Tim Page, veteran Vietnam war photographer, opposes MGM's *Minamata* censorship

Richard Phillips
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The following discussion is with Australian-based veteran war photographer Tim Page, an enduring representative of the generation of remarkable documentary photographers who exposed the realities of the Vietnam War. This is the sixth article in a series about the controversy surrounding *Minamata*, the new movie by Andrew Levitas and starring Johnny Depp, in addition to our original review.

Minamata focuses on the decades-long 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 several interviews. The first of these was with photographer Stephen Dupont, a winner of the W. Eugene Smith Grant for Humanistic Photography in 2007; the second with 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, and the fifth, a statement by Jane Evelyn Atwood, the first winner of the prestigious Smith Memorial Grant, when it was established in 1980.

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.

UK-born Tim Page, 77, is one of many acclaimed photographers who have spoken out against MGM's suppression of *Minamata*, which this week was nominated as the Best Foreign Film at Japan's prestigious Nikkan Sports Film Awards.

Page began his 56-year photographic career in 1965 as a stringer for United Press International in Laos, before transferring to the news agency's Saigon office in Vietnam, where he also worked on assignment for *Time-Life*, *Paris Match* and the Associated Press. His images, along with those by other courageous photographers, including UK-born Larry Burrows and Philip Jones Griffiths and others, were crucial in exposing the criminality and horror of the US-led war in Vietnam.

Page was wounded four times in Vietnam, narrowly escaping death in 1966 and 1969. On the last occasion, he was seriously injured by shrapnel from an exploding land mine. He was evacuated to the US, where he underwent extensive neurosurgery and other treatment, during much of the early 1970s.

Page has received numerous honours for his work—the Robert Capa Award, the American Society of Media Photographers Award, the National Press Photographers Association Award and others. His books include, *Tim Page's Nam* (1983), *Ten Years After: Vietnam Today* (1987), *Sri Lanka* (1987), *Mid Term Report* (1995) and *Requiem* (1997). The *Requiem* photographs are on permanent display at the War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City.

In 2002, Page edited *Another Vietnam*, a unique collection of never-before-published images by Vietnamese war photographers, supporting the National Liberation Front and recording daily life for millions of ordinary people in northern Vietnam.

Page spoke with the WSWS last week about *Minamata*, praising the two-hour movie and explaining the significance of Eugene Smith's work.

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Tim Page: *Minamata* is a beautifully shot and crafted work. The low light footage is simply stunning and just keeps you there in the moment. It's rare that you get a film made about a photographer that is so meaningful and accurate in dealing with the dichotomies of being a photojournalist.

Eugene Smith was a brilliant photographer and someone who came back from the edge of disaster in the Second World War. He was seriously wounded and wrestling with all sorts of psychological trauma. The first major photograph he took after he'd recovered was of his kids, a beautiful picture, almost like the last photograph in the family of man. His war photography was just awesome and so was his work at Minamata and all his long-think essays.

The film, and his brilliant work whose today's generations know little about, makes me upset because we don't have magazines like *Life* or similar publications anymore, not even any real independent weekend magazine supplements. It's all just infotainment and shopping.

No longer are there those magazines sitting on the table, publications you carefully looked through, turning the pages, finding

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your favourite pictures and thinking about how the shot had been taken; what it meant and what happened in the seconds before and after the shot. As a photographer these were your learning points.

Everyone today has a device with endless images, but how many of these stick like glue in your head. Eugene Smith's Minamata series are part of that lexicon of images that define photography, that define history and even define our life on this planet.

Maybe I'm just lamenting something that has passed, but when I hear about *Minamata* being banned, in the sense that MGM in America is not releasing it, it just reinforces my concerns about the cultural dumbing down that's going on.

Is MGM doing this to get more publicity or to ingratiate themselves with somebody? What is all this supposed to achieve?

Richard Phillips: MGM's claims of concerns about personal issues with Johnny Depp are bogus. When MGM bought the rights to the movie in February 2020 it knew all about the marriage break-up.

