China: Interview: David Novack and Janice Engelhart on All Static and Noise

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New Bloom editor Brian Hioe interviewed filmmakers David Novack and Janice Engelhart on their documentary on the ongoing human rights crisis in Xinjiang, All Static & Noise. The following interview was conducted in August 2023.

Brian Hioe: First, could the two of you introduce yourselves for readers that might not know you?

David Novack: My name is David Novack. I am a longtime filmmaker of documentary films. I am originally from the New York City area. I am currently living in Portugal. I am a specialist in sound for film and I teach sound for film at the Universidade Lusófona here in Portugal. I came into the film industry as a sound specialist doing rerecording and final mixing for films for about fifteen years, then I gradually transitioned into documentary filmmaking from that point on.

I have a wife, two kids, a dog, and a cat. [Laughs]

Janice Engelhart: I am currently living in Amman, Jordan. I'm from Seattle, Washington, and I had spent ten years living in Taiwan and China, due to my husband's work. At that time, I was working as an arts programmer, facilitating art exchanges between US and Chinese artists. It was in that capacity that I came to know David.

I was a programmer and I worked with him on his tour of China. I also have a background in counseling and social work, I worked at the Taipei Community Center. And I worked on the Shoah Holocaust project, which was a Spielberg effort that interviewed survivors of the Shoah for a visual documentation project.

BH: What is it that made you want to make this film? What drew you to that?

JE: I had the opportunity to see the atrocity unfolding in China. I was in Taiwan from 2009 to 2010. It was then that Liu Xiaobo was arrested. I was on the Mainland from 2010 to 2019. I was new to China, so it was very shocking for me to see this suppression that people were living with.

There were high hopes with the economic opening up that things would relax politically, but I was seeing friends who were self-censoring and many artists that were defining their work in the context of the regime. It wasn't necessarily political work, they would never call it that, but it was clear that because of the political restrictions, work was being defined.

DN: In 2010, I was touring China with my first film as director. It was a film about human rights in Appalachia in the United States, around various forms of coal mining and environmental devastation and its impact on people's health and lives. So I was on that program and one of the places where we went was Guangzhou. That was where Janice and I met.

Subsequently, I co-produced a film on human rights in North Korea. I later made another film about the Russian diaspora, revolving around Isaac Babel, who was a writer who was executed under Stalin. It was kind of looking at similar themes, though it wasn't a contemporary story, it resonated very much in the contemporary moment. Then Janice reached out to me, right around when I finished that film.

JE: It was very auspicious since David and I met on December 10th, 2010. Which is the day Liu Xiaobo is awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

David was doing a screening that same night. What was so striking to me, was that here I could listen to this American director criticize the American government, talk about human rights problems, without any restriction. And then I could see Chinese audiences consume that–to the Chinese government's great pleasure. And then people were, in secret, trying to watch an event that was occurring in Norway.

Then years would pass. As arts programmers in China, we were always trying to find the space where events were allowed. Where is the red line of what the Chinese government will tolerate?Sometimes, the events get overtly canceled. Sometimes the cancellations were not so direct. The fire alarm or the sprinklers would go off at a venue,shutting down the event. You never really got a straight answer as to why your event was canceled or who was behind the order to shut it down. But, you always try to find the cracks in the cement so you could program some event, somewhere. I had worked on dance,poetry, music programming, but it was the film work that Ifound soresonant.

The other observation I had was that there was a limitation to what journalists could do–at least in China. As the years went on, we saw several western journalists leave because they could not get their visasrenewed. Things wereamping up around 2015 and 2016. Xi had come to power in 2013. We sawgreater and greater restrictions. People were more and more scared. Technological surveillance became more pervasive, a real problem. Who was going to tell the story of how these changes were impacting daily life?

I used to attend a lot of underground art events. They were off the radar, housed in small venues or people's homes. But once the cameras came, around 2017 and 2018, these kinds of gatherings becameoff-limits. There was nowhere to go. There were even cameras in the parks. It was at great risk that people were gathering and exchanging. Even just meeting became dangerous.

That's when I came to the place of wanting to work with film. My life was becoming so dystopian that I didn't have language to describe my experience. The combination of pain, fear, loss, and shock was too much for me to process. I needed a creative outlet. I did't have the skills to make a high production value film alone. I'm not a filmmaker. I'm really more of an activist, advocate, and arts programmer. I do have the ability to facilitate and bring people together.

