

What role does filmmaking have in the Planetary Emergency? Beyond the Screen, stories of Deforestation, Cross-Cultural Collaborations & Penan Resistance in Sarawak, Malaysia¹

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Abstract

We are in a Planetary Emergency and as we face threats to survival this article asks, *what role filmmaking and cross-cultural collaborations can have in sustaining futures?* In what has been described as “the greatest environmental tragedy of our time” (Brown 2011), this article delves into the last forty years of deforestation and the acts of resistance in Sarawak, Malaysia. For the last ten years I have been collaborating as an artist/activist/friend with Mutang Tu’o and Penan communities, and this article attempts to articulate the questions and propositions that have emerged from my experience and research. As a filmmaker, I share the vulnerabilities about my own practice. As an audience member, I reflect on the extensive documentation of the *Sarawak Campaign*. As a soul, I tell the story about what I learnt about the land when living with nomads. I question the impact of *awareness*-building, the role of *heroes*, and feel the limits of focusing on the mediascape whilst the landscape is destroyed *in front of our eyes*. A Call to Action.

Siamo in un'emergenza planetaria e, mentre affrontiamo la minaccia alla sopravvivenza, questo contributo vuole interrogarsi sul ruolo che svolgono il cinema e le collaborazioni interculturali nel pensare un futuro sostenibile. In quella che è stata definita “la più grande tragedia ambientale del nostro tempo” (Brown 2011), l'articolo approfondisce gli ultimi quarant'anni di deforestazione e gli atti di resistenza nel Sarawak, in Malesia. Negli ultimi dieci anni ho collaborato come artista/attivista/amico con le comunità Mutang Tu’o e Penan e questo articolo cerca di articolare le domande e le proposte emerse dalla mia esperienza e ricerca. Come regista, condivido le vulnerabilità della mia stessa pratica. Come membro del pubblico, rifletto sull'ampia documentazione della campagna del Sarawak. Come spirito, racconto la storia di ciò che ho imparato sulla terra vivendo con i nomadi. Metto in dubbio l'impatto della sensibilizzazione, il ruolo degli eroi e sento i limiti del concentrarsi sul paesaggio mediatico mentre l'ambiente viene distrutto davanti ai nostri occhi. Un invito all'azione.

Keywords: planetary emergency, activism, filmmaking

Parole chiave: emergenza planetaria, attivismo, cinema

We are in a *Planetary Emergency*. The climate is changing, the air is polluted and the ozone is thinner. The water is turning

¹ This article was inspired by Mutang Tu’o and The Penan Resistance.

more acidic and marine species are suffocating on plastics. And on the land, the soil is getting contaminated, ecologies are cleared as minerals are extracted and biodiversity is being lost. The animals don't have anywhere to live. We don't have enough to eat. We are in a Planetary Emergency. Our planet hosts a patchwork of damage and disruption as humanity's spoils of war from the conquest of nature. And as we face threats of survival and questions of sustaining futures, we are asked to take a pause. To reflect on the journey of how we got *here*. And hopefully, we can learn from the past, and not repeat the same mistakes.

One such history that may shed us some light is the story of what has happened in Sarawak, Malaysia. Though it may not be necessary to validate the cause of focus as if to equate that one ecologies' destruction is more significant than another, it is the *story of deforestation* of Sarawak that holds historic significance of *resistance*. And resistance is central to how we can comprehend a way out of this mess (see Ortner 2016). Let us take this opportunity to explore the historic shifts of the *Sarawak Emergency* and resistance. Credited as the *birthplace of the modern environmental movement* where «the Penan became icons of resistance for environmentalists worldwide» (Brosius, 1997: 40). A resistance that found its form on the *screen*...

The form of this article is presented as a personal testimonial. In 2013, I saw a photo of Penan communities standing in front of a blockade protecting their homelands. As a young filmmaker, I believed film was an empowering agent and I felt like there was a story that we could tell that would help. I went to Sarawak and from the moment of my arrival all of the villagers told me I must meet Mutang Tu'o, an activist who has dedicated his life to the protection of the forest. Since then, each year I have returned to Sarawak to live, and learn and collaborate with Mutang and Penan communities for months at a time. When my parents died, Mutang adopted me as his son, and my commitment to the cause became a commitment to him. In this paper, I will attempt to share my experiences, vulnerabilities, research and reflections on this journey. Drawing on discourse of visual anthropology, documentary studies and media analysis, as well

as my own practice-led-research in making the film *TULIN*². Blood, sweat and tears in the face of ongoing destruction have tinted this tale with grief and disillusionment, however this article attempts to show the significance of why I continue with this struggle, and invite other filmmakers to see beyond the screen, and value the connections we may foster, in the face of *our* planetary emergency.

Setting the (Anthropo)Scene

Int. Kitchen, Sarawak Village – Daytime. (Epilogue. TULIN. Circa 2016)

Close up of hand-held microphone. The frame zooms out and reveals MUTANG sitting on a chair examining the device. His children hang off their father and look at the sound device.

Blake (Off Camera):

Many outside people know the Penan and come, and I wonder what do you think...

What does that do? What changes because of the people coming?

Mutang:

For me this is what I think based on what I've seen. They actually don't do much.

We Penan have so many problems. But they come and make a document and that's it.

