

Minamata: How a Japanese corporation poisoned a community and an American photographer fought to expose it

Jason Quill, Richard Phillips
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Minamata, directed by artist and film producer Andrew Levitas (*Georgetown*), is about the industrial poisoning of a Japanese fishing village by the Chisso chemical company, and the struggle, beginning in 1971, by famed photo-essayist W. Eugene Smith to reveal the disastrous human consequences of this corporate crime.

Between 1951 and 1968, Chisso dumped thousands of tons of untreated wastewater containing the highly-toxic methylmercury into Minamata Bay in southwest Japan, poisoning local fish and other sea life.

Local residents, having always eaten fish from the bay, noticed strange behaviour and illness amongst cats in the 1950s, and then, in 1956, the first human cases appeared.

In the years that followed thousands of residents, including children suffered muscle weakness, disability, insanity, coma and death from severe mercury poisoning, with the company denying any responsibility for the health catastrophe.

Today, 2,283 people have been officially recognised as patients and it is widely acknowledged that over 75,000 people suffered from Minamata mercury poisoning. Over 1,700 lawsuits are still ongoing.

Minamata is a forceful examination of Chisso's ruthless attempts to prevent any exposure of its operations and the suffering of its victims. Based on the book *Minamata: A Warning to the World*, by W. Eugene Smith and Aileen Mioko, the 115-minute film has brought its director into conflict with MGM, the movie's North American distributor.

Levitas's movie was completed in late 2019 and premiered at the Berlin Film Festival in early 2020 and was supposed to be released in the US and the UK in February 2021. This did not occur.

MGM, notwithstanding a handful of international screenings this year, has "buried" the film, refusing to announce a North American release date because of the alleged "personal problems" of the film's lead actor Johnny Depp. We will return to MGM's outrageous censorship below.

Minamata opens with Smith (Depp) in the process of photographing "Tomoko Uemura in Her Bath," his acclaimed shot of a mother cradling her severely deformed, naked daughter, who is afflicted by Minamata disease, in a traditional Japanese bath.

The extraordinarily moving black-and-white image, later considered by many as one of Smith's greatest achievements, along with others from the Minamata series published by *Life* magazine, brought to American and international audiences the horror of Chisso's mercury poisoning.

The film then flashes back to a year earlier. Smith, a semi-recluse in his Manhattan loft, is at a creative impasse. Alienated from his former

wife and children, the acclaimed photographer is frustrated with publishers, still suffering post-traumatic stress from serious wounds and harrowing experiences in World War II and drinking heavily. (Sara Fishko's 2015 documentary, *The Jazz Loft According to W. Eugene Smith*, is a valuable companion piece to Levitas's movie [see: WSWs review and interview with the director.]

Aware of his socially conscious photographic work, Aileen Mioko (Minami Bages) approaches Smith to help expose the situation in Minamata. "There's a resistance on the ground but we need global attention," she says.

At first reluctant, Smith eventually decides to approach long-time collaborator and *Life* magazine editor Robert Hayes (Bill Nighy) and insists the latter send him to Japan in order to blow the story open.

On arrival, Smith discovers that the villagers, after years of fighting Chisso, are exhausted and intimidated. Armed with as many cameras as the villagers could find, and a makeshift dark-room, Smith sets about winning the villagers' confidence and gathering evidence against the company.

Smith, Aileen and activist Kiyoshi (Ryo Kase) visit the Chisso company hospital in disguise and photograph those suffering the worst of the disease. They also uncover documents showing that the company hid the findings of private research, proving the river water was indeed poisonous for over 15 years.

Chisso's president, Junichi Nojima (Jun Kunimura), is aware of Smith's arrival in the community and tries a number of tactics—including bribery and physical violence—to dissuade or block the photographer's work.

Running parallel with Smith's efforts is another group representing a minority of victims still determined to fight the company. Though some are afraid of challenging the company, group leader Mitsuo Yamazaki (Hiroyuki Sanada), in a moving scene, urges them on. "This is not just about this town," he declares. "Big companies invade small towns all over the world and pollute their existence.... It's happened before, and it will happen again!"

Smith eventually wins the trust of Tomoko Uemura's mother and is finally allowed to take the soon to be famous photograph. This and other outstanding Minamata images published by *Life* made up Smith's last photo-essay before his death in 1978.

Minamata makes clear that the disaster that hit the southwestern Japanese fishing community was not a one-off. The film concludes with an extended list of similar tragedies in the decades since the Minamata disaster: mercury pollution in Indonesia, radiation in Chernobyl and Fukushima, toxic mine waste poisoning in Africa,

Latin and South America, the lead poisoning of Flint water supplies in Michigan and numerous other cases.