I wanted a western director because I thought this was a story that the western world needed to understand, the world that wasn't China-focused and didn't understand China but was certainly falling victim to the Chinese government's nefarious activities abroad, by buying products induced with Uyghur forced labor. I went to David, as an experienced filmmaker who also demonstrated some grit. I knew that making a film about China was clearly not going to be an easy project.

He tackled difficult content and political sensitivities with his film "Burning the Future," and "Babel"–a film inRussian and Ukrainian. I thought he could manage working in a language not his own, Chinese.

It was hard.I had gone to some Chinese filmmakers, who weren't well-established in their careers. This was a topic they weren't comfortable covering. I understood some of what was going on in Xinjiang.I thought that it would be difficult for directors, artists, and musicians inside of China to become engaged in this project, given the politically sensitive content.

In 2018, when we began, there was a lot of resistance. The story of what was happening in the Uyghur region wasn't out as much as it is today. We weren't seeing the BBC or other news pieces now available on YouTube. Few people were reporting on it, and the community was super-timid.

DN: We didn't even know too much about the extent of repressions in Xinjiang at that point. When we started filming, the arc of the film wasn't even conceived to include this story because it had very little to do with the people we were focused on, Han Chinese rights defenders and the sacrifices they and their families make in the context of the erosion of rule of law in China.

As we moved forward, it first became clear that Xinjiang was very important, that rights erosion there had a different character but was part and parcel of the overall changes in China. As things escalated even more, it became clear to us this needed to be its own film–that this was a cultural genocide in the least, if not a full genocide. This scale of this story demanded that the voices, the Uyghurs and Kazakhs and others impacted, needed to be prominent in their own piece and not be part of something else.

JN: I was just thinking about this in preparation for the interview. What occurred to me is that the Chinese government has this tactic with the rights defenders, who knowingly accept the risk of going to prison for speaking out.

It's the family members the government targets; it's the kids that can't go to school, the wives that are being stalked outside their apartments. To me, that was just outrageous. The cruelty ran so deep.

In our initial concept, we had engaged someone living in the diaspora. She was the daughter of a Tiananmen survivor who was still in prison but who had a release date in the next few years. She started to engage us, we prepped a full film shoot around her, and then she pulled out because she was afraid. Her mother was still in China and she was afraid of that.

So then we were looking for another young person who could represent the persecuted family member story and it was Jewher that came to the fore, through our partner, Cao Yaxue of China Change. She's someone you may want to talk to, because she was involved from the early stages and defined much of the film's narrative. Jewher had testified before the CECC, the Congressional Executive Commission on China.

That was an indication to us that this was someone we could invest our time in, because she was already public. She became a focus of the film because of her family story. Then the Uyghur story unfolded, and we realized that, wow, she's not only a key protagonist, but we need to build the story around her.

BH: Was it through these organic links that you found the protagonists for this film? Because with this film there's often the risk assessment that the subjects must take.

DN: It was kind of both. I actually remember I was in a car with Yaxue. We were on our way to Weimar, where we were going to film a scene that was related to the original concept. We were filming in Weimar because we wanted to film about the reach the Chinese government has all over the world. The city of Weimar was a central site for concentration camps during the Holocaust, so

they are very active about this history being something that is dealt with clearly.

They have a human rights award. They had given their human rights award to Ilham Tohti, Jewher's dad. We were there because they had given the prize to Ilham Tohti and someone, some entity, most likely connected to the Chinese government, had managed to take down their entire city server and erase everything. It was a big thing.

We met with the mayor and the mayor was telling us this story about how this happened as a consequence of offering Tohti the prize. While we're on the way there, Yaxue was telling me the story of Jewher and Tohti's separation at the airport, and I'm like, "Oh my gosh, we have to talk to Jewher and see where this leads."

The first time we went to Jewher was only around a month later. We made that part of the story originally to give context to the Weimer event, and to contextualize her father while telling her first-person story about their airport experience. It became clear to me that she would make a very strong young woman to have as a protagonist for many reasons.

It helps for international audiences that she speaks English. It helps for the overall impact that she is a Beijinger; a Beijinger who is raised there as a bit of an outsider but also an insider, since that's where she is raised, and that she is pursuing this education in foreign relations and international relations in a way where she can engage with these issues that are so important to her. As well as her age, and the fact that she is a woman. All of these things come together to say that this is a wonderful person to have on camera, since we're looking for people who audience members can identify with. She has a Beijing core, but also an American core, and now a Uyghur core, and she's young–this is a story that should be reaching out to a youthful generation. It all comes together.