We have one major problem: the land has been destroyed. The rainforest has been destroyed.

This is the problem we have because the government want to take this land.

We are worried they will take it all.

You will understand with the example of Penan in Bakun.

They want to build a hydro-electric dam in Bakun. There are Penan over there. These Penan people say it is a real problem. The government made a promise that they will build a new house so they could build a dam there. They'll build a new house for them to move. And they're expected to stay there. But the Penan people from there say it's a huge problem because their land has been taken and they can't afford all of the expenses.

...

Of all the foreigners who come, and there are many foreigners who come, they come and see.

And then they leave. They look. They understand the problems here,

² https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLEudo_MHfGmTpsi-k-iloSH_0nyFq68vN.

but they only make a document. Only make a film. Only document it.
 But they don't do anything for us or this land.
 I don't understand why they do it. The stories don't give us money. We
 cannot live like this.
 We know the story and we tell it. But it doesn't solve the problem of
 the land.
 We speak strong, and whoever comes will listen to this story. But who
 can help us?
 Some have told us that if we need help we must go to court...
 But who can help us? Who will have mercy on us?
 This is how it is.

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The forests of Borneo are the oldest tropical hardwood forests in the world, an ecological arrangement for the last one hundred and thirty million years. In the northern region of the island, the Malaysian State of Sarawak has been the most dramatically altered, with over ninety percent of the primary forests cleared for logging and monoculture palm oil plantations. Sarawak is a melting pot of cultures, with Malay, Chinese and Tamil populations mixed with over twenty indigenous peoples. However it is the Penan peoples, one of the last nomads of South-East Asia, that have been at the forefront of the battle of deforestation. Whilst all other indigenous *orang uleu* (people of the interior) were relying on agricultural practices of subsistence, the Penan nomads were hunter/gathers, moving across the forest interior. And though the Brooke Raj, an offshoot of the British Empire, recognised such claims to the land over the one hundred and five year rule³, in 1963 when Sarawak and neighbouring Sabah became part of the Malaysian Nation State, their forest homeland for the last four thousand years was no longer recognised as Penan Territory.

This denial of homeland territory has been the plight of many indigenous and first nation people across the globe, especially hunter/gatherer nomadic peoples. One of the most basic characteristics of hunter/gatherer modes of subsistence is that people follow the food – and as the plant and animal life shifts over the seasons, the people move accordingly. And when you know that you are only going to stay in the region for a few

³ Brooke Raj (1841-1946), British Crown Colony (1946-1963).

months at a time, you don't build permanent infrastructure. For the Penan, their dietary staple was the *uvut* and *jakah* palm, eaten in the form of sago (*na'oi*). The family band of nomads would stay in the area with the palms, and leave once cleared, only to return twenty years later when the trees have returned to maturity. This nomadic lifestyle and lack of permanent infrastructure has equated that there is no *proof* of the Penan's claims to territory. And this aspect of *impermanence* haunts the land claim disputes in the legal framework even today. Whilst all the other agricultural peoples have proof of how they *altered the land*, the last nomads of South-East Asia continue to fight for recognition of their ancestral claim. An example of systemic punishment for only *taking what you need*, in a system that punishes us when we don't *permanently change the landscape*. This is the irony, or perhaps the catalyst, of Sarawak – that the lack of proof was followed by a movement of resistance *defined by documentation*. In 1987, Penan communities put up the first blockade against logging, and quickly these images were globally circulated (Brosius, 1997: 40). The (exoticised) (?) image of a loin-cloth wearing indigenous person defending their homeland inspired many other movement messaging and campaigns – with examples from *GreenPeace* and other conservation groups (Brosius, 1999: 41). But though the reach could be found on a global stage through influence and a rhetoric of boycotting the export of Sarawak's tropical hardwood timber, it also came with a counter argument from the Malaysian government and their logging companies. The government's monopolisation of logging, is exemplified by the Sarawak State Governments' ex-Chief Minister Taib Mahmud's accumulation of a personal wealth (USD \$15 Billion) from his thirty-three years of office. Welcome to the Anthropo(s)cene.

The Cult of Awareness

It is J. Peter Brosius (1990; 1991; 1992; 1993; 1995; 1997; 1999) who gives the most extensive analysis of media representations from environmentalists (activists, academics and NGOs – often from the Global North), and its counter movement from the *government/logging conglomerate*. As the logging encroached on Penan territory – so the story goes, it was Bruno Manser, the Swiss national who spent six years living a *Penan gaya*

pengurip (a Penan lifestyle), who is credited as the initiator of the resistance. I will return to the significance of Bruno later, but at this stage as we try to grasp a sense of resistance, this is supposedly where it starts. Bruno is credited as bringing the Penan communities together. And when mobilised on scale, he shared the messaging of the *Penan struggle* to a global audience, in what Brosius referred to as the *Sarawak Campaign* (Brosius, 1997: 64; 1999: 41). With the majority of the Sarawak's logged hardwood exported to European and Japanese consumers, manufactured in the form of timber/furniture and disposable chopsticks respectively, the Sarawak Campaign initially focused on messaging of *boycotting*. Boycotting was an attempt for consumers on the international arena to have *awareness* of the ethics of consumption and boycott the imports of Sarawak Timber.

