

“The heroes of this story were the people of Minamata who broke societal norms, stood up against all odds and demanded to be heard”

Director Andrew Levitas discusses *Minamata* and its creative underpinnings

Richard Phillips
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Last week director, producer, painter and sculptor Andrew Levitas spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* about his dramatic feature *Minamata*, based on a script by Levitas, David K. Kessler, Stephen Deuters and Jason Forman, with Johnny Depp one of the film’s executive producers.

The film is set in the early 1970s and deals with the industrial poisoning of Japanese fishing communities by the Chisso Corporation and the determined efforts of famed photo-essayist W. Eugene Smith (Johnny Depp) and his wife Aileen Mioko Smith (Minami Bages) to globally expose this crime.

MGM purchased *Minamata*’s US distribution rights in early 2019 but refused to release it. The company’s acquisitions head Sam Wollman told Levitas that “the personal issues of Johnny Depp”—i.e., a messy divorce with his former wife Amber Heard—could reflect negatively on MGM and the film would be “buried.”

On December 3, Iervolino & Lady Bacardi Entertainment announced that it had bought the US distribution rights from MGM. The company only gave it a one-week theatrical release, starting on February 11, in 27 American cinemas, including just two in New York City, with future streaming and DVD releases soon to be announced.

We began last week’s interview, which has been edited for clarity and length, by asking Levitas to explain his attraction to the Minamata story, Gene Smith’s photography and the film’s genesis. The full video of the interview can be watched above.

Richard Phillips: Thanks Andrew for *Minamata* and for your time today.

AL: Well firstly, thank you and your colleagues, for all that you’ve been doing to support the film and spread the word about why its story is so important. None of us came to making this film as a financial or career decision. We all became involved because this was a story—50 years after the events—that had to be told.

I remember seeing Gene Smith’s Minamata images when I was about 10 or 12 years old. My parents had a collection of old *Life* magazines and I was paging through them and saw “Tomoko Uemura in her Bath” and I felt quite weird.

I felt uncomfortable because I recognised that I should have felt horrible seeing this deformed child but somehow, I didn’t. I felt okay and even uplifted. It was really complicated at that age because I didn’t have the awareness to understand what I was seeing and why I would feel that way.

Years later, as I became an artist and re-examined this work and many others, I realised that it had stuck with me because what I was feeling was right. It was an image of hope and love, and it was compassionate. It was the absolute best of mankind reflected back to us.

The thing that so special about Gene’s work is its goodness and hope.

There’s a lightness that really seems to push out the darkness—the blacks in his photographs were so black—it’s the human element of it all and I became really engaged with his work again. But it took about another 15 years, and 30 films and gosh knows how many art exhibitions, books of poetry and all the other stuff, until I just felt that this story had to be brought to light again.

Firstly, I couldn’t believe that 50 years later there were victims and patients in Minamata still fighting to be heard, fighting to be recognised, let alone be compensated or helped—for someone to just say, yes, we believe you, we understand.

Secondly, I became increasingly concerned with how the environmental pollution issues that we all face are so compartmentalised. For example, if there’s an issue in Australia, that’s Australia’s issue. If there’s an issue in New Zealand, it’s New Zealand’s issue, or something in Newark, New Jersey it’s New Jersey’s issue, or in Flint, Michigan it’s Michigan’s problem, or an oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico, then it’s their thing.

I realised that this was to do with big corporations and big money and that the system was set up so that we only worry about the things in our neck of the woods, and not really consider that it was all the same issue basically. So that really bothered me, and I started thinking about what sort of film to make.

I’m not a filmmaker that would make a crusading journalist kind of movie, like *Dark Waters* or *Erin Brockovich*, and although I’m a big fan of both those, I needed to make something that would feel completely universal. A film that any person anywhere in the world, could watch and engage with.

In those movies that I’ve just referenced, and a few others that some filmmakers have been brave enough to make over the years, the hero of those films is often the person knocking the lid off the story, finding the Eureka moment, and then basically getting the bad guys. To me that doesn’t feel relatable or a call to action for individuals.

From the time I first learned about it, the heroes of this story were the people of Minamata who broke societal norms, stood up against all odds and just demanded to be heard and seen. That Smith went there, and then brought it to the rest of the world was amazing.

This allowed me to go in through Smith’s perspective, through his eye, and make it relatable, digestible and, I hope, poetic, elegant and beautiful. This is important when you’re dealing with handicapped and deformed children because we need to be looking at these difficult things, leaning in, and looking at them front-on, in order to do something.

Anyway, that’s a very long answer to your succinct question.

RP: Jane Evelyn Atwood, one of the photographers who defended *Minamata*, and called for its release, refers to this. She speaks about the

necessity to reveal and show pictures that people don't want to look at, and about the struggle involved in establishing the right process for this.

Gene Smith was obviously a complex man. Was it daunting to accurately develop and portray that complexity? What passed through your head about what to avoid and what you wanted to reveal?