Jewher had already dealt with the fact that she is going to speak up. The last thing her dad says to her in the film is, "You show the world how strong we are." That doesn't mean shutting up stoically, she always interpreted that–I think wisely–as "you're going to be out there in the diaspora where you're safe. You're going to be speaking."

We had that comment a lot from the Han Chinese who we had met with the 709 lawyers, who had this sense: "What is your responsibility if you're out?" And it's a difficult question. Especially with the potential ramifications for people back home. How do you assume that responsibility and what do the people back at home really want us to do, knowing we're doing something potentially that puts them in danger? These are hard personal and ethical questions.

We can't impose the answer on anyone. Janice and I, as well as our crews, we've all been very careful to make sure more than once that people who are speaking to us on camera are comfortable knowing the ramifications–that they understand and have made this decision consciously. When we finished the film–because some people we had interviewed four years before finishing the film–we asked them: "How do you feel today? Do you still want to be in this film?" We really needed to take that pulse.

Jewher had already been out in the world speaking when we spoke with her. Then, Abduweli, the other protagonist, didn't come to us by accident and through connections in the same way that Jewher did. We had seen in the media that people in Turkey were being interviewed for some video pieces and some print pieces. Who is the person that's coordinating that?

We reached out and we found that it was Abduweli. Right away he said, "Come, come to Turkey, and I'll introduce you to as many people as possible." I didn't know to what extent he was going to be a protagonist. Initially, he was going to be a facilitator. We interviewed him and got his story, but he

was really facilitating for six days of non-stop shooting in Istanbul.

When we spoke on Skype and found out that he knew Tohti, that he was a student who had attended Tohti's classes and that they had a friendship, that really shifted it. He's the loveliest man, his family is so lovely, and he connects to Jewher's story through the fact that he knows Jewher's father. He was even in their apartment when she was younger, he was one of those students that would be in his apartment at times.

It became a very natural progression that we would then follow him on his journey, where ever it would bring him, and also to whomever else we would meet along the way.

JE: One feature that has evolved since the film has been out in the world a little bit is that Abduweli serves this tremendous advocacy role in preserving culture. His professional life has been focused on preserving the Uyghur language. He found the space that was permissible to teach Uyghur under Chinese law (early childhood education) and continues to promote that. Jewher is working in the realm of forced labor now, she's become a tremendous advocacate for these issues and can elaborate on those themes that show up in the film to the larger audiences.

BH: It's so interesting that the film deals with displacement, passing on culture, or connecting with local and international stakeholders.

JE: There's a moment when Abduweli is in Norway, he's in the park. He's talking to himself. He says he's happiest when he's working. "I always feel alienated, I always feel apart. I'm always different from this place. But when I'm working, I'm happy."

He says again to Jewher on the phone call, just keep working, that will keep you happiest. How do you survive on the outside world, when you're so displaced from your home, your family, and your people? The work is what gives your life meaning.

DN: The ramifications for Abduweli's work have been severe. It's hard to draw a direct line between his work and the ramifications back home in Xinjiang to his family, but some very bad things have happened to his family back at home. He believes it's because of his work. It's not necessarily so, because this stuff happens to people who don't have people in the diaspora speaking up. Yet it's a burden that he carries. It's a real burden.

BH: I wanted to ask about some of the creative choices and challenges to shaping the film. Could you talk a bit about that? Such as the stylistic choices that shaped it, such as the animation.

DN: That's complicated. All my films have been structured around the journey of a protagonist. Usually two or three. I feel very comfortable with that format. The biggest challenges for me were that we have all this testimony, so how do we whittle it down? How do we choose what pieces to use in the testimony, since we have 300 hours of interviews?

In Kazakhstan alone, we had probably 25 interviews. Because what happened in Kazakhstan is that Aina, who is a human rights lawyer in Almaty, she just put out word that there is an American filmmaker who wanted to interview people on their experiences and on their family's experiences. I said I would just like to have 5 or 6 stories that might have some slight differences between them and I can decide what to use, but people there were so anxious to speak that van loads of people came to speak to us. Quite literally.

And so how to choose? In Turkey, there are probably eight more interviews we did not use at all, maybe more. The best that we can do is to look at what people are saying and how they are

delivering it, does it feel like our audience can connect, does it have a little bit of a difference in the story.

Imagine–most of these interviews are an hour and a half long. We could pick out the ten-minute kernel pieces and have people get all of that testimony, but we realized that wouldn't work. If we were to just do one person's story about torture in a detention center, we could have done that, but that just felt as if the scale would be lost.