These «public and hidden transcripts» (Scott, 1990: 26; Brosius, 1997: 505) that globally circulated comprised of texts from the Environmentalists on the ground – such as written and photographic books from Wade Davis, Ian Mackenzie and Thom Henley, as well as the news coverage and reportage of BBC, Nat Geo and CNN to name a few⁴. And over the years at the height of deforestation the *Penan struggle* also became the topic of high-profile discussion, including speeches from Prince Charles/The Prince of Wales; convenient coverage of *an inconvenient truth* by Al Gore, and even during his time in office, the ex-Prime Minister of the UK Gordon Brown claimed that what happened in Sarawak “is probably the biggest environmental crime of our times” (Brown, 2011).

Looking back, one can only claim that the resistance campaign was extensive and far reaching and yet it didn't stop the destruction. I introduce the term the *Cult of Awareness* less as a critique of individual efforts but more as a question of impact. The *Cult of Awareness* is a means of understanding a disparity

4 «The Sarawak situation received coverage on NBC Evening News, National Public Radio, CNN, and Primetime Live and in Newsweek, Time, The New Yorker, The Wall Street Journal, and Rolling Stone. BBC and National Geographic both produced documentaries on the Penan. The Australian films *Blowpipes and Bulldozers* and the Swedish Film *Tong Tana* both reached audiences and received wide acclaim... Meanwhile, Penan were awarded the Reebok Human Rights Award and the Sierra Club-sponsored Chico Mendez Award, and SAM activist Harrison Ngau was awarded the Goldman Prize for his work against logging in Sarawak» (Brosius 1999: 41).

between the *mediascape* and the *landscape* – a haunting rift between *material realities* and *the world we represent*. Fast forward over the years, and there are many a film of Sarawak and beyond that has grounded its impact according to awareness – *awareness building*. Equating an over-simplified recipe, that awareness leads to change. This is what I mean when I speak of the *Cult of Awareness* – a precondition, an assumption – that there are some visuals that you can't un-see; there are some sounds you can't un-hear; there are some stories that you will listen to that will shift your perception... but post-shift of paradigm... what next? The *Cult of Awareness* may make us aware, *but then what...?*

As well as highlighting the disparity between the *mediascape* and *landscape*, the *Cult of Awareness* is accompanied by further complexions of perspective, derived of multiplicity. When Post-Modernity over-rationalised *the grand narrative*, and Roland Barthes lamented *The Death of the Author* (1967), subjectivity trumped the objective truth. Everyone has a voice, even if not all of them are heard. We invented the *parallel universe*, and still somehow we act surprised when greeted with #FakeNews, as if it were not the climax to our Contingent #NOW. In the case of Sarawak, the government/logging conglomerate were not passive – they too had their own story to tell, and they told their story with the help of the *experts of illusion* (London-based public relations agency *Burson-Marsteller, Hill and Knowlton*). Brosius ascertained that it was in the 1993 broadcast of *Primetime Live* where the reporter John Quinones “confronted” the Malaysian ambassador to the United States, Abdul Majid, that prompted the Malaysian Government to «try to shape the discursive contours of the debate» with the Northern environmentalists (Brosius, 1999: 49-50).

The Malaysian logging conglomerate claimed that the Global North environmentalists were quick to criticise Malaysia as a *developing Nation* – a synonym for *developing Economy*, for their *path of progress*. Furthermore, the Global North seeks to limit how developing nations exploit their *own* resources despite having profited from the same model, with these aspects were framed as «Eco-Imperialism» (lvi: 41-42). This argument holds ongoing significance in the Planetary Emergency (particularly with Climate Change), with a similar line of defence from many

developing nations who continue to exploit the(ir) *un-renewable resources*, only to receive pressure from the Global North who sustain the legacy of pillage and consumption, measured as a big-foot carbon footprint. Whether one agrees with this argument or not, these are the contours of Eco-Imperialism in Sarawak, and continue to manifest across the globe as we seek a path to *sustainable futures*.

The response of the *Government/Logging/PR conglomerate* after the international boycott campaign was to develop a “techno-scientific”/“techno-bureaucratic” (lvi:41-49) apparatus, employing a certification system of what could be called *sustainable logging*. This entailed measuring the tree’s circumference, and claiming that a certain size of diameter would equate whether or not it was sustainable to cut down. With *sustainability* often regarded as an ideal state of the planet’s health, this example leaves me questioning how such a term can be measured, let alone claimed. Companies claim their product is sustainable but according to what? Maybe they are not *lying* to consumers but what are they *measuring*, and what aspects are they *disregarding*? Indeed in the case of logging, whether certified *sustainable* or *not*, of the forty-thousand plant species unique to Borneo, every time a forest is cleared about fifty percent of species will not grow back... *But at least we are aware*. Documentation, dialogue and discourse that specify the *do’s and don’ts* and allow us to *measure a mediascape* and *disregard* the materialities of *landscape*.

The Hero’s Journey: Who will save us

Penan peoples lived nomadic lifestyles travelling in family groups. But when the Malay/Sarawak governments claimed access of the forest interiors and introduced compulsory village settlements, wider communities were formed. When settled in communities and no longer nomadic, the government appointed village representatives as the *Tu’a Kampong* – a Malay word for *the Headman*. Eastern and Western Penan language have no term of hierarchy and so adopt the Malay Bahasa term. As too is the case for other Malay words like *work (kerjia)* and many frameworks of the *modern*. Instead Penan culture is deeply egalitarian.