AL: I was able spend a lot of time with Aileen [Mioko Smith] and she provided many very personal and revealing insights. I also visited Minamata and spoke with many of the living victims, living patients and relatives. It was most important to me that I had their support. Smith's family and Kevin Smith, in particular, were quite helpful as well, and then of course there were the Minamata families.

The most daunting thing was to make sure that I did right by these people because we were certainly going to reopen old wounds. It was going to be painful for them. They have lived through enough so I needed to make sure that the film could be effective and right for them, as well as making sure that we got it right when dealing with Smith and his work.

Gene was shooting black-and-white photography but seeing the world in colour and it was challenging to be able to use that, and then interpret it. We had a lot of tricks and tools at our disposal, which was quite exciting.

I needed to make a film that the community felt properly represents them, gets their dialect right and does all this sensitively. It had to connect with Japanese audiences, which meant making filmic choices in terms of where the camera was and how I approached the storytelling.

On top of that, I needed to figure out how to truly show a layman—someone who has only ever picked up a smartphone to take photographs—what the process is like, what it feels like. As a photographer myself, I needed to shoot it in such a way that photographers would go, "This is right, this is the thing." I feel very grateful that so many photographers reached out and saw that.

We had to address the fact that 99 percent of the audience won't have ever picked up a real camera before. This meant figuring out how to educate people about our language, the language of Smith and the language of photography in a succinct way, but that feels elegant and fun. It can't be just, "Here's your photography lesson," but gives a sense of what it feels and looks like, what it smells like, all of it.

At the beginning of the film, Gene is in front of the camera and as the movie continues, he really becomes our eye and we become his eye. There were many things we did, and I could spend hours and hours talking about it.

So that part of the challenge was enjoyable, and we spent an enormous amount of time game-planning it. But we also wanted to get Gene spiritually, the experience for him and what the people on the ground were going through. That was tougher because you're dealing with actors and their interpretations. I'm happy to say that Aileen in particular, and other people that were friendly with Gene, reached out and they were quite satisfied with Johnny's interpretation, his performance.

RP: All the photographers I interviewed commented on his performance and found it very convincing. Several of them had been photographers in war zones and suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder. They were completely on board and complimentary. That's a tremendous achievement.

I get to read a lot of movie public relations material that often talks about the wonderful commitment from the actors, crew and etc., but in the case of *Minamata* this didn't seem to be just PR but a reality. Could you talk about that?

AL: It's funny you say that and you're right. Most of the stuff you read on films like that is total bullshit, excuse the language, but it is. On this film, it wasn't that everyone just got along, it wasn't Kumbaya and all that, in fact, there was a lot of push and pull, but there was real commitment.

I didn't allow a single person to step onto my set who wasn't fully aware of what we were trying to do and why, and that includes the extras

whom I interviewed all personally. Obviously not the catering and drivers, but everybody who had a hand in the film's production was vetted by me, not just for their artistic talent but their commitment and their understanding.

We worked very hard to build a team and a fully immersive environment. We didn't have any weird cardboard walls and sets with no ceilings. If we built something, we built it properly with all the details painstakingly in there, so our artists—both in front and behind the camera—felt they were walking into that real environment.

One of the great compliments Johnny gave me early on was that he felt like he was living in a documentary; that he couldn't get his head around this but it was helping him somehow experience and live it, and just be Gene [Smith].

We had a certain amount of time to shoot this film and we shot it in less than the scheduled days. That generally does not happen on a film like this, but it did because there was no bullshit. People were there to do it, and not just for the love of the game, which alone is unique, but for the passion and feeling that we really could change minds and inspire people to stand up and have their voices be heard. It was amazing.

RP: There are many different aspects of the production to discuss but I need to mention the protest scenes. The use of recreated archival footage, real archival footage and the cinematography by Benoît Delhomme [*The Scent of Green Papaya* (1993), *The Proposition* (2005), *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* (2008), *The Free State of Jones* (2016), *Eternity's Gate* (2018)] were wonderful and completely convincing. These scenes had real tension, nothing felt wrong, dated or out of place. How did you achieve that?

AL: Thank you for raising this. It was complicated to get right, but it starts and ends with the idea that we tried to make it real. Like I said, there wasn't anyone on my set, including the extras, who weren't fully invested. I sent documentaries around to all of them to watch so they understood who they were, what they were doing, why they were there.

It wasn't all done in editing. It was something we had to step into on the day and be able to shoot on our Bolex [cinecamera], know what existing documentary footage we had, and then shoot it in real time.

At the end of it all, we had to have a riot, but not in a dangerous way, but I would sit there on a microphone and just tell everybody what was happening, why we were there and what had happened to your sister or your cousin.

Benoît wasn't so convinced that it would work but once we laid out all the footage, it just happened quite seamlessly. It's an element of the film that, all of us are really excited about and proud of.

RP: The film has many subtle moments in the relationship between Aileen and Gene. Could you also talk a little about that process?