Instead, we came up with this concept of shared experiences; that everybody we're talking with had been there, had detention, had torture, had whatever other things we wanted to bring to bear. And perhaps we could think of it more in terms of an imaginary location, based on reality, where they all simultaneously occupied the space. And we called this our shared spaces.

Our shared space had themes–we initially started with nine or ten different themes, but it would have been much too many. We sort of picked and chose pieces of people's testimony so we could occupy these spaces and give the audience not only a sense of scale, but veracity, because you're hearing the same or similar things from different people at the same moment. We thought that would be very effective. Of course, the way to show it would be with some kind of animation without it being particularly 'graphic,' as in difficult to watch, to really give a sense of these shared spaces and give some visuals that the audience can really think about.

You could also be focused on people's faces and tell people's stories and not go to a visual. But there are other pieces out there that have an animation about Uyghurs. A few of them our illustrator did illustrations for. I found the style very effective. There's something real enough about it, but it still has enough of a distance of being a little unreal that it protects the audience from trauma.

JE: I think David's work as a sound engineer and designer–his foundation in film came to the fore during the animation. You'll hear the sound of a door closing, the sound of a prison, when Ilham Tohti and Jewher are together at the airport and when they part. Or the chains. That adds a whole other layer for emotional digestion.

That might be lost with regular film, but is pronounced with animation. What I found so intriguing with all of our interviews is that everybody talks about the time when the police came to their apartments. You hear when they come to the door, the banging on the door–again, a sound feature.

That's done with animation.. You hear the screams. You hear the people coming into the apartment through the door. here is the sound of dogs barking in the film. For me, as an observer of the process, those sounds layered the emotional impact with intensity.

And I've heard people–lawyers in particular–who have described the process of waiting to be arrested. They knew it was coming sometimes. And there was relief when the police finally came because they were so nervous before hand. I found that particularly impactful. In these stories, you have the waiting to be arrested, the being taken away in the black cars–and we see/hear all this repeatedly with both animation and sound.

How do you deliver both the intensity and magnitude of the experience: the torture, the time in prison?– David and Nancy, our editor, came up with the idea of the shared spaces. I think that was a brilliant move, because artistically you're able to package both the breadth and the intensity of the experience.

DN: Also to the overall structure in editing, which was thankfully in the hands of Nancy, our editor, who I also happen to be married to.. We resisted giving too much didactic information that someone could just look up online in a moment. Because the goal for us is to create a lasting impression. A

lasting impression that haunts–in both a positive and negative way. That haunts the audience because you've witnessed a kind of trauma and you're carrying that with you afterward. If we've done our job, you're carrying with you the experience of watching the film, long afterward.

To that goal, to that end, the shared spaces, the testimony and the heaviest of moments and the end of interviews in which people are just staring down the camera and maybe crying or not crying–but forcing the audience to sit with that moment before moving on… those are all there to create that kind of lasting impression.

But there's the other lasting impression, which is the resilience. Because we meet these characters that we come to like. We like them for different reasons and they become proxies for different reasons. A young woman who has found herself in America. A middle-aged guy who is a poet and is so knowledgeable and well-educated and with his own personal traumas, both of them bringing us through. Where they kind of come together is in their action, their activism, their hope, and their desire to keep going because not only is it all that they can do, but it's what they must do.

They leave us with the two things in the end–Abudelli saying that they can take our mosques and our schools, but they can't take our souls. And Jewher with this expressive dance which is a dance of action and a dance of trauma and a dance of all of these things. She lands on the ground and then she sits up. Because she's going to sit up to face the truth and to face us. Creating all of these lasting, haunting impressions was really our goal. So when you look at many of these individual elements, they each serve one aspect of that lasting impression.

JE: I would just say that for me, the final dance scene is so exemplary of the state of affairs now. Jewher falls, she falls three times. Then she sits up. She doesn't stand up like a superhero. And maybe this was for me, where the western filmmaker–that David and Nancy, all of us, were willing to tell a truth that is very hard to sit through. The film is not easy to watch and we recognize that.

We have been told by others, "Couldn't it be happier?" There are little moments of humor, like with the EU, when Jewher is having exchanges with the parliamentarians. But how do you tell this story in a happy way, because it's going on now? It's not hindsight, we're not there yet. People are still being detained. People cannot live freely, people in the diaspora cannot communicate freely. Uyghurs cannot communicate with Uyghurs and Han Chinese cannot communicate with Han Chinese, if they are segments of the dissident population.

