

Reviews

El Susto

Karen Akins, director

Brave Little Films, 2019

75 min. <https://elsustomovie.com/watch>

In recent years, public health has taken aim at sugary beverages, the pleasurable drinks clever media campaigns have led consumers to associate with happiness. On the surface, the issue is understood as one of personal will and motivation. Decreasing—or better yet, eliminating—our consumption of these empty calories is associated with decreased risk of diabetes and certain cancers, as well as decreased incidence of tooth decay. This may seem to call for a simple behavioral change, but lowering sugary beverage consumption is a goal laden with economic, social, and even racial undertones, ripe for analysis and debate. Karen Akins, a former activist who first encountered the ruinous effects of diabetes in Mexico as a medical mission volunteer in 2008, takes on this complexity in her first documentary, *El Susto*, using Mexico as a case study.

Akins blends multiple perspectives, using narration to thread across interviews, footage of daily life, celebrations, and political and industry events, as well as commercials and other forms of popular culture. The film brings together the many voices involved in this debate: researchers, politicians, the business sector, the food industry (Coca-Cola), and civil society. Importantly, she gives voice to the Mexican population suffering the brunt of chronic health illnesses. Imagery of the dire health consequences (amputations, blindness, death) is effectively juxtaposed against the profit-driven perspectives of the industry and the politicians who have supported the industry through recent decades.

El Susto begins with *El Día de los Muertos*—the Day of the Dead—Mexico’s celebration of the passing from one world to the next. The film uses the celebration as an initial anchor to talk about type 2 diabetes, which is the main cause of death in the country, despite greater media attention being given to violent deaths and the drug cartels. Bottles of Coca-Cola sit conspicuously between flowers and other trinkets that

adorn the beautiful altars built for the celebration. Family members recount the departed’s love for the fizzy beverage, a love that they also share, even when associating Coca-Cola with their own diabetes diagnosis and the death of their loved one. Yet the narrator centers the perceived causes of diabetes on the concept of “*el susto*.” *Susto* translates as a fright, a sudden scare, or a sensation during which one’s soul momentarily leaves the body as a result of grief, traumatic events, earthquakes, kidnappings, and so on—events too common in Mexican society. According to the film, 76 percent of Mexicans believe that *sustos* cause diabetes. Yet, as the viewer soon learns, the core of the problem is not *sustos* but the politics, corruption, and trade agreements that have allowed Coca-Cola to become such an important part of everyday life in Mexico.

Akins brings to full view the consequences of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), industry power, and resource allocation on public health, echoing important recent scholarship, such as Alyshia Gálvez’s *Eating NAFTA* (2018) and Marion Nestle’s *Soda Politics* (2015). The film presents the roots of Coca-Cola’s global influence, along with contemporary views from the company’s strategic events and political rallies, where industry tactics are laid out along with its influence in policymaking. Beyond Coca-Cola, viewers are also presented with larger issues contributing to Mexicans’ love for sugary beverages: water access and safety, health care access, and the health care system’s lack of capacity to address chronic diseases, leading to greater risks of complications, disabilities, and death from mostly preventable conditions. In doing so, Akins provides evidence of how profit and the well-being of the rich have been prioritized at the expense of the poor, who more often than not are marginalized Indigenous communities in the country. Fortunately, Akins also presents solutions, showcasing Mexico’s civil society and researchers’ efforts to create impactful change, focusing on the passing of sugary beverage taxes in 2014 (which also included a tax on junk foods). The showcase is largely uncritical, praising both Mexico’s victory in passing the tax and civil society efforts to call attention to local industry influence.

The policy victories—the sugary beverage tax and the recently passed front-of-package labels—are laudable, but they sustain a focus on behavioral change that places the burden for health solely on the individual. Are there ongoing efforts to improve the health care system? Water access? Socioeconomic and racial inequities? These are a few key aspects that merit further exploration.

El Susto is a valuable contribution to motivate deeper conversations about transnational companies and the role of government to safeguard its citizens' health. The film could be incorporated into classes that tackle issues around food access, nutrition, food justice, and even migration. The film can also be viewed as a needed call for action to push for government regulation of food marketing and of industry involvement in research and policy, both of which are significant, but often overlooked, influences on individual and community health.

—Melissa Fuster, City University of New York
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REFERENCES

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Just the Tonic: A Natural History of Tonic Water

Kim Walker and Mark Nesbitt

London: Kew, 2019

144 pp. Color and black and white illustrations. \$25 / £18 (hardcover)

The next time you sip your gin and tonic, spare a thought for Doña Francisca Henriques de Ribera, countess of Chinchón and wife of the viceroy of Peru. When the beautiful countess lay languishing and feverish on her deathbed sometime around 1630, she was given a dose of a local “fever bark” and, surprisingly, recovered. So thankful was she for this miraculous cure that, the story goes, she returned to Spain to dispense the bark to the suffering of Europe. It may all sound somewhat fanciful, but the story was enough for the Swedish botanist Linnaeus to name both the tree and the genus after the countess (although he managed to drop the first “h” in the process, so it became *Cinchona*). It is the bark of the cinchona tree, and the powerful antimalarial quinine compounds it contains, that is famously the bitter flavoring in tonic water. Of course this did not happen overnight; the history of the links between cinchona, quinine, malaria, tonic

water, and gin are much more complex and more fascinating than one might suspect, as *Just the Tonic* shows.

Like all the best books focusing on single foods or drinks, the fun is in the broader contextualization. Together, co-authors Kim Walker (student of the history of plant medicines) and Mark Nesbitt (curator of the Economic Botany Collection at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, London) open up a series of different worlds to introduce us to the history of tonic water. They explore the nature of malaria and the slow voyage of discovery that led to the understanding of its transmission. We are also treated to a natural history of the tree itself, which, from the seventeenth century, was in great demand in Europe for treating fevers of all sorts. Indeed, when the Parisian pharmacist Auguste Delondre first set eyes on a specimen in the Peruvian Andes, he remarked: “That magnificent tree. For so long I had seen it in my dreams and now it was before me” (p.11). Long before the nature and causation of malaria were understood (early in the twentieth century) and long before the workings of quinine in blocking the actions of the malaria-causing parasite in the blood were appreciated (even now not perfectly understood), cinchona and its derivative quinine were being taken as both “preservative” and treatment for malaria.

Just the Tonic brings together three strands to tell a single story, mixing well-informed historical narrative and quirky anecdote. While the first part of the book focuses on quinine and its use against malaria, the second explores the cultural history of the most popular medium for administering the drug; that is, via carbonated water. In the process, we are treated to a (very) brief history of medicinal mineral waters, the rise of “aerated” or soda waters from the late eighteenth century, and the proliferation of “restorative” and “medicinal” tonic beverages—some highly alcoholic, others directed at the temperance movement—in the nineteenth century. These drinks were promoted, variously, as preventives, cures, and convalescent remedies; as stimulants either to the appetite (aperitifs) or to the digestion (digestives); and, eventually, as medicinal “tonics” and refreshing drinks in tropical climes.

The third and final part recounts the history of gin, in particular in its combination with tonic. This is perhaps better known, but the authors nonetheless manage to relate some curious occurrences along the way, such as the technologies used in procuring the necessary ice in the pre-refrigeration age. Throughout, the authors have aimed for a “magazine” style of presentation, with short articles and even shorter text-boxes inserted at regular intervals. If the overall impression is on the erratic side, this approach does have the virtue of allowing them to cover a wide range of topics. The asides are distracting but frequently fascinating (in a frustrating sort of