AL: There was no way that I could condense all of the stuff we had into two hours so I needed to prioritise things. The most important thing was to make sure that the main elements are there. What was the most important thing about their relationship, its essential truth at this time and how could I express that in the least sort of, distracting way. Frankly their relationship is not the story of the film that I wanted to tell, but I also couldn't leave it.

If they were in bed making love or they were kissing it would have felt out of place in the two-hour context of the film. So we had look at their relationship and approach it from the standpoint of who is Gene, who is Eileen and how do they interact in this time. What is their thing? I spent so much time with Aileen talking about it and I feel, and she feels, that we got it exactly right, so that was quite satisfying.

I'm sure that there are quite a few writers and people in an audience that would have been clamouring for that big kiss or that thing or the sort of generic Hollywood thing, but it just didn't fit.

RP: At one point in the movie Gene says, "The coverup by the Chisso Corporation is going to be as much of the story as the story itself."

Well, that became a reality for you because in July last year and you published an open letter to MGM about the fact that they were burying the movie. Could you talk about that?

AL: Wherever you're dealing with big corporations, and those that run some of them, you meet people that genuinely just don't care. They can retire to their beautiful homes in Italy, or their Beverly Hills pools, or they drive their nice cars, and are so completely disconnected from the entire general public who is just struggling to pay their bills, have a happy life, stay healthy and make it through the day. And in Hollywood you certainly find people in those positions, who have no concept whatsoever or connection to artists and don't care. It's horrible.

I don't care to talk about it too much, I'm just past it. The gentleman we dealt with at MGM, if you would even call him that, is not somebody that I would try to fix or help to be a better person. Ultimately, he's no longer our problem or roadblock, or someone that I'd care to spend the time so he makes a bigger contribution to society or lives a more full and positive life.

What I'm happy about is the film is now outside of this and while they did everything that they could pretty much to damage it, whether intentional or otherwise, the film lives on and hopefully speaks to those people who can make a difference.

This is a film for all age groups but particularly those younger folks who haven't had a chance to be part of a moment like this but can find their voice and realise that they have it in them to be the change. They have it in them to step up, have it in them to be heard. If there's a message in this film, it's that a single voice can start a chorus, a match can start a massive fire and a pebble can start a tidal wave.

I sit on a lot of panels that talk about the environment, corporate greed and all this stuff and most of the people on these panels are talking in big doom and gloom terms, it's over, we're done, we're never going to win, we're screwed and we're past the ticking midnight clock thing. I'm always the one sitting there going well, I see improvement, I see younger people wanting to be heard, starting to engage but they're fed a lot of fake news, they're fed a lot of stuff, that's just not real. And I think and certainly hope that if we get enough eyeballs on the film in America, that we can speak to those people.

RP: The point is that the film has now been released [in the US] because thousands of young people who saw it got on Twitter and other social media, began agitating for the film's release and telling their friends.

There's a mass sentiment amongst young people to change society. I noticed in one online interview that you spoke about the pandemic and the necessity for a global response, but that people are being told they have to live with this virus and also live with the damage, the environment and everything else. That certainly wasn't Gene Smith's response to what happened in Minamata.

AL: And it's not my outlook. I firmly believe that we can change, and firmly believe that the change comes from within us. You don't have to spend money but make that decision to live in a certain way and bring positivity and an agenda of goodness. They've done such a good job to distort wanting to live a healthy existence and in a polluted free world and make it suddenly feel like cliché.

It's incredible how they've manipulated that. But it's a smile to your neighbour and not littering on the ground. It's when you do buy a pair of sneakers, and if you have a chance, figuring out what kind of company made those sneakers. It's also paying attention to who you vote for.

RP: So what's the next project. What's your next film?

AL: They're quite a few, that I'm working on. My process is that I find a subject that matters, ideas, areas that I want to explore and find as much information about that as possible and then determine, should it be a film, a sculpture, should I write about it? I've got a pretty healthy slate at present, but nothing that I really want to tease.

I can assure you that they it will be different approach every time. I'm

not trying to make the same movie over and over or the same sculpture over again. I'm not going to spend my time and be away from my kids—the things that I really love—and make those sacrifices that Gene did, and the way other artists, do unless it has the chance to be actually nutritious, helpful and empowering for people. So... we'll have to stay tuned I guess.

RP: Okay and I think that's a good point on which to end.

AL: And Richard, just on a personal note. It was those folks on Twitter, all these people stepping up [on *Minamata*] and saying something and just being heard every single day. It was folks like you who really made the point of supporting us and sticking up for what you thought was right.

Myself, and all of us on the filmmaking team, read those articles and read the interviews with the photographers. It meant a great deal to us that they felt that way and that someone was taking the time to go out and do that, so thank you so much from the whole filmmaking team.

RP: Okay and thank you. The interviews were very educational because they explored all sorts of elements in the film. These photographers could all identify with Gene Smith because they fought a lot of the same battles that he did with publishers.

AL: If you ever want to do a round table with some of those guys, I'd be very keen to do it.

RP: That'd be excellent.



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