

More photographers oppose MGM's refusal to release *Minamata* in North America

“We confront a tsunami of issues” that “need to be exposed and documented by serious photojournalists”

Richard Phillips
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This is the fourth in a series of discussions about *Minamata*, the new movie by Andrew Levitas, in addition to our original review. The film, featuring Johnny Depp, focuses on the industrial poisoning of Japanese fishing communities in Minamata by the Chisso Corporation and the courageous work by acclaimed photo-essayist W. Eugene Smith (Depp) and his wife Aileen Mioko Smith to expose this crime before a global audience during the early 1970s.

The first of these conversations was with photographer Stephen Dupont, a winner of the W. Eugene Smith Grant for Humanistic Photography in 2007; the second with acclaimed Australian documentary photographer Jack Picone; and the third with Kevin Eugene Smith, a lawyer, former television producer and journalist, and the manager of the photographic estate of his father, W. Eugene Smith.

While *Minamata* has been released in many countries around the world, MGM, which purchased the rights to distribute the film in North America, has not screened it in the US. The company, which is being taken over by Amazon, has refused to give any indication when it will be released.

In July, director Levitas issued an open letter revealing that he had been told by MGM's acquisitions head Sam Wollman that the company was “burying” *Minamata* over concerns that “the personal issues of Johnny Depp,” could reflect negatively on MGM. The company's arrogant and censorious actions constitute 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 Chisso.

The following edited conversations are with David Dare Parker and John Hulme.

David Dare Parker is an award-winning, Western Australian-based photographer and a co-founder of the REPORTAGE Festival, a member of the SOUTH photo collective. His photographs have been published by Le Monde, Stern, Australian Geographic, the Bulletin, the New York Times, Fortune, the Guardian, Bloomberg and TIME magazine with assignments across the globe, including Turkey, Indonesia, Israel, East Timor, Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Parker also works as a motion picture stills photographer and has produced images for leading performing arts companies.

Richard Phillips: W. Eugene Smith has inspired thousands of people around the world to become photographers. What influence did his work have on you and what did you think of his portrayal in *Minamata*?

David Dare Parker: Gene Smith was one of my heroes. I have the original *Minamata* book, so the movie brought all those black and white images back to life for me. I loved the film—the cinematography is extraordinary—and given the lack of publicity for it in Australia I was very

lucky to see it in a cinema. I caught it in Perth the day before its last screening.

There were few well-known Australian photojournalists when I was a kid, so our heroes were international figures. There was Margaret Bourke-White, David Douglas Duncan, Robert Capa and Don McCullin, but Gene Smith was the one I looked to the most. I got my hands on all of his books and I read his biography.

Smith was my hero—a flawed hero—and a complex figure, but most photojournalists are complex individuals. You're away from your family, taking on difficult and often psychologically demanding stories, and in the process, I suppose, you become complex.

In Smith's case, there was his struggle—physically and psychologically—to overcome what he suffered during the war, which is portrayed well in the film. Johnny Depp did a great job and gave a real sense of what I imagined Gene Smith was like as a man. I also loved the fact that all the characters in the movie were complex, and this felt real.

Smith was a brilliant photojournalist and probably the best that *Life* magazine had, and it gave him the opportunity to take his work to a high level. Back then *Life* was like the television of the day and people like Margaret Bourke-White and David Douglas Duncan and later Gene Smith were superstar photographers. They were almost like television celebrities and widely known, something you don't have today.

RP: What do you think about MGM's decision not to announce a North American release date for *Minamata*, claiming it's because of so-called reputational issues with Johnny Depp?

DDP: I didn't know much about the issues with Johnny Depp and his former wife Amber Heard. I'd heard rumours about MGM not getting behind the movie, which is a shame, but it appears to be a “he said/she said” situation in a train wreck of a marriage. To not release a movie because of this is ridiculous. Why should the film and its director suffer because of the alleged behaviour of one of its actors?

I also work in the film industry, but if the quality of a film is to be judged, or not even released, according to the alleged moral values of one of the actors, then you're not going to get too many films made. If you're going to work with people you can't judge them based on gossip or innuendo. If there's been domestic violence, then obviously that can't be forgiven, but none of this is proven. At this stage there's nothing. The *Minamata* movie and the story that it tells are still relevant and much more important than all this.

RP: Yes, and there's a whole generation that knows nothing about Chisso's mercury poisoning of a whole community. They need to know the story.

DDP: For serious photojournalists, your first responsibility is to the

story, to the people you are photographing and to get that story out there to inform people and have some influence on public opinion.

I know that “bearing witness” is a bit of a cliché, but the aim of serious photojournalists is not to win awards. In the 1980s and ‘90s there was a kind of award-chasing culture, which I backed away from. I think it’s healthier that we don’t have that so much now, and even though we don’t get the budgets we used to, there’s a much better atmosphere in which photojournalists get on with their work, and for the right reasons.

Ultimately, you want your work seen by as many as people as possible, but it shouldn’t be about the photographer, but what’s in front of their lens.

RP: The advent of smart phones and instant communications, however, has made it increasingly difficult for photojournalists to make a living from their work.