I can no longer make contact with any of my friends on the mainland. I don't want to put them in a situation where they are accused of meddling with foreign forces or black hands. Now I've put myself in the world as someone willing to speak out on what the Chinese government is doing. Being truly honest about what is going on, knowing that this is hard, knowing that the market doesn't want this–it wants what is happy and funny.

DN: The documentary market wants movies about true crime and celebrities and music. Those things are all great, we're saturated with bad news in the world. I sort of get that film wants to be a fantasy world. But this is too giant a crime against humanity to look the other way. It is one in which we're mostly looking the other way.

BH: Could you talk about the challenges of getting the film on the market, in that case? Xinjiang is, of course, not a pleasant topic.

DN: There's a hell of a lot there that we didn't show.

JE: And this is just a group of filmmakers' perspectives on this issue. I think with any content that

runs counter to the Chinese government's approved narrative, you look for the cracks in the cement and see where the openings exist. There's so much resistance out there and we could talk endlessly about challenges.

But I think there are also moments of hope–there are people, like you, willing to listen to this story. Or there are people who are inviting us to screen the film because it's important, because it's not a news piece. The people who come are curious, willing, and some of them are scared.

We had an audience member in New Zealand, which is where we did our premier at DocEdge, who was scared. She's the daughter of a Uyghur advocate and her uncle is in a camp. She told me before coming in that she was scared, that she didn't know if she could handle watching the whole film. Among community members, that's often a response we get, that they're scared to look at it on film and are unsure of how they will react.

Then at the end, in the Q-and-A session, where Abduweli was present, she said, looking around at the audience members, I'm just so grateful for the film–it speaks for what I feel–and I'm so grateful to all of you for listening. She could identify with what she saw in the film andshe felt validated.

BH: Where has this film been screened and where do you hope for it to go next?

DN: So far the film has been screened at DocEdge in New Zealand. That was the world premiere. That was the very end of the spring festival season. We now have a European premiere scheduled at a festival this fall – not yet announced publicly by the festival, so our apologies for not being clearer. But we are waiting now to see what other festivals around the world for the fall season might accept the film, because we'd like to have a few more festival screenings before we go in other directions.

We're engaging with potential distributors about a whole combination of broadcasts around the world in various countries, also a theatrical strategy that we're going to couple with an impact campaign, as well as educational distribution for the film.

We have no doubts that the film will get out there and be seen on a wider, broader basis, it's just a matter of time. We'd like to, by next winter, be in some kind of broad distribution strategy, we have all of those plans. And we also plan to bring it to cities around the world ourselves, parliaments and congresses, to have thinktank screenings, screenings for media, for the UN, because we need to go beyond the traditional media aworld with this if it's going to have the impact we hope for it to have. We want to very directly go to policymakers around the world in different places and we certainly hope it will be screening in Taiwan shortly.

Our website has a way for people who would like to have a screening to host one, or talk with their local film festival. They could also reach out to us as we begin to plan the rollout for the film.

JE: We have several universities, community organizations, and NGOs that have already reached out. I have a spreadsheet of requests, but we can't screen the film publicly until we complete the festival circuit in 2023.

DN: There are some other strategies and also roadblocks to distribution. We recognize, is this going to get on Netflix? They're doing business in China or courting it. Is it going to get on Disney+? No way, they are doing business in China or courting it. So we know that there are obstacles to major platforms and some major broadcasters that have a vested interest in protecting their relationship with the Chinese government.

As an example, you may have read about how there was a film about a Chinese tennis player from the late 80s that was pulled from Tribeca. We know that there's interference with large festivals and

cultural institutions that are engaged with China.

I say that without blame. A film festival that invites Chinese filmmakers is a great thing. It may be that showing this film means they would not be able to invite Chinese filmmakers anymore, nor Chinese buyers. From a cultural standpoint, the self-censorship that happens–I don't blame the organizations that self-censor. But I want to encourage and inspire organizations and cultural institutions to get beyond and above that, to understand that in the 1930s, there was self-censorship of what was happening to Jews and others in Germany and then Poland. Is that something we want to carry with us again?

Brian Hioe is one of the founding editors of New Bloom. He is a freelance journalist, as well as a translator. A New York native and Taiwanese-American, he has an MA in East Asian Languages and Cultures from Columbia University and graduated from New York University with majors in History, East Asian Studies, and English Literature. He was Democracy and Human Rights Service Fellow at the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy from 2017 to 2018 and is currently a Non-Resident Fellow at the University of Nottingham's Taiwan Studies Programme.

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