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presents

THE CURSE OF SUGAR



Directed by Mathilde Damoisel
Produced by Hauteville Productions

2x52'

LOGLINE

What is the price of sugar? How much does the fleeting pleasure of this delicious but useless poison really cost? It is a global addiction that has been fuelled by the exploitation of land and people for over five centuries. Sugar was the basis of a civilisation which, from the transatlantic slave trade to modern forms of exploitation, has never ceased to brutalise labour in all its forms, and to perpetuate immense lies in order to guarantee the prosperity of its industry.

The whole world has been shaped by sugar. From Brazil to Réunion, from Europe to South Africa and from India to the Dominican Republic, its production has laid the foundations for the modern capitalist system, devastated the environment and led to massive population movements. As the curse of sugar continues to haunt certain parts of the world, we set off to these exploited lands to discover a history of which we are all heirs.



Today, with struggles to defend workers and the planet continuing, many regions are wondering about the future of sugar production. The film concludes by highlighting the diverse initiatives that aim to promote the ethical production of this commodity.

SUMMARY OF THE TWO EPISODES



Act I, "The Sugar Empire", spans the whole of the 19th century and focuses on the construction of the sugar civilisation. From being a rare product reserved exclusively for the elite, sugar developed into a staple of the European diet, with consumption skyrocketing to 6 million tonnes in 1900. An essential driving force behind the colonisation of the Americas and the "Triangular Trade", the Sugar Empire was weakened by the

abolition of slavery throughout the mid-19th century. A new system, indentureship, then took root, continuing the brutal mistreatment of workers. Voices such as that of Gandhi in South Africa were raised in defence of these uprooted men and women. But would they succeed in shaking the sugar empire?

Act II, "An Impossible Emancipation?", retraces the continued exploitation of workers despite their many forms of resistance, from the beginning of the 20th century until today. In the 19th century, the world's population doubled and that of America multiplied by 12. A true revolution of the status quo was needed to feed this burgeoning society - and it arrived in the form of industrial food. The United States became the center of the new sugar empire, gradually expanding to Hawaii and Cuba. Working conditions, as disastrous as ever, were reminiscent of the days of indentured labour. Despite struggles and resistance, the sugar industry seemed untouchable. Even today, many associations are fighting to protect workers, in the hope of changing exploitative practices within the production of sugar.

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

“—
| When we work at the sugarcanes, and
the mill snatches hold of a finger, they
cut off the hand; and when we attempt
to run away, they cut off the leg; both
cases have happened to me. This is the
price at which you eat sugar in Europe. |
—”

Voltaire, *Candide* (1759)

“This is the price at which you eat sugar in Europe...”: the voice of the amputated slave in Voltaire’s *Candide* still haunts us today. It’s the echo of a centuriesold global history in which the tremendous labour of some is harnessed to satisfy the taste of others. The history of sugar is one that binds us together, as dominant and dominated, as consumers and producers, across regions and through time, along paths often unsuspected. It is a history that accompanied the birth of European capitalism, forever upsetting the balance of the world, and damaging our lands and our bodies. But while the enslavement of the peoples of Africa was the foundation of the sugar trade in the 15th century, its abolition four centuries later did not put an end to it. The history of sugar is still being written.

Even though today its toxicity is no longer in doubt and sugar is known to be responsible for - among other things - the global obesity epidemic, more than 185 million tonnes are produced across the five continents - an increase of 270% since 1960. In 2022, the sugar industry was estimated to be worth 50 billion dollars. The major sugar groups that dominate this market - led by Germany’s Südzucker and France’s Tereos - have taken up the torch from growers and traders to ensure that sugar’s stranglehold does not wane. Even if it means resorting to increasingly aggressive lobbying... Great financial battles that are currently being fought in Brussels and on the commodity exchanges have followed the wars, conquests and coups d’état that punctuated the history of sugar.

Originally, sugar was a rare and expensive commodity, the prerogative of princes and the powerful. However, with the advent of slavery, it became accessible to all and a mainstay on tables the world over. It was the displacement and exploitation of some six million African men and women that enabled sugar to be both mass-produced and marketed at ever lower costs.



The abolition of slavery, by England in 1834 and by France in 1848, was not the end of the story. To continue producing this white gold, the African slaves were replaced by scores of poor workers, or “coolies”, who came from all four corners of the colonial empires, often attracted by the illusory promise of a better life on the plantations... This system is called indentured labour, or “engagisme” in French. It lasted until the 1930s, and led to the displacement of more than three million men and women from India, Africa, China and Europe to the West Indies, South Africa, Polynesia, Brazil and Australia. These massive population movements reshuffled the geopolitical deck and reshaped the identity of nations like Mauritius, Fiji and Guyana.