In many ways, these egalitarian characteristics act as a clause

to understand the role Bruno Manser had in mobilising the Penan peoples. Bruno Manser is a *household* name amongst Penan communities and is deeply celebrated for all he did to try to stop the bulldozer. I would think that Bruno would hate how he is remembered as the martyr – *the hero, Lakei Penan* (*the Penan man*) who fought the good fight for the *preservation* of the forest, and then disappeared in the 2000, suspected murdered by the *timber mafia*. Bruno Manser is one *hero* of our *tragic tale*. In questioning the significance documentation had on how resistance manifested, we'll briefly reflect on some of the examples of filmic representation to establish a comprehension of what stories were told. *Bruno Manser – Laki Penan* (2007) is a Swiss/French documentary that starts in Switzerland and tracks the journey of Bruno to Borneo. He was a shy boy more interested in nature than people, who spent his childhood dreaming of the forest. And when he finally arrived, he was met by Penan peoples – with whom he lived and learnt how to *survive* in the forest. As the *plot thickens* and we establish the *narrative ark*, our hero must overcome the obstacles of logging... Which he does by orchestrating an extensive campaign, that we can slowly start to comprehend.

Then a second more recent film, *Paradise War: The Story of Bruno Manser* (2019), a Swiss biopic of Bruno celebrating their national hero, with the *glitz and glam* of fiction to fill in the blanks. And then there is a third film – *The Borneo Case* (2016), this time without a national hero, this Swedish production presents us with some other heroes : English journalist Clare Rewcastle & DJ Peter Jaban from *Radio Free Sarawak* (a pirate radio station); Lukas Straumann – Swiss Executive Director of *Bruno Manser Fund* (BMF), the namesake legacy NGO who continue to dominate aid efforts with Penan communities and fight to preserve the final primary forest; and Mutang Urud – an activist from neighbouring indigenous Kelabit communities exiled and continuing the fight from Canada. This third example is a film *about* Sarawak, though not set there alone, as we dart around the international arena and we bare witness to how in recent years, the *Sarawak Campaign* has shifted its focus to *accountability* and corruption – aka *we follow the money*, and we map Taib Mahmud's wealth accumulation and the corruption of uneven distribution (see Strauman, 2014).

When we take a glance at these films we can see that there's often a narrative structure of resistance where we follow a *hero's journey*. The hero is presented as the *saviour*, who has more often than not been the *outsider/the white saviour*⁵. I see this not a critique of the individual efforts, but rather a reflection of the pattern when we *zoom out*. And there are additional nuances to acknowledge of this *outsider-as-saviour* complex, which is to acknowledge the tangible fear of safety of those in Sarawak. The fate of Bruno is not one we want to wish on anyone. And the fear of the timber mafia is real. So as such, the stories' focus on the *outsider* as the *face of resistance* can also be read as a safety barrier to anonymise the Penan activists, to keep them safe... or at least safer. Within the Planetary Emergency environmental activists on the *frontlines* are losing their lives at an unprecedented rate. Most commonly in Latin America where indigenous and first nations peoples are merely trying to defend their homelands as the scale of exploitation takes a rapid speed. As *Global Witness* reported in 2020 there were two hundred and twenty-seven reported deaths of environmental activists. Every death is a loss, but those who die trying to preserve life on earth is a tragedy.

For a resistance movement defined by documentation, with films as the most comprehensive example, what can we learn from the *hero complex*? Narrative norms are based on the *personal stories* that showcase the struggle and attempt to overcome adversity. *But when we have a hero, does that give the rest of us an excuse to sit by and let someone else 'save the day'?* We may have learnt the significance of *self-help* from the self-help-gurus, and we may sing Bowie's lyrics that *we can be heroes*, but evidently many of us still await the *messiah*... and when the crowd chants "Thank God for Greta", gratitude seems to be holding hands with grief... *Post-awareness*, from *apathy to activism*, it's a spectrum.

5 This discrepancy between *outsider/insider representation* is not always as clear cut as I present here, and there are anomalies to the dominant patterns. One film is *Sunset over Selungo* (2014) by Ross Harrison. This is a short documentary that depicts resistance through personal encounters of Penan (activists) from Selungo – known as one of the last areas of primary forest in Sarawak, and regarded as *preserved* as the *Baram Peace Park*. *Rather the chosen film examples are reflective of the films that had an extensive viewership in festivals and film distribution.*

Voices for the Borneo Rainforest

Though filmic documentation from *outsiders* may dominate this story, I'd like to move *beyond the screen* to consider the media and infrastructures that support Penan voices. At the height of deforestation and the *Sarawak Campaign*, Thom Henley coordinated a global tour where *audiences* heard firsthand accounts from three Sarawakian activists – Mutang Urud (featured in *The Borneo Case*) and two Penan activists, Mutang Tu'o and Unga Paren. Bruno Manser was presented as the tour's *translator*, highlighting his character when he was still active in deciding how he was introduced. The tour meant that Penan peoples were able to *talk for themselves* and share their messages in the UN, the Whitehouse and many key political settings. However though this tour was extensive and significant, there are many ongoing obstacles for political engagement and self-representation of Penan voices. One unique break in the pattern has been Elia Bit, a young woman who was one of the first Penan to enter politics joining the opposition party *Parti Keadilan Rakyat/PKR (People's Justice Party)*. After politics she established an NGO *Penan Baram Empowerment Networking Association (PENA)* with the primary objective of granting Penan peoples their *citizen/identity card*. Where democracy holds the ideal of *giving voice* in the political arena, it is Elia Bit who is helping Penan peoples claim their right to be recognised by their government and be able to vote in elections and have access to education. Self-representation is pivotal, a pivotal step of *finding voice* in a system where *silence = violence*.

