connected with everything from love to celebration - we can unravel ourselves from the sticky defeat and embrace a level field of life by developing a more arms length relationship with sugar.

"Sugar is not evil, but life is so much better when you get rid of it."

Kathleen DesMaisons

"Any sugar - brown sugar, white sugar, high fructose corn syrup, fruit juice concentrate - have an equal effect on your health."

Thomas Campbell

"It's not the calories. It's the source of the calories."

Debbie Herbst

FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. Discuss your initial reaction to the film. Did you find the evidence and format in which the film was presented to be compelling and convincing, or was the comical approach dissuading?
2. What is your relationship to sugar? Do you know how much sugar do you consume on a daily basis? Do you consider yourself to be a healthy eater?
3. Did you find the information offered up in the film to be shocking, or were you aware of the role sugar plays in contemporary life? Discuss.
4. Why do you believe Americans have such a disproportionately unbalanced relationship to sugar, as compared to the rest of the world? What is it about American culture/life that feeds the unhealthy overconsumption of the sweet stuff?
5. Discuss the notion that “sugar is the new tobacco.” Do you believe sugar should be taxed, as cigarettes and other nicotine products are today? Are we headed towards a sugar-driven health crisis?
6. What was your relationship with sugar when you were a child? How much sugar were you allowed? How has this affected your adult relationship to sugar?
7. What experience do you have with mood swings, and to what do you attribute these emotional variations? In which ways do you think your diet affects your mood? Do you ever use sugar as a pick-me-up? If not, in what ways do you increase your energy levels?
8. Is the average individual aware of the amount of sugar in everyday food items? For example, did you know that some fruit smoothies contain as much sugar as Coca-Cola? Why is there such a gap between education/knowledge and the general public when it comes to what we put in our bodies?
9. Would you be interested in attempting a 30-day sugar-free diet? How do you think you would fare? Do you consider yourself a sugar addict?
10. What can you do - on a simple everyday level - to make an impact on the amount of sugar in the average diet?

NOTES:

FILM FACTS:

- THAT SUGAR FILM is director Damon Gameau's first feature film. Having graduated in 1999 from Australia's National Institute of Dramatic Art, Gameau went on to pursue an acting career, starring in a number of Australian TV programs and films, and playing an Australian backpacker in an episode of "How I Met Your Mother." He had been eating a sugar-free diet for 3 years when he began the 60-day sugar diet for the film.
- Gameau published "That Sugar Book," an accompaniment to the film, containing information from the film plus certain findings that didn't make it to the final cut, as well as a sugar-cleanse and recipes from his partner Zoe.
- British actor and comedian Stephen Fry is featured in THAT SUGAR FILM, where he explains the history of sugar. Having suffered from a self-declared sugar addiction since the age of 4, he was enthusiastic to get involved in the film.
- Gameau's partner, Zoe Tuckwell-Smith, is also an Australian actress. The couple met in East Timor in 2009 during the filming of "Balibo," an Australian war film. Their daughter Velvet was born in November 2013, and the family live in the Dandenongs, outside of Melbourne.
- Gameau established The Mai Wuru Sugar Challenge Foundation following the release of THAT SUGAR FILM. Proceeds from the film go to helping the Aboriginal community of Amata, Australia, access healthy food.
- Psychophysicist Howard Moskowitz was hired by the U.S. Army to work at its research labs in 1969 in order to improve the MREs (Meals, Ready to Eat), so that soldiers would eat more on the battlefield. Moskowitz discovered that soldiers ate more if sugar was added but only up to a certain level, coined the "bliss point." He went on to create the perfect Prego pasta sauces, containing sugar as the second ingredient after tomatoes. He found that hunger is not the main force that drives us to eat but rather cravings, sugar the greatest of them all.
- The term TOFI (thin on the outside, fat on the inside) first appeared as a phenomenon in the media in 2006. An individual is described as TOFI when he/she has a thin appearance but has disproportionate fat stored in the abdomen. The only way to discern this is through an MRI scan.
- The history of the word "sugar" shows that most languages took the name for the sweet stuff from Sanskrit "sarkara," which means "material in a granule form." French: sucre. Spanish: azúcar. Arabic: sukkar. Greek: sákcharon.
- Dried fruit, figs, bananas, and mangos are fruits with the highest sugar content. Raspberries and blueberries feature on the low sugar side of fruit.
- Christopher Columbus introduced sugarcane to the Americas on his second voyage in 1493. He had received cuttings of the sweet plant as a gift from the governess of the Canary Islands.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Interested in learning more about cutting sugar out of your diet? Director Gameau published a book, "That Sugar Book," at the time of the film's release, packed full of inspiration. thatsugarfilm.com/book-3/
2. Visit the THAT SUGAR FILM website, where a whole host of low-sugar recipes, interesting challenges and ways to get involved in a healthier alternative await. <http://thatsugarfilm.com>
3. Try embarking on a 30-day sugar-free diet. There are many resources, both on the web and in print, offering simple and manageable ways to begin.
4. Watch "Fed Up," a 2014 film produced by Katie Couric, which provides an in-depth look at the American food industry and its propagation of sugar in the average diet. <http://fedupmovie.com/#/page/home>

We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.