Although indentured labour, widely denounced, has been brought to an end, the sugar industry has, as always, been able to adapt. Working conditions remain among the worst in the world. Even today, in Guadeloupe, nine out of ten workers are exposed to carcinogenic pesticides. In the Dominican Republic, Brazil, Cambodia and Zimbabwe, men, women, children and the elderly continue to cut sugar cane as they did in the past, in conditions akin to forced labour or even slavery. The landscapes of these former sugar colonies have been forever shaped by the sugar plantation model. In Europe, vast lowlands have been sacrificed for sugar beet monocultures, with soil and water becoming irredeemably exhausted and polluted.

This film aims to reweave the complex threads of the history of sugar, and to reveal its true cost - the brutal exploitation, over many centuries, of the labour of some in order to satisfy the tastes of others. Whether slaves, expropriated farmers or indentured workers, the dominated of yesterday and today have never ceased to pay, with their freedom and their lives, the true price of the sugar we consume.



ARTISTIC NOTE

In this 2 x 52' series, we are adopting a global approach to uncover this Sugar Civilisation; a civilisation that knows no geographical boundaries and which still shapes our world today.

The story

To embrace the history of sugar, which spans nearly three centuries and five continents, we have chosen a counterpoint narrative that spotlights the powerful echoes between the past and the present. a shift in space or time.

We delve into this story through contemporary sequences that challenge and bear witness to the abuses perpetrated by the sugar industry today - be it in the Dominican Republic, India, Florida or Brazil. Filmed in situ - on the ground and in the moment - each sequence focuses on a specific situation, approached from a human perspective, with no overhang. The style is direct, but with particular attention paid to the faces, gestures and bodies at work.



The past is called upon both to make sense of these contemporary realities, and to set them within a global, long-term understanding of the hold sugar has over our world. The film progresses without sacrificing chronology, while still allowing for ellipses and associations of ideas to move through this world. It focuses on concrete cases which are anchored in a particular place, illustrated by original documents and carried by singular voices from the past. The written and oral testimonies of former slaves and indentured labourers are brought to the fore to help render this grand history of sugar as human as possible.

International historians, who stand out for their cross-disciplinary approach linking the political, economic, cultural and social history of sugar, reinforce our understanding of this global system. Their interviews focus on anecdotes and concrete cases, lending a tangible and thought provoking relevance to their contributions.

The story is told through a commentary that frames the narrative and focuses our understanding on how sugar contributed to the brutal exploitation of labour and land - and how this legacy continues to concern us all. The commentary allows the historians to develop their ideas while also acting as a common thread, reviving or summarising the story, highlighting a strong idea, or justifying a shift in space or time.

“Sugar Planet”: A Structuring Design

The film presents a global dimension: in particular, we want to highlight the extent to which the history of sugar links diverse worlds - the New and the Old; the North and the South; empires and their colonies.



It also emphasises the impact of this history on our present day. A history that has shaped entire societies and formed complex relationships of dependence; it is at the root of decisive tensions and essential rifts.



To make this movement through space and time fluid and legible, we are developing a graphic device in the form of a globe, the material of which evokes both sugar as a commodity and its allure. Moving in a rotary motion, the globe symbolises sugar's hold over the planet, its omnipresence and its ability to transform places and people. Whether we approach it in its entirety, on a planetary scale, or in detail, moving towards a particular region, this material captures such variety and gives a tone, a certain “flavour”, to the cartography. The same material can be used to integrate photographs, drawings or engravings into the cartography. It also serves as a transition between filmed sequences and archival footage, helping to anchor all these narrative elements in the same geography of sugar.

The archives

The oldest films documenting the plantations and the sugar industry are used, as well as the photographic collections of the major sugar groups and their communication material. From the end of the 19th century onwards, an abundance of film material (archival, amateur, newsreel and advertising films), as well as photographic material, has enabled us to precisely illustrate changes in the sugar civilization. Confronting the sugar civilisation with its dark side, we will be using contemporary images, whether documentary, fiction or advertising, which exalt the pleasure and sensuality of this delicious poison...



PROSPECTIVE HISTORIANS

On global history of sugar

- **Elizabeth Abbott**

Elizabeth Abbott is a Canadian historian who has lived in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, and now teaches at Trinity College, Toronto. Published in 2008, her book “Sugar, a Bittersweet History” is considered to be one of the most comprehensive studies of the history of sugar since Sidney Mintz’s pioneering work “Sweetness and Power” in 1985. Like Mintz, she sets out to investigate sugar’s dark side, as well as the relationships of power and oppression that are woven into its history.

- **Christine Rufino Dabat**

A Brazilian historian, Christine Rufino Dabat teaches at the Federal University of Pernambuco and at the EHESS in France. She also edits the journal “Brésil(s)”. Dabat has devoted her research to the history of the sugar industry, with a particular focus on labour and the environment. She has worked closely with Sidney Mintz, for whom she is the Portuguese translator. She has supervised a number of theses on such themes, encouraging a global rather than a strictly Eurocentric approach to the history of sugar.

