W. Eugene Smith Memorial Grant winner Jane Evelyn Atwood opposes MGM's *Minamata* censorship

Richard Phillips
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The statement published below is from internationally acclaimed photographer Jane Evelyn Atwood, the first winner of the prestigious W. Eugene Smith Memorial Grant, when it was established in 1980. It is the fifth article in a series about *Minamata*, the new movie by Andrew Levitas and starring Johnny Depp, in addition to our original review.

Minamata focuses on the industrial poisoning of Japanese fishing communities in Minamata by the Chisso Corporation and the courageous efforts by acclaimed photo-essayist Eugene Smith (Depp) and his wife Aileen Mioko Smith to expose this crime before a global audience during the early 1970s.

The WSWS reviewed the movie in late July and followed this with a series of interviews. 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, Eugene Smith. The fourth article featured comments from photographers David Dare Parker and John Hulme.

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.

Jane Evelyn Atwood was born in New York and has been living in France since 1971. Regarded as one of the world's leading documentary photographers, she is the recipient of numerous prestigious awards. This includes a World Press Foundation Prize, the Grand Prix Paris Match du Photojournalisme, a Grand Prix du Portfolio de la Société Civile des Auteurs Multimédia, as well as a Grand Prix Photo Albert Kahn and a Lucie Award for Documentary Photography, to name just a few.

During her 45-year career she has published 12 books of her work, her photographs have appeared in the world's leading newspapers and magazines, and she has exhibited worldwide in solo and group exhibitions. Atwood's approach is deeply immersive, spending years on individual projects; her work is intense, empathetic and animated by a determination to expose social oppression and injustice.

This includes documenting the life of Parisian prostitutes, the plight of blind children in France, Japan, the US and other countries, a monumental ten-year photographic study of the brutal treatment of women prisoners in Eastern and Western Europe and the US, a four-year project on landmine destruction in Cambodia, Angola, Kosovo, Mozambique and Afghanistan, and other projects.

As one writer commented, Atwood's photographs "shows us repeatedly what we don't dare to look at or are afraid to know or what we might not otherwise see."

Atwood's defence of *Minamata* and her opposition to MGM's refusal to release the movie in North America is an important indication that serious artists are rightly concerned about the efforts of governments and giant corporations to silence artists and marginalise any work that might expose and challenge the rich and the powerful.

The WSWS does not share Atwood's views on #MeToo, which, notwithstanding its claims, is not in the slightest concerned about the plight of millions of female refugees or poverty-stricken working-class women. But Atwood's principled opposition to MGM's censorship of *Minamata*, her forthright defence of Johnny Depp, along with her reassertion of Eugene Smith's approach—to use "photography to expose and denounce the unacceptable"—are a welcome and valuable contribution to the fight for freedom of artistic expression.

The censorship of MINAMATA starring Johnny Depp as W. Eugene Smith

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I oppose MGM's refusal to release this film in US cinemas, because I'm against censorship. We know all too well what it leads to: censorship eventually turns against the censors themselves.

Johnny Depp has been accused of beating his last wife, the actress Amber Heard. But apparently the woman is hardly credible, his former French wife has defended Depp and, as I understand it, he has yet to be charged with anything.

Let me emphasize that the #MeToo movement is great: because of it, women who claim they've been abused are finally being heard. But from what I've read, Depp may have been set up. Apparently he's been "cancelled"—no more advertising jobs, no more acting jobs. Collateral damage of #MeToo? It is terrible and frightening that someone's career can be ruined on the basis of rumors and unfounded gossip on social media and in the mainstream press. This is an important issue for all artists.

In any event, no matter how the actor has behaved in his personal life, I'm against censoring the film—just as I'm against censoring literature, music, or art of any kind. If people don't want to see a movie because of what one of its actors is accused of (in this case, probably falsely), that's their choice. But the movie deserves to exist in its own right, as does any creative endeavor.

I can't help wondering if MGM's censorship of *Minamata* might have more to do with the subject itself—mercury poisoning—than with the reputation of the lead actor. It's also interesting to note that Depp was hardly paid for the role, and it was he who produced the film. Did he have to produce it himself in order for it to exist? Some years ago, I did a book on landmine victims. I found it impossible to obtain a sponsor, because all the countries and corporations that might have helped fund the project were—albeit completely off the record—involved in some way in the proliferation of mines, whether through manufacture, sale, trade, stockpile or use of them. They didn't want their names on a book that denounced landmines.

When today the major media outlets are owned by just a few corporations or individuals, it becomes more and more difficult for photographers working on controversial subjects to get their work published.

I became a photographer because I had seen prostitutes on the streets in Paris, where I've lived since 1971, and I was curious about them. I found them beautiful and wanted to know them. Photographing them allowed me to do that. My very first story was on a small group of women prostitutes on the Rue des Lombards. It became my first book.

Since then I've done 12 more books, each one more difficult than the last. I was censored twice—by the United States and by Morocco—because of nudity in one of my exhibitions. In Morocco, the images were carefully removed from the crates and set aside when they arrived at customs. They were reintegrated into the show only after it closed, before its return to France. In the USA I was flatly told, "We won't exhibit that here." Sometimes one can get away with showing a woman's breast, but a man's penis is almost always off limits. That's both censorship AND a double standard!

When I began my work, I knew nothing about photography and had never heard of W. Eugene Smith. In fact, I was inspired by only one photographer, Diane Arbus. I knew she had killed herself and, with a suicide in my own family, I wanted to try to understand how someone can choose death over life. I discovered Arbus through her pictures and I never forgot them. Later, when I did my first book, and especially when I became the inaugural winner of the W. Eugene Smith Award, I learned about Smith and all the other photographers whose pictures I was beginning to see. Smith's work moved me. It also highlighted the importance of using a series of images to tell a story, departing from the Cartier-Bresson approach of only one photo, or the 'decisive moment.' Smith invented (and indirectly gave me permission to do) the photographic essay: to tell stories with pictures. He used photography to expose and denounce the unacceptable, the injustices that most people ignore or don't want to know. With the mercury poisoning, he was up against a powerful and rich corporation. His pictures bore witness to the effects of the poisoning on the residents of Minamata and swayed the jury to convict those responsible. As with Smith and his book *Minamata*, a couple of my images have also made a concrete difference and helped to change the course of history.

It seems to me that this kind of engaged photography is even more important today. At a time when everyone thinks she/he is a photographer, when we are bombarded with images across social media, only serious pictures can give authenticity to a story. This kind of photography needs to be preserved and promoted—just one of many reasons why the film *Minamata* must be accessible worldwide.

Finally: as an American, I find it outrageous that the film isn't screened in the US, and I believe the excuse for censoring it is just bullshit. This is a movie that exposes an unconscionable tragedy few people know about, but everyone should. It deserves to be seen by the widest possible audience.

Jane Evelyn Atwood

Winner of the first W. Eugene Smith Memorial Grant, 1980

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