

Documentary photographer Jack Picone calls on MGM to release *Minamata* in North America

Richard Phillips
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The following is the second in a series of discussions with leading photographers, and others about *Minamata*, a new drama directed by Andrew Levitas. The 115-minute movie is about the industrial poisoning of fishing communities in Minamata, Japan by the Chisso Corporation and the struggle during the early 1970s by acclaimed photo-essayist W. Eugene Smith (Johnny Depp) and his wife Aileen Mioko Smith (Minami Bages) to expose this corporate crime.

Minamata has been released in several countries, where it has received overwhelmingly positive reviews, and will start screening in French cinemas this week. Its Japanese premier was held late last month in Minamata, Kumamoto Prefecture, and in the first four days of its national release was watched by over 41,000 people.

While MGM purchased the film's North American distribution rights following the latter's international premier at the Berlin film festival in early 2020, the studio has not released *Minamata* in any North American cinemas.

Last July, company executives told director Levitas that the company was “burying” 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.” Depp has been subjected to poisonous #MeToo allegations in the Murdoch media and elsewhere and recently accused Hollywood studios of “boycotting” him.

While MGM claims that *Minamata*, completed in late 2019, is on a list of forthcoming releases, it refuses to indicate when such a release might take place. This is an outrageous attack on all those involved in the film's production, including Aileen Mioko Smith, who was co-author of the book on which it was based, as well as the victims and families of those poisoned by the Chisso Corporation.

Jack Picone, a multi award-winning Australian-born, Bangkok-based documentary photographer, is one of many photographers angered over MGM's suppression of this passionate and intelligent film.

Picone worked for about three decades in various war zones, covering eight wars in the 1990s, including Armenia, Yugoslavia, Somalia, Rwanda, Palestine, Iraq, Liberia, Sudan, Angola and what was then Soviet Central Asia. He is a co-founder of Australia's REPORTAGE photography festival and his work has

been published by *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Libération*, *Der Spiegel*, *L'Express*, *Granta*, the *Independent* and the *Observer*.

In 2013, the REPORTAGE festival was censored by Destination NSW, the New South Wales tourist authority, which blocked the planned public projection of images onto two large screens near the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney. The show contained images by many high-profile international documentary photographers—James Nachtwey, Jodi Bieber, Francesco Zizolla and many others—as well as local photojournalists. The tourist authority management ruled that the images were “too distressing” and not “family friendly” and should not be shown.

Picone recently spoke with the WSWS by phone from Thailand and began by discussing *Minamata*'s artistic strengths and its contemporary significance. This is an edited version of our conversation.

Jack Picone: A lot of films about journalists and photojournalists are over-romanticised and one-dimensional. *Minamata* wasn't that at all and was as close to reality, within the creativity and artistic license of making a dramatic film, that any documentation of that story could be.

Richard Phillips: What resonated the most for you?

JP: I was a bit concerned that it might smack of the great white saviour going into an Asian culture to save them, but it was nothing like that.

I'm a bit sensitive to that sort of thing because I covered the Rwanda genocide in 1994 and, in 2019, went back and a documentary [*Rwanda: Beyond the Swamp*, directed by Fiona Turner (2020)] was made about my return. The filmmakers were award-winning people, and it was an objective film—it didn't have any of this “white saviour” stuff—but they couldn't get anywhere with it. The rejections were based on this idea that it was about an old white guy in Africa telling his story. This was the general reaction and it couldn't get a screening anywhere.

As you know, the original *Minamata* story was a collaboration, and the film shows that it was really Aileen who approached Smith and gave him the idea to pursue this story when his career was receding and in a difficult place. These sorts of collaborations are the best because they bring different cultures and sets of ideas to the table so the story can be developed in a more three-dimensional way.

Johnny Depp, as Smith, wasn't a hero as such in the story and

the film shows him as a troubled character who had to be convinced to involve himself in the project. There was a collaborative dynamic, with the common goal of telling the story and holding corporations like Chisso accountable for what they did. I knew the original story quite well, having read about it early in my career, and then later studying it in depth for my PhD. I also loved the way it was filmed, the desaturated colour, like old colour film negative.