- **James Walvin**

James Walvin is a British historian and Emeritus Professor at the University of York who, since his first research in Jamaica in 1967, specialises in slavery and the culture of plantations. His book “How Sugar Corrupted the World: From Slavery to Obesity” was published in France in 2020. In it, he takes a particular interest in the political, economic and cultural mechanisms that have enabled sugar to permeate our societies, bodies and environment so strongly and so profoundly.

- **Darra Goldstein**

Next to her work as an American historian, Darra Goldstein is also a food critic and author, which led her to found the journal “Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture” in 2001. She has edited an encyclopaedia of sugar, “The Oxford Companion to Sugar and Sweets”, in which she reconnects the pleasure of sugar with its bittersweet history.

On slavery

- **Frédéric Régent**

Frédéric Régent is a French historian and former chairman of the “Comité national pour la mémoire et l’histoire de l’esclavage” (National Committee for the Memory and History of Slavery). A specialist in slave societies in the French colonies, he recently published « Libres et sans fers. Paroles d’esclaves français » (Unshackled and Free: Testimonies of French Slaves) and « Libres de couleur : Les affranchis et leurs descendants en terre d’esclavage » (Free and of colour: Freedmen and their descendants in the land of slavery).

- **Michael Zeuske**

A German historian, he is working on a world history of transatlantic slavery, and is particularly interested in the personal and intimate dimensions of such relations of dependence. He is also interested in the “second slavery”: how, after its abolition in England and France, slavery was continued and adapted, particularly in the United States, Cuba and Brazil. In this context, he draws attention to the various slave-buying and hiring practices that enabled slaves to be replaced in the sugar industry, and the culture of plantations to grow and prosper.

- **Dr Khalil Gibran Muhammad**

Gibran Muhammad is an American historian. He holds the Chair in History, Race, and Public Policy at Harvard's Kennedy School of Public Policy, where his research examines democracy and the criminal justice system within the context of racism. He is a contributor to Project 1619, which aims to place the history of slavery into the centre of the historiography of the USA. He is the author of the essay "The Barbaric History of Sugar in America".

- **Darra Goldstein**

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On indentureship

- **Xavier Le Terrier**

Le Terrier is the director of the Villele History Museum (Réunion), a place of memory that was once one of the island's great sugar plantations. A historian of indentureship, he has published several works on sugar: "La main d'oeuvre du sucre" (The Workforce of Sugar), "Faire du sucre à La Réunion" (Making Sugar in Réunion).

- **Gaiutra Bahadur**

Bahadur is an American journalist, born in Guyana into a family of Indian indentured labourers before emigrating to the United States in the 1980s. In 2013 she published "Coolie Woman, The Odyssey of Indenture", a book that is both a family investigation into the footsteps of her great-grandmother, but also a rare history of female indentured workers in India who came to cut cane in the sugar colonies of the Caribbeans and Guyana.

On Haiti and Cuba

- **Ada Ferrer**

A Cuban-American historian, she teaches at New York University. In 2015, she published "Freedom's Mirror: Cuba and Haiti in the Age of Revolution", a history of the Haitian and Cuban revolutions. In 2022, she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for "Cuba, an American History".

CV - MATHILDE DAMOISEL

Mathilde Damoiseel is a talented and creative documentary film maker. For nearly 20 years, she has sharpened her ability to make geopolitical and historical documentaries with an international appeal. Following an MA in Film and TV Production from the University of Bristol in the UK, Mathilde first established herself at Testimony Films, working alongside British producer and historian Steve Humphries, on wide-ranging historical explorations that aired on the BBC and ITV. This experience left Mathilde with a passion for wide-reaching historical accounts, and an approach that struck a chord both in France and internationally. Her films have been shown in Europe and across the world, with ensuing TV preorders, releases on streaming platforms, as well as screenings at important film festivals.

More recently, Mathilde Damoiseel directed *Wuthering Heights: Love, Hate, and Vengeance* (52', ARTE, 2022) and *Far West, The Hidden History* (52', France Télévisions, 2021), for which an educational guide was established as part of Stanford University's SPICE program (Stanford Program International & Cross Cultural Education). Prior to that, her *Mahatma Gandhi, Beyond the Myth* and *When Banana Ruled* were both acquired by Amazon Prime Video and proved particularly successful in both India (Discovery India, Netflix India) and Brazil (Canal Curtial, Globosat).

SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

- *The End of the Ottoman Empire* (2x52', ARTE / RTS / TV5 Monde, 2015), broadcast in over twenty countries.
- *When Banana Ruled* (52', ARTE, 2017), presales to Amazon Prime Video and Netflix India.
- *Mahatma Gandhi, Beyond the Myth* (52', France 5 / LCP / RSI / Globosat /Discovery, 2019), broadcast in fifteen countries, including on Amazon Prime Video
- *Romantic Paris, Erotic Paris* (95', France Télévisions, 2020)
- *Far West, The Hidden History* (52', France Télévisions, 2021)
- *Wuthering Heights: Love, Hate, and Vengeance* (52', ARTE, 2022)
- *Nurses: Our History* (90', France Télévisions, 2023)

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