Reviews of *Minamata* have been mostly positive but there have been some sour responses by critics from *Indiewire* and the UK-based *Independent* and the *Telegraph*. Underlying their critiques is an insistence that no one should get too emotional about the disaster, let alone be passionately committed to exposing the plight of the Minamata victims. Any filmmaker venturing outside this framework is beyond the pale.

Indiewire critic Eric Kohn, for example, denounces the film as a “mopey drama” in an article headlined, “Johnny Depp’s Gonzo Performance Can’t Rescue an Overzealous Biopic.”

The “occasional poignant observation can’t salvage a movie trying this hard to tug every heartstring at its disposal,” Kohn declares, and accuses the film of “defaulting to histrionics.”

Geoffrey McNab in the *Independent* says that the film “pulls in contradictory directions” and gives it two stars. “It can’t work out whether it’s a crusading social drama or the story of a troubled artist’s redemption. The result is a film that neither engages nor moves the viewer in the way that might have been expected.”

The *Telegraph* declares *Minamata* is a “self-glorifying” biopic and accuses Levitas of “shaping the story to flatter Smith with a fairly groanworthy redemption arc.”

Contrary to these arrogant and self-satisfied claims, *Minamata*, is a passionate and thoroughly objective work and one that thoughtfully shows how Smith’s determination to expose Chisso’s crimes, and the corporation’s victims, reinvigorated his creative spirit.

While it is not possible here to critically examine the depth and significance of all Smith’s work (see the International Center for Photography’s online collection), his contribution to photography—as a powerful journalistic tool and artistic medium—is significant and underpinned by a profound humanity.

Smith’s post-war photo-essays—*Spanish Village* (1951), *Nurse Midwife* (1951), *Country Doctor* (1954) and others—established a new paradigm in contemporary photojournalism.

Above all, Smith was driven by a passionate belief that fighting to expose the truth could animate others and change society for the better. As he once said, “A photo is a small voice, at best, but sometimes—just sometimes—one photograph, or a group of them can lure our senses into awareness... a catalyst to thought.”

While these sentiments strongly underpin *Minamata*, Levitas now confronts a media corporation hostile to these concerns and is using an ongoing #MeToo-style campaign against Depp to “bury” the film and punish all those involved in its production.

In 2018, Depp’s former wife Amber Heard, penned an op-ed piece in the *Washington Post*, claiming she was victim of domestic abuse. This set off the usual media and career-trashing hysteria against Depp, who was not named in the *Post* story. None of the incidents alleged by Heard have ever been the subject of any criminal investigations, let alone charges.

Depp was quickly removed from the scheduled next production of *Pirates of the Caribbean* and then last year was asked to “resign” his role as Gellert Grindelwald in the third movie of the *Fantastic Beasts* franchise. Depp’s removal came after he lost a libel case against the Murdoch-owned, UK-based *Sun* tabloid after it published sensationalist material denouncing him as a “wife-beater.”

Last week Levitas made public a letter he sent to MGM condemning the giant entertainment corporation. “MGM [in early 2020] was intent on bringing to light the suffering of the thousands of victims of one of

the most heinous industrial pollution incidents the world has ever seen.

“In re-exposing their pain in the sharing of their story, this long marginalized community hoped for only one thing—to lift history from the shadows so that other innocents would never be afflicted as they have... and it seemed in that moment, with MGM’s partnership, a decades-long wish was finally coming true,” the letter states.

“Now, imagine the devastation when they learned this past week, that despite an already successful global roll out, MGM had decided to ‘bury the film’ (acquisitions head Mr. Sam Wollman’s words) because MGM was concerned about the possibility that the personal issues of an actor in the film could reflect negatively upon them and that from MGM’s perspective the victims and their families were secondary to this.”

Levitas recalled speaking to Mr. Uemura whose daughter “suffered every single day of her life” because a “large faceless corporation didn’t live up to their moral obligation to humanity, decency and righteousness.” His letter demanded MGM executives speak to Uemura and other Minamata victims and “explain why you think an actor’s personal life is more important than their dead children, their siblings, their parents, and all victims of industrial pollution and corporate malfeasance.”

The letter noted that “people all over the world are victimized by corporations who do not value them or consider them as real” and urged MGM to reverse its decision “to actively hinder the distribution and promotion of *Minamata*.” It concluded with a YouTube video of one of the victims—Shinobu Sakamoto—talking about her experiences.

MGM has responded with a contemptuous and anodyne statement. “The film was acquired for release via American International Pictures, a division of MGM which handles day-and-date releases. *Minamata* continues to be among future AIP releases and at this time, the film’s US release date is TBA [to be announced].” Any decision by MGM, currently being taken over by Amazon, will undoubtedly be influenced by economic calculations.



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