

# Eugene Smith award-winning photographer Cristopher Rogel Blanquet discusses *Minamata* and why it must be released

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The following discussion is with Cristopher Rogel Blanquet, one of this year's W. Eugene Smith Fund Grant winners. The grant will allow Blanquet, a young Mexican photographer, to continue his *Beautiful Poison* project about unrestricted use of agrochemicals on workers in Mexico's massive flower-growing industry. His project documents the life of four families in the Villa Guerrero region who have suffered the death of children, genetic disabilities and chronic diseases related to these chemicals.

This is the seventh 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 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 WSWWS 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, the fifth, a statement by Jane Evelyn Atwood, the first winner of the prestigious Smith Memorial Grant, when it was established in 1980, and the sixth, an interview with Tim Page, veteran Vietnam war photographer.

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.

Cristopher Rogel Blanquet is one of a growing number of acclaimed photographers who have spoken out against MGM's ongoing suppression of *Minamata*. Blanquet became a professional photojournalist seven years ago and has worked in Mexico, France, the US, Peru, Turkey, Ukraine, Morocco and Syria, after having initially been a journalist for the Mexican periodical *El Universal*.

Rogel Blanquet's intense and socially conscious photo-essays focus on workers and the plight of immigrants and the poor. His images have been featured in numerous national and international publications, including the *New York Times*, *El Mundo*, *Milenio* and *Vice*, to name just a few. His work has been exhibited at the Alliance Française, the José Vasconcelos Library and the Museo de Arte Moderno in Mexico City, the Honeyguide Gallery in El Paso, Texas and the Museo de la Memoria in Montevideo, Uruguay.

Many of the photographs in the *Beautiful Poison* project are of Sebastián, an 18-year-old with hydrocephalus, and his father Don Tino. Sebastian's mother, Doña Petra, died from untreated kidney disease earlier this year due to the suspension of all treatments other than COVID-19 at Mexico City hospitals.

The following is an edited version of our discussion with Rogel Blanquet. We began by asking about his first impressions of *Minamata* and what resonated in the film for him.

Cristopher Rogel Blanquet: I don't know to what extent the script accurately depicts Eugene Smith's life, but in cinematographic terms it's very interesting and important that other people, not just photographers, watch it. It allows you to understand the mind, and the context, of a person dedicated to what we are dedicated to—the understanding that in journalism it is not the journalist that matters but the story.

*Minamata* gives a voice to the person behind the photos, in this case Eugene Smith, and like those dedicated to photojournalism, we are human. We have our own problems—our own demons—and are touched by what we report on.

We witness Eugene Smith's post-traumatic stress and his problems with alcohol. Again, I don't know how much of this is true, but it helps people who are not in the media business to understand something about the life of a photographer. This is important because many people think of photographers as rapacious; that we are vultures and are distant, and don't get involved with the people we photograph, or are interested in their story.

I teach at the National Autonomous University of Mexico [UNAM] and always tell my students that you cannot tell a story if you do it from an emotional distance. You have to be emotionally close to the story and have empathy. This is shown in *Minamata*.

If there's no empathy then you cannot tell that story, but there's an emotional price paid for this empathy. There's always anguish after every story we document because we absorb the sadness and the pain. There's an adrenaline rush, there's anger and rage because in the end we are human.

*WSWS: What's the significance of Minamata today?*

CRB: This is an important film that should be available for everyone. The way Eugene Smith approaches the source is totally inspiring and I feel a real connection to his approach and the things he did.

I was already familiar with the Smith's *Minamata* work and the [*Beautiful Poison*] project that I won this year's award for has similar subject matter. I felt a bit of pressure after winning the award and was worried my work would be compared to his, but it was an honour and very interesting that I unintentionally addressed a subject emblematic in Smith's career.

A section of the film shows Smith being unable to take the pictures because the family hasn't given him permission. He hasn't got authorisation and must gain their trust. Smith knows that if they don't let him intimately document their struggle and their pain the work will be useless. In the end, the people trust him and that's when he achieves his greatest photographic work. I very much identified with all this because it's not easy to convince people to let you into their

lives. They're rightly afraid that their image will be used in a wrong way.

*WSWS: What do you think about MGM's refusal, up to this point, to release the film in US cinemas?*

CRB: An actor's personal life is one thing, Depp's in this case, but the film is something different. Why should someone's personal life be used to censor *Minamata*? The film and its message about pollution should not be punished in this way. The importance of Smith exposing the pollution in *Minamata* is something that is current and not just in Japan. There are many other similar examples of this around the world.

This is a must-see for journalism students and even more so for photography students. We are not working with furniture, we work with people and for this reason it's imperative that we feel empathy. As [Polish writer Ryszard] Kapuscinski once said, "This profession is not for cynics."

There's almost no photographic culture here in Mexico outside of photographers themselves. I know about Eugene Smith, and so do all my colleagues, but the rest of the population, including students, don't know anything about Smith or [James] Nachtwey, [Sebastião] Salgado or [Manuel Álvarez] Bravo. That's why I always try to give my students references to many authors because in this context in Mexico there is no knowledge unless you are already dedicated.

*WSWS: What censorship or concerns by publishers have you faced and had to overcome?*

There's censorship, of course, but I've never been censored as such. I do live in Mexico, however, which is one of the most dangerous countries to practice journalism without there actually being an active war underway.

It's a dangerous activity here, but for this same reason it's an activity that has to be conducted. We have to assume this is part of our vocation and our responsibility, and so with the proper precautions I always try to do my job as well as possible.

*Under the pretext of a "war on drug gangs," Mexican governments unleashed a bloody war against human rights advocates, left-wing activists and the press—with at least 86 activists and 120 journalists killed between 2006 and 2021. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, more journalists have been killed in Mexico so far this year than in any other country in the world.*



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