In considering self-representation, it can be helpful to situate the screen beyond the representations and consider access and infrastructure. Though we may talk of the *world wide web*, it's very recent that cellular infrastructure and even electricity was introduced into Penan Territory. Though many Penan became economic migrants due to the scarcity of food post-deforestation and left for the *connected cities* in search of work, it is very recent that solar and hydro-electric projects have been introduced to the villages, enabling content creation on the commonly owned smart-phone. And in most cases, cellular mobile coverage is still limited to the neighbouring hill or the one village kiosk. This does not deny the fact that smart phones are commonly present in the Penan village-settlements, it just limits the usage and

reach of connection. The point here is to acknowledge that with the shifts in access, whether through digital infrastructure or political/electoral practices, resistance continues to morph. Look at one of the more recent campaigns and success stories of Penan-led resistance, with the support of Malaysian NGO *Save the Rivers* and BMF: the *savemulu.org* campaign. The company *Radiant Lagoon*, a Malaysian palm oil company, commenced a non-consensual clearing of a relatively small patch of forest on the borders of *Gunung Mulu National Park*, a *UNESCO* World Heritage site. *Certain* Penan villagers from Batu Bunung and Long Iman partnered with Barawan neighbours to create a blockade, an online petition and a legal case claiming the significance of the nature strip for animal's migration. The online petition like many aspects of *online activism* today, equate the value of a *sign and share currency* that was converted into a document that could elevate the legal case in proceedings. And for my Penan *facebook friends* they were able to share, comment, contribute and mobilise *their* movement. *Online Activism*: the next step of an oral history, which started with nomads who had no proof of altering the ecology, that turned to a campaign defined by documentation, and then leads us to a (brave) new world...

Building New Realities or The Screen

When did we insert a *barrier* between ourselves and nature? Maybe if we click *reverse camera* on the *selfie*, the world will look different? And maybe the *screen inserted in-between* is not only a wall, but also comes as a *gateway* to another side? In this *filmic journey*, with no hero in sight, "anthropocentric visuality" (see Mirzoeff, 2014), asks us to reflect on our ways of *seeing*, and turn our attention to the *audience* and the practice of *viewership*. For the *global audiences* from our heterogenous cultures, we often arrange furniture in our homes to mirror a *home cinema*, resulting in an arrangement where the furniture directs us to *look at the screen*. For such reasoning it comes as no surprise that the *Cult of Awareness* came to fruition – when the screen was elevated as the heart-centre of the home, *the world revolved around what we watched*. And though viewing practices and physical arrangements shift from the television to the laptop and smart phone as more mobile, we often find ourselves in dialogue with a screen.

I find it helpful to reflect on the context of Karl Marx conducting ethnographic research in Manchester, a British society who recently cut down their last forest and desperately sort to find an alternative to continue iron smelting – a solution found in the form of coal. Building on Foster and Burkett’s (2017) analysis, when Marx spoke of *alienation*, at its core he was talking about the alienation of the *human from nature*. The onset of factory production lines that took people *off the land* and *inside* the workplace and place of rest, was the moment we took our hands from out of the *soil* and went inside the *four-walled-box*. And in doing so, we turned the whole rest of the world into *the great outdoors*. And as we transition from *hunter/gather* to *agriculture* and into *consumer* modes of subsistence, we find ourselves *inside* looking at a screen. And when so many of us spend our lives inside looking at the screen, is it any surprise that we have the *deniers* amongst us who can’t *feel* how the climate has changed? We *aliens* turned a living breathing planet into a space craft, and watched the *world go by* on a screen.

For arguments sake, we could consider *the screen* for more than its *ontological properties*, more than the material. It’s Tom Boellstorff (2008) who comes into significance, with his work of a digital *coming of age*, based on the ethnographic research in *SecondLife* (2008). Boellstorff argued that virtual worlds enabled by digital technology and infrastructure are an extension of the human – a man-made *apparatus of the imagination* – that first found articulation in Western thought as Plato’s *Cave of Allegories* (Boellstorff, 2008: 34). Indeed, Boellstorff was arguing specifically of a *second life* virtual world, but I wonder if we cannot consider the internet as its *own world* – the place where sight, sound and word meet to create a *reality* of its own...? As Yuval Harari (2016) spoke of in his speculative documentation of *Homo Deus* – the sequel to the story of the *Sapien*. When we were *elevated to gods* – a product of our times/a condition of the anthropocene is that we know of animals in fairytales and zoological palaces of the artificial, whilst the wilderness was domesticated and *in situ* was replaced by *replica* (Harari, 2016). The great *data dump* that is the internet builds a *self-generative apparition* of the world that *was*, and *is* and *will be*, according to those whose voices are heard. It suddenly feels as

if documentation, discourse and dialogue found a home – online. A second life, like a *virtual* antidote to a *material* «Autoimmune Climate-Changing Capitalism Syndrome» (Mirzoeff, 2014: 215).

