

Acclaimed photographer Stephen Dupont denounces MGM's "burying" of *Minamata* in North America

Richard Phillips
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Minamata, the latest film by director, producer and artist Andrew Levitas, was released this week in Japan, following successful screenings in Australia, New Zealand, the UK, Ireland, Russia and at several European film festivals in recent months.

Levitas's 115-minute film is an authoritative and sensitive dramatisation of the decades-long industrial poisoning of the Minamata community in Japan by the Chisso Corporation and the struggle by photo-essayist W. Eugene Smith and his wife Aileen Moiko Smith from 1971 to 1973 to expose this crime. Johnny Depp, one of the film's producers, is compelling as Smith, backed by strong performances from a primarily British and Japanese cast, with cinematography by Benoît Delhomme and music by Ryuichi Sakamoto.

While tens of thousands of people have so far watched *Minamata*, and reviews have been overwhelmingly positive, MGM has not yet released the film in North America.

In July, Andrew Levitas published an open letter revealing that MGM had decided to "bury the film" because it was "concerned about the possibility that the personal issues of an actor in the film [Depp] could reflect negatively upon them." The popular actor, who has been subjected to a poisonous #MeToo allegation in the Murdoch media and elsewhere, has recently accused Hollywood studios of "boycotting" him.

During a September 22 press conference at the San Sebastian International Film Festival in Spain, according to the Associated Press, Depp denounced the "cancel culture," which he described as "this instant rush to judgment based on essentially what amounts to polluted air." The actor, who received the prestigious Donastia Award at the festival, warned that the situation has "got so far out of hand that I can assure you, no one is safe. Not one of you, so long as someone is willing to say one thing."

MGM owns *Minamata*'s distribution rights for North America, which includes the US, Canada, Mexico, Central America and most of the Caribbean, with a population of nearly 600 million people. The studio's censorious actions are being opposed in social media campaigns, by a petition and through hundreds of letters to MGM management. Photojournalists and documentary photographers who have been inspired by Eugene Smith (1918–1978) are also speaking out over MGM's actions.

The following interview was conducted with Australian photographer and filmmaker Stephen Dupont who bluntly

denounces MGM's failure to release *Minamata* in North America.

Dupont's work has been featured in the *New Yorker*, *Aperture*, *Newsweek*, *Time*, *GQ*, *Esquire*, *GEO*, *Le Figaro*, *Liberation*, *Sunday Times Magazine*, *Independent*, *Guardian*, *New York Times Magazine*, *Stern*, *Australian Financial Review Magazine* and *Vanity Fair* and exhibited in Paris, London, New York and other major cities. He currently has a major exhibition in Canberra, "Are We Dead Yet" on the recent bushfires in Australia and the long-term impact of climate change.

Dupont has been a war photographer for three decades, reporting from Afghanistan in the 1990s, prior to and during the US-led invasion in 2001. In 2005, while embedded with US Marines outside Kandahar, he photographed and then released, images of troops burning the bodies of Taliban fighters. The horrifying images of this war crime further fuelled popular anger inside Afghanistan and internationally against the ongoing US-led occupation.

Dupont's striking images have been rewarded with numerous international prizes, too many to list here. His most cherished award, however, was winning a W. Eugene Smith Grant for Humanistic Photography in 2007.

We began the conversation by discussing his impressions of *Minamata* and Smith's influence on his work.

Stephen Dupont: I really liked *Minamata*, which I saw in a cinema and found it quite powerful and sad. It was quite personal because I won the W. Eugene Smith Grant in 2007, which was an incredible honour. This was one award that I'd always dreamed of winning and it was for my work in Afghanistan.

It was announced at the time my daughter was born and I still remember the phone call from David Friend, one of the judges. He was the creative director of *Vanity Fair* and an important person in the photography world. It was an incredible feeling and a great honour.

Gene Smith was someone whose work I'd grown up with and, more than anyone else in my late teens and early 20s, inspired me to become a photographer. I was carrying that connection to Smith with me as I watched *Minamata*.

I didn't want to be too critical of the dramatisation—it's not a documentary—but I felt Johnny Depp captured the personality of Smith really well—his movements, approach to photography, the darkroom work. I can imagine Smith being that kind of dark,

broody, at times arrogant kind of personality, and Depp was believable and convincing.