TP: It doesn't make any sense. All it did was make me focus even more closely on Depp's portrayal of Eugene Smith, which I have to say was incredible.

I'd hoped that the film might have spent more time on the trauma that afflicted Smith in the war, but it does deal with what happens to a photo-journalist in war—the shock and awe and the madness. These things of course are worthy of a film on their own but there could have been more about that side of Smith's history. For Smith to go back to Japan and face all those ghosts of the war—unearthing and dealing with stuff that you want to bed—was no small issue.

Minamata briefly tackles those issues and then delves into the mercury poisoning, an issue that affected many, many people. This brought back to me what happened in Vietnam and photographer Philip Griffith Jones's book [*Agent Orange: Collateral Damage in Vietnam*]. He exposed how the population was left to deal with the horrible consequences of Agent Orange.

Minamata is a beautifully crafted film that everyone should see and one with a message more important than some sort of alleged scandal over a marriage break-up.

RP: Gene Smith once said: "I've never made any picture—good or bad—without paying for it in emotional turmoil." How would you react to that?

TP: It's true. Eugene Smith was seriously wounded in Okinawa. He'd been with the US military as it went through the so-called chain of islands. His photographs were outstanding, but, unfortunately, they're largely forgotten today, unless you're a Second World War book collector. His pictures graced the covers of *Life* magazine and I keep comparing it with what [British photographer] Larry Burrows did in Vietnam. These were photographs that forced people to think.

People today are overwhelmed by hundreds of images—they're bombarded—and find it difficult to come to grips with anything. I'm not singing a Jurassic-style lament here, but simply stating that people don't have the time to sit down and read and think. We're conditioned to have the attention spans of gnats. Maybe MGM are nervous about what the film encourages and are trying to cauterise that critical approach and freedom of thought we used to try and encourage.

RP: Whatever MGM's motivations—stated or otherwise—it is totally indifferent to all those involved in the production of the film, Aileen Mioko Smith and the victims.

TP: Mega-corporations don't give a damn about individuals, period. I sued *Time-Life* after I was wounded in Vietnam. They claimed because I was a freelancer, they weren't responsible and that a verbal contract wasn't binding. I sued them, but it took four years and eventually went to the Supreme Court and although I won, the settlement was a pittance. They spent half million dollars defending themselves.

RP: The conflicts between Smith and the head of *Life* portrayed in Minamata would have no doubt resonated with you.

TP: Tommy Thompson is the first person I met at that level in *Life* magazine in 1967. The magazine was run by a corporate hierarchy that responded to a board room which had some very right-wing people who were on and off about the coverage in Vietnam.

Every year they flew a plane load of billionaires and millionaires to different parts of the planet so they could see their people at work. One year they took them to Vietnam. All these top executives showed up and they were kitted out in military uniforms, complete with helmets, pistol belts and that sort of stuff. They toured round the air bases and had trips on helicopters and boats and fired guns. It was bizarre and the security was tighter than for a US president.

RP: What's the importance of this film for young photographers or anyone who hasn't heard of Minamata or Eugene Smith?

TP: I'd show the film to high school students in the UK or photography students here at Griffiths University because it goes back to basic principles—the grammar of our business. By the time you've finished watching the movie you almost want to get into the dark room and process a roll of Tri-X.

More importantly, it shows Smith's tremendous compassion and what a photojournalist should be. You see that in Smith's attitude towards the Japanese kid, who is twisted and tangled from Minamata Disease, but he encourages him to begin taking pictures.

Smith was an example of someone so dedicated that he basically died for the cause, in fact, he died a couple of times. The power of his images though is bound up with his incredible history. You can't talk about photography and photo-journalism unless your lexicon is populated with the images of Eugene Smith and Larry Burrows. They were, and are, the masters.

Minamata also goes a long way to explaining why it's necessary to report on issues that are usually hidden. The question is not what people want to see, but what they should see. There's very little of that sort of thing being published in media today.

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