Finding the Me in Emergency

We made a film about our worst nightmare and watched it come true in front of our eyes. The «fleeting image» is the new product in our «super-modern» world of «excess» (Augé, 1995: 87) and extinction. And *on demand*, in the palm of our hand, we are all filmmakers now. But what of the *endangered* elephant in the room? The Planetary Emergency? On looking to Sarawak, questions linger of how we may learn from our mistakes and where to put our efforts of sustaining futures. And though “hope is as hollow as fear” (Tao Te Ching: Vers. 13), it’s not all *doom and gloom* – we can wait and see what will happen for *tomorrow’s a new day* – but so too is *today*. A new #NOW... so for what do we wait?

Part of our filmic literacy is an orientation into the ways of seeing and *a frame* to help move beyond the screen. We have become acquainted with the *non-human eye* and often the camera finds its focus from different perspectives. We can *zoom in* on the intricacy and detail of life *in motion*. Or we can *zoom out*, and cycle after cycle, *reel after reel*, we can see the pattern emerge – (emergency). This fluctuance in scale is both a vice and virtue. Our planetary emergency is both global and local – its beyond our comprehension, and we are *living through it*. And more often than not, we are concerned of the threat to life, but we don’t know where to start... And in our *physical world* do the *laws of physics* mean that *individual action* zooms out into *systemic change*?

For the past nine years, the screen and the camera have actually been the medium within which I have reconciled aspects of my own alienation and established a relationship with the secondary forests and Penan communities. The heightened senses of sight and sound became elevated – the camera lets me see, the microphone helps me hear, and the time-warp of editing and play-back of a timeline has helped me feel the rhythms that would otherwise not be felt. Entering Penan territory and finding my own place and role within this movement has been enabled through *collaborative practice*. It was those *public*

transcripts that were circulated, that crossed the globe and when viewed sparked my stance of solidarity. And on arriving to Sarawak this relationship of *outsider* with the *Moto omok na'ant* (the machine that can see) was not too foreign in the context of the village. But rather it was understood that I was just the next *environmentalist* from the Global North welcomed into the community with a *promise to help*.

Our first collaboration was not a film - but found its form as a book. A language preservation children's book *Apo Uleu* (*Our Sago*), that told the story of young ones learning from their grandparents how to collect and process the *uvut* palm. Back in 2013, the limited access to electricity made the idea of a film seem less relevant for the community and so the written word was presented to an oral culture materially. And though the books were widely distributed across Penan villages and schools, many of the books have been washed away in the floods that have become annual disruptions. As the climate has changed in Sarawak, with Penan settled on the rivers by the government when they cleared the forest interior for logging, irregular rainfall and soil siltation means that the villages have been washed away each year for the past six years. These changes in the climate have prompted the building of new stilt homes, and in the case of *tourist visited villages*, a little further from the river's edge, the government has built the *lamin ba ka'lap* (the house to run away from water).

My cross-cultural collaborations continued in the production of the non-fiction feature film - *TULIN* (*Seed*). Co-directed with Mutang Tu'o, we adapted a script from Hollywood's *Universal Studios* written at the height of the *Sarawak Campaign*. It was an eco-horror where a deadly virus takes over the globe, but the Penan's medicinal plant knowledge saves humanity to find and develop a vaccine (Brosius, 1999: 41). However updated in our Contingent #NOW of then (2016-2020), post-deforestation there was no cure for our "sick planet" (Mirzoeff, 2014), climaxing in a climate changed apocalypse. But in *TULIN* the world did not end, and post-apocalypse the film finishes *here/#NOW*, picking up the pieces of all that did not *survive as the fittest*. Unfortunately, we never got to travel to screenings on distributing the film because the COVID-19 pandemic started. However *TULIN* was/is made available online, on demand during the *lockdown* - The

long now, when contagious bodies were asked to #StayAtHome even though *our house is on fire...*

Looking to the future, I do think there's significance in delving into *Cli-Fi* (climate-science-fiction) films and stories... but it's just a question of *what futures do we want to imagine?* ... TULIN felt too much like a *wake up call* – an invitation to wake up with shock and fear. But to consider the viewership with empathy, it is shared in a land covered in scars and trauma. And maybe *hope is as shallow as fear*, but *optimism is a strategy*, and too many souls live out life with activist-fatigue, eco-anxiety, grief and the ongoing layers of intergenerational dispossession. So what do I want to share with them? What stories to we want to tell? What energy do we want to put out in this life? *Maybe the future is not a problem to solve, but is a trauma to heal?*⁶

(Ongoing) Conclusion

Over the last few years, the political arrangement of Sarawak and Malaysia broke the uninterrupted *Barisan Nasional*/BN (*National Coalition*) domination, and now ping-pongs back and forth the bi-partisan opposition party *Parti Keadilan Rakyat*/PKR. The timber mafia is much less active and so my collaborators don't feel the same intensity of concern, and so we no longer hide our camera, and we don't need to risk motorbike rides on logging roads at night to avoid being seen. BMF, *Save the Rivers* and other NGOs (like *The Borneo Project*) have more partnerships with the governments, for example working together to establish the *Baram Peace Park* for the *preservation* of the Selungo primary forest. However the logging certainly hasn't stopped – it's just that now the bulldozers have returned to the regrowth of the secondary forest. There are also shifts within the villages, where many Penan communities have fractured according to the split of support of BN and PKR – equating that the opposition to logging and plantations as less heterogenous. After over thirty years of being impoverished *by and in a broken system*, development projects that permanently shift the land sometimes feel like the best option for some Penan, who like *all of us*, just want a *better future for their children...* The struggle in Sarawak continues with the need for support and solidarity.