I also learnt a lot more about Minamata and what happened and hadn't realised that it kind of killed Smith in the end. I was quite shocked about some of these revelations. The film was an honest depiction.

Richard Phillips: Could you speak about the scenes where Smith was grappling with post-traumatic stress?

SD: This was completely convincing and I can vouch for that personally. I've had my own dealings with PTSD, trauma and struggling with things that I've photographed and experienced, much like he did. This part of the movie was certainly confronting enough to be convincing. I also thought about the *Jazz Loft* documentary, which captured the essence of Smith in New York. It revealed the chaos and shambolic way in which he lived very well.

Smith was dealing with the trauma of what he'd seen and the psychological blowback of that iconic scene of the mercury-poisoned Minamata girl in the bath—*Tomoko and Mother in Her Bath*—that everyone knows, or should know. Gene Smith struggled a lot with that entire body of work and a lifetime of work. He brought a lot of PTSD from World War II and in addition how he was treated by *Life* magazine. This is portrayed in the film and it won't necessarily be picked up by many viewers, but photographers understand it. He was really angry that *Life* was becoming a sort of tabloidy lifestyle magazine and not taking his approach and the sort of work he was doing seriously enough.

Having said all that, there was also the matter of his own self-destruction, with the drinking and drugs. He was obviously a complicated figure, but he was self-medicating to the point where no matter how bad the trauma you begin to blame everyone else for your situation. He was carrying a lifetime of damage and he couldn't see a way out anymore. It was a very sad ending for the most important documentary photographer to have ever set foot on the planet [see: "W. Eugene Smith's Warning to the World"].

There's no question in my mind about his impact and influence on generations of photographers, which still endure today. So many photographers—young and old—have been inspired by his vision and his philosophy. He was the master of the photo essay, of the documentary and of black-and-white photography. There were so many great and wonderful things that Smith contributed to the world of photography.

RP: At one point in *Minamata*, Smith—Depp—says, "The cover up [by Chiosso Corporation] is going to be as much of the story, as the story itself." There are some parallels here. We have a situation where MGM has decided to "bury the film" in North America because of so-called reputational issues with Johnny Depp. What's your response to this?

SD: It's complete bullshit and shouldn't be used to stop the film being released in the US. Regardless of what Depp is alleged to have done in his personal life—and there are just allegations about what happened during a marriage breakdown—he's just an actor. The big picture here is the film, its story and the victims of the mercury poisoning. MGM shouldn't be crossing that boundary. Don't shoot the messenger is what I'd say.

MGM's response reflects the world we are living right now,

which in my opinion, uses things like #MeToo and blows all sorts of allegations out of proportion. Any kind of negativities in people's lives are seized on.

MGM is not just punishing Depp but everyone else, the other actors, the director, the cinematographer, writers, all those involved.

Even if the allegations were true, I wouldn't change my opinion. With Depp what we're talking about is a marriage breakdown, something that lots of people go through all around the world, the only difference is that they're not celebrities. It's a sad state of censorship in a far too critical world where, god forbid, if you say or do anything the wrong way, or make a mistake, and you're crucified every which way. Let's get these things into perspective.

RP: The film makes clear that Minamata was not a one-off and ends with an unstated challenge to the audience. It's not a happy ending.

SD: Big business corporations have always gotten away with this sort of thing and will continue to do so unless they're stopped. That this film highlights this once again is important. It resonates with audiences and compels them to say—"We can't let this happen again, we have to stand up, protest and get our voices heard"—which is good.

We need to stop the big corporations from getting away with the industrial destruction and murder of communities, which is happening all over the world—in the Amazon, Papua New Guinea, with gold mining and the poisoning of rivers. It's disgraceful and criminal. Once again, it's the power of that one percent who seem to rule the world and are usually not held accountable for the atrocities they commit.

Everyone, not just photographers, should see *Minamata* because it's dealing with big issues even bigger than photography. It's a film that highlights the mercury poisoning of a whole community, which continued for many, many years and whose effects are still present today. Everyone needs to acknowledge and never forget this and similar tragedies and fight to prevent them happening again.



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