DDP: To be honest, you can’t really do it, unless you’re living in New York and have a close relationship with something like the *New York Times*. I could never financially rely on photojournalism as a career and had to mix it up with the film industry assignments. I get some work from the *Times*, but not long assignments and, of course, you can’t travel now because of COVID-19 or bear the cost of two weeks quarantining.

I took on an assignment reporting on the situation facing the Rohingya [in Myanmar] and it cost me \$US5,000 to do that. One publication offered me \$300 for the photographs and some sort of exclusivity. In the past you could offer \$1,000 just for the publication to look at your photographs and magazines like *Stern* would cover the costs of your flights.

RP: Eugene Smith 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.” How would you respond to that?

DDP: I think that’s true. Gene Smith immersed himself in the communities he was photographing which a lot of us, in our early days, didn’t have the opportunity to do. There have been photographs I’ve taken where my relationship with someone was just a 250th of a second.

What I love about digital, as opposed to film, which I have no nostalgia for, is that you can immediately show what you’ve photographed to the person. You can have a conversation and learn something about them. They can see what you’re trying to achieve and not just someone with a machine in front of their face, which is good. It’s almost like putting the camera on a tripod—an emotional tripod—and taking the time to think about what you’re doing. The most important thing is what’s happening in front of you, to be more responsible and to get it right.

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John Hulme, a UK-born, Northern Thailand-based photographer, has spent decades documenting social issues in Europe, Thailand, Burma, India, Bangladesh and Japan, focusing in particular on the plight of so-called “illegal migrants” and other brutally exploited workers.

Hulme’s photographs have been published in numerous books, magazines and newspapers, including, the Independent on Sunday, the Financial Times and the Sydney Morning Herald. His work has been widely exhibited in the UK, the US and Thailand, his best-known photo-essays and exhibitions include “Burma’s Forgotten War” and “In Search of a Job—any Job” about Burmese migrant workers in Thailand.

Richard Phillips: You’ve watched *Minamata*, which is now showing in Thailand. What’s your assessment and what do you think of MGM’s refusal to release it in the North America?

John Hulme: I’d already heard about the movie and, being a photographer, knew something about the Minamata story and the legendary photo-essays of W. Eugene Smith. I was really looking forward to watching it and wasn’t disappointed.

It’s a beautifully crafted work, the cinematography is fabulous with images Eugene Smith would have approved of. Johnny Depp is thoroughly convincing, and the fact that he decided to take on such a film is remarkable. The movie also took me deeper into how and why Eugene

Smith and his wife Aileen came to document Chisso’s mercury poisoning of a community. I hadn’t known that company goons had nearly beaten Smith to death. That was a revelation to me.

I always wondered how Smith was able to capture the intimate, deeply personal moments of the Minamata victims and their families. I thought you’d need to be almost invisible to achieve these sorts of intimate connections. He wasn’t invisible, of course, but it was his patient work to be accepted by the community and win their trust and his consummate professionalism that created the emotional intensity and humanity of the photographs. The film gave a real sense of that.

It’s a tragic irony that fifty years after Eugene Smith exposed Chisso’s crimes, his son Kevin is fighting MGM in a battle that parallels that waged by his father against Chisso and to win justice for the Minamata victims.

Why is MGM doing this, what’s it trying to achieve? I’m completely puzzled. The film is not about an American corporation? Can it really be all about Depp’s marriage breakdown? Messy marriage breakdowns involving famous actors are hardly big news. It doesn’t make any sense.

Whatever the reasons, MGM’s actions are censorship and highlight the total indifference of this major corporation to the plight of the Minamata survivors and their families, Aileen Mioko Smith, who gave the filmmakers the rights to make the film, and everyone involved in the film’s production. MGM clearly doesn’t give a damn about any of this.

The bottom line for MGM and the overpaid executives who run the corporation is not the artistic honesty and power of the message of the films they distribute, but their profits and share values. People everywhere should demand MGM immediately release the movie in North America.

RP: You’ve closely studied Gene Smith’s work. How would you describe his approach, and its importance?

JH: I recently came across a Studs Terkel radio interview with Eugene Smith and Aileen recorded in the mid-1970s, just after their Minamata book was published. It’s well worth listening to, not least to hear Smith and Aileen’s voices and their commitment to expose the Minamata disaster.

Smith was already established as the pioneer of the photo-essay, but the Minamata project, which I suspect was the first major exposure of industrial poisoning of a community and its terrible human consequences, established a new benchmark that others have followed.

Aileen was an accomplished photographer herself and, as Smith says in the interview, her images are some of the finest in the book. Their three-year commitment to the project, which was originally supposed to be three months, was extraordinary and points to the time and care needed in the field to get the sort of honest images necessary to illustrate complex stories and inform and hopefully move the viewer.

The Minamata story it’s not just a piece of history. The survivors and their families are still suffering. We confront a tsunami of issues, from the lead poisoning of waters supplies in Flint [Michigan] to industrial pollution of the oceans. These need to be exposed and documented by serious photojournalists.

There’s a real need and thirst—a real pushback sentiment among young people around the world—for this.



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