⁶ See Joanna Macy, *The Work that Reconnects*, and an applied initiative in Australia, *Psychologists for Climate Change*.

Immediate financial support directly to Penan families, to *Penan Baram Empowerment Networking Association* (PENA), as well as *Save the Rivers*, BMF and *The Borneo Project* would be incredibly helpful and invited.

I suppose what I have tried to do by *writing this story* has been a vehicle to ask what I have learnt over the years, and how I process the world I find myself. When I first started working to preserve endangered languages and help *keep culture strong*, it felt important and meaningful for the community. And then moving more into environmental activism, defined by a practice that acknowledged the stake holders from outside the village community, I thought we could make a film that would finally stop logging/palm oil/damage/destruction... I thought we could *save the day*. But we made a film that has been barely seen and so has a mild impact to say the least. And for many years this has felt like a *failure*. It was the belief I had that I could do something to make change and uphold promises made to Mutang. During *TULIN* and over the last few years I have been journeying through life and death cycles with the passing of my mother. A journey that has rippled an elemental sacredness to life whilst embodied in the closing/opening hearts of grief. And moving through the death cycle helps find the afterlife of *life after death*. The preciousness of every part – including *our* precious part in the whole. And so in trying to piece together my interpretations, experiences and feelings, I have used the art of story to help process my values to be able to move through to the next chapter with some clarity, purpose and CARE. It is not a *hero's journey*, nor one of *awareness* – but one of *empathy*. A story of resonance, in trying to process a way to *move and be*. After writing this article I see *filmmaking* as a whole *journey beyond the screen*. Like many, I have been indoctrinated into a system that *values productivity* and *attributes value* according to *output*. And perhaps here I see the flaw in the way *this Story of Sarawak* has been told – where I was trying to assert a *measure of value* of resistance. A resistance this is not *defined by* but rather *includes* documentation. Instead of measuring our *creations as commodities*, maybe we can see them as a *trace of the creative journey*.

It seems to me, that the *nomadic ways* got *lost in translation*, or

perhaps culturally appropriated. And our *short attention spans* saw the headlines of the *big picture*, and skimmed the surface of the beauty in the detail... Nomad = Moving on + Letting go ... *Wrong answer*. And if this is how we continue to navigate the Planetary Emergency, it is *Game Over*. For the nomadic path was never a neglect of CARE or responsibility – there was always a *return to the earth* when we followed the cycles of the sun... *and twenty years later when the uvut palm returned to maturity, the Penan family would settle once more...*

We don't need to finish one film and then *move on* to the next. We don't need to *collect* stories and then *dispose* of our relationships in search of a *new update*. *Ongoing commitment* is its own practice of CARE and resistance of *life in a Broken System*. And rather than measuring film and other creative pursuits as the *output* or *outcome*, we can see film as a *starting point*. The opportunity and the *opportune unity* to bring different souls together. Collaborating is about *negotiating* – learning to listen, learning to share and finding *our common voice*. And how precious these cross-cultural collaborations can be. And perhaps in doing so, we dismantle the system that *stunts our collective* by separation. And film and all creative collaborations, both on and off the screen are a *portal into the imagination*. And through uniting and dreaming together, we can return back to earth and the connected whole. *Stories are where we may practice life. And life is where we may practice eternity*. If we conclude that what happened in Sarawak is a *tragedy*, then we finish the story prematurely. Rather it is *ongoing*. It is the "art of living on a damaged planet" (Tsing *et al*, 2017) where *life is our greatest artwork*. And *love is the greatest form of resistance*. In a world where some *profit* on another's *loss*, there are so many of us *asking for help*. And there are so many of us who can. And when we move past the paternalistic *saviour complex* into one of *solidarity and support*, that's when the magic happens and the real work starts.

When I look at my practice, my experiences and the all of the efforts of resistance from this tale, the most important contributions I have made are not remembered on a screen. It was when I was able to buy a wheelchair after an old lady had a fall. Or putting down my *motor that can hear* (microphone) and organising a *motor that helps someone else hear* hearing-

aids. It has been the weddings to which I contributed; supporting families through grief; housing friends when they had no home; it has been days collecting rice when the harvest was ready; it has been making music videos for my musician friends; it has been trying to unhook the boat swallowed to the monsoon rains only to be attacked by a crocodile; it has been helping out where I could... and it has been *love*. It has been the many shades of sharing life with collaborators, friends and community that is most precious of all the gifts. These are not the projects I had as an *idea*, they are the requests of what my collaborators shared when I *listened*. For when we want to do something to help others and help our planet, who are we to be the experts? Who are we to be the experts of someone else's life? Who are we to be the experts of something else's existence? *Zoomed out* and it's a Planetary Emergency with nowhere to start. *Zoom in* on the *here* and #NOW, and then maybe we can see that the *answer has been staring us in the face the whole time...*