RP: You worked many years in war zones. Were those flashback scenes convincing?

JP: Yes, and the blue filter effects and flashbacks had an acuity of reality, but were quite minimal. It could have easily gone in a clichéd direction and been all about Depp playing the war trauma that Eugene Smith suffered. [Director] Levitas could have heavily concentrated on this, but he didn't.

Of course, this issue shouldn't be minimised. I suffered the same thing after Rwanda for years and nearly drank myself to death because of the stuff I saw and photographed. It's real, but the film kept its balance and concentrated on the bigger story, which was the plight of the people in Minamata.

That's why I think the issue regarding Depp and MGM's failure so far not to release the film in America is wrong. I feel Johnny Depp's alleged improprieties are misplaced and not as big as the corporate industrial pollution that caused incalculable pain and claimed a multitude of lives in Minamata. Similar crimes are still happening today.

If you join the dots between when the Minamata story happened in the early '70s and 2021, corporate malfeasance and destruction continue to this day. This is bigger than a marriage breakup between a man and woman.

We don't even know what went on—it happened behind closed doors—and even if it was really bad, is that reason enough to kill this story? Depp hasn't been found guilty of anything. How is that a reason for what MGM is doing? Do they have another agenda? Is it #MeToo or something even more nefarious?

RP: You mention the ongoing industrial pollution by major corporations. The film ends with a rolling list of such crimes.

JP: Yes, in some ways that had a bigger impact on me than the whole film. It wasn't like someone just pricked my skin with a pin, it was like they put a knife through my heart. The corporations are still doing it—the same lies, the same greed, the same nefarious behaviour, all in the name of making more money and at any cost.

The Chisso company was polluting the sea around in Minamata and, as we know, the ocean is a thermostat for the whole world. When you pour in all this crap, it alters the delicate, complicated balance of the ocean and increases the temperature, which in turn is directly linked to global warming. Now we have agrochemicals, plastics, mining and other things ending up in the world's oceans.

I did an assignment in Sulawesi [Indonesia] for *Mare*, a German magazine, in 2002. It was about illegal gold mining going on in the mountains of Manado, with alarming amounts of mercury being used in the processing. The conditions for the miners were appalling. The mercury was being put in cesspits, but it leaked into the water table beneath those and then into mountain streams. It didn't result in the sort of birth defects seen in Minamata, but there were many poisonings and deaths and miscarriages.

RP: Eugene Smith speaks about photography being a small voice, but one that can sometimes bring about progressive change.

JP: He was right. Documentary and photojournalism during the civil rights movement in the US was instrumental in mobilising people for Martin Luther King's speech in front of the Abraham Lincoln memorial in Washington. Researchers have also established that the images from the Vietnam War were a catalyst, not singly but in agency with other journalism, and turned popular opinion against the war.

The other quote in the film that I really liked was Smith's statement about Native Americans who believed that if you took their photograph then you captured their soul. Of course, I knew this, but loved the way Smith extends this and says that it also takes a part of the photographer's soul.

Many photographers suffer incredible trauma when put into war situations or something like Minamata. Not everyone does—Philip Griffith Jones was a bit dismissive of it—but James Nachtwey told me that he suffered badly. It exists and people often forget that. I've been told that the camera is like an emotional shield, but not for me. In fact, the camera was like a microscope into the hurt and pain that I was documenting, tattooing it into your memory and recalling it at the worst possible times.

RP: *Minamata* also establishes and revives the idea of what a serious photojournalist should be.

JP: Eugene Smith worked in a very immersive way. There was a power balance between him and those he was photographing, he was very ethical in his approach.

Aileen Mioko, of course, is the reason the whole Minamata project happened. She had a lot of creative input and was co-author of the original story. She gave birth to it. It's almost as if she's the architect and Eugene Smith was the draughtsman, and a very good one at that.

While photojournalism is for various reasons hugely compromised today, Smith's approach is still possible as long as you can find a way to finance it.



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