...Maybe it's time to *stop talking and listen...*

Call to action

I would like to conclude this article by removing any poetic tone. I must say I often hide behind my words and I tell stories rather than employ academic language. After attempting to turn my relationship with Mutang, Penan communities and the post-logged forests of Sarawak into (anthropological) research – it doesn't sit well with me to think that what I do in the (social) sciences is often caught up in justifying validity on things I don't have the right to say, and consequentially I don't talk of what I really learnt and experienced on the journey and within the practice. In light of such a rationale, I present the following recommendations in consolidated form as an epilogue to our story of Sarawak. For perhaps that is one key recommendation as the next step for filmmakers, artists and storytellers committed to creating sustainable (and equal) futures: I believe it is our role to help transition the *Cult of Awareness* into a pathway of action⁷.

⁷ In the documentary world, often this is referred today as *Impact Producing*. See *BritDocs* (UK) and *Shark Island* (Australia) for program of *GoodPitch* models of impact producing support and successful case studies; such as *Gaby Baby* (2015) by Maya Newell and Charlotte Mars.

1) From *Awareness* to *Empathy*

Scientific models, facts and knowledge often equate audience paralysis and turn the *tangible* and *material* into *abstraction*. Ethnographic accounts that are grounded in first-hand experience, and the paralleling emotional experience, should be prioritised. This also extends into the non-human, whereby alternate perspectives help audiences *remember* or *realise* different experiences of life during the planetary emergency. Post-NeoLiberalism, in *our century of self*, it is helpful to help others realise that they are not the centre of the world.

2) *Decolonising the Imagination* and *Speculating Sustainable Futures*

Our history has been contaminated and our imagination has been colonised. And slowly reality is catching up to the sci-fi dystopias of yesterday's imagination. Helping to imagine sustainable futures gives a framework to show *how it can be achieved*. Let this be a process of *show don't tell*. No one likes to be told (whether they were right or wrong) – no one likes to be told. Show don't tell, *what world do we want to create?*

3) *Trigger warning/Enter with Caution*

Once *empathy* is practiced, we realise that not everyone's experience of the planetary emergency is the same. And we need to ensure that the eco-anxiety, grief and trauma are treated with CARE. We must ask, *what energy do we want to put out into the world? What stories do we want to share? And how can we do it with CARE?*

4) *Interviews as Active Listening*

There are some things that some people say only when a camera is present. It's not about *exposing* or *interrogating* the person in front of the camera. But rather it is the time to share (y)our heart(s), as we ask someone else to share theirs. Within this dynamic, as *those listening*, we have the opportunity to be guided. We can listen to what we are told. And if we listen, we can respond accordingly. *What can we do when we let people tell us what they want and need?*

5) *Frontlines vs Privilege. Personal not Local*

Our consumerist lives are often commodified, equating that few of us in the world have first-hand experience of living on the land. And even fewer of us are indigenous to any land. Instead, the majority of the world's human populations are the ancestors of intergeneration dispossession, migration and alienation. Learning from, and sharing with, land-based and indigenous peoples is of deep significance in order to understand the problems, as well as be guided in the practices

that are intertwined with planetary cycles of growth and nourishment. These areas of land, forms of knowledge and (land-based and indigenous) peoples, are the most *threatened* and should be regarded as the *frontlines* of the planetary emergency. Establishing networks of (cross-cultural) collaborations, solidarity and support is pivotal. Previously, the environmental movement told us to “think global, act local”. But contextualised with the *frontlines* and *areas of privilege*, maybe we can update the mantra to acknowledge the *asymmetrical experience* and the significance of cross-cultural relationships: “think global, act interpersonal/interspecies”.

6) *Creativity as System Disruption*

Though we may not ask – *who will save us* (?), we do ask – *what will save us?* And we ask this question in a broken system. The moment we perpetuate our practice according to the constraints of discourse, we specialise and categorise, and insert ourselves in the industry/norms/*business as usual*, we not only continue *the system*, but we also strengthen it. Each time we make a film and distribute it in the usual pathways, we help establish a *film industry*. *Could we not take what we've learnt and question our practice everyday? Why make a film when there are so many possibilities? We must disrupt and dismantle, step by step. And continue to adapt... it's ongoing. Every day is the dawning of a new day. Follow your gut. Don't be constrained... Resist.*

7) *Creating space*

Increasingly, the environmental movement speaks of the need to learn from and be led by indigenous voices. Quite simply for filmmakers and cross-cultural collaborators, I believe this next step would be to support these indigenous directors and storytellers. I don't want to just *feature* these voices in 'my' film, I want to enable these voices to be the directors. I don't have the answers to the Planetary Emergency. But I believe there are others who do, and I want to help some of those voices that otherwise remain silent.

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Invitation to support – Be part of the story (SARAWAK):

Penan Baram Empowerment Networking Association (PENA):
<http://penanempnet.weebly.com/>

Save Rivers Network: <https://saverivers.org/> ; *Bruno Manser Fund:* <https://bmf.ch/de>

The Borneo Project: <https://borneoproject.org/>