*(My decision about moments was made)*

LUCIA NIMCOVA
*Double Coding,* installation, films and publications, 2008

**Lucia Nimcova**: One year after I finished the *Double Coding* (2008) video installation, I decided to have a look at my film diary *(my own written observations, or literally rewritten thoughts I liked from the hidden/banned films).* I selected 9 double-coded sentences and added them to video installation without an English translation. For those who don't speak Slovak it will be just another sound, however the audience can find a translation outside of the video room to decode message. It is my unfinished game between visual, spoken and translated history.

For me this is not just a project as, *Double Coding*, but it's really a part of trilogy. It's *Unofficial* (2008), it's *Leftovers* (2007-9) and *Double Coding*. There is a repetition, it's almost all the same, but a little bit different somehow. There are many similarities but at the same time three different voices:

There's official life, which is basically how we consider ourselves: we remember being a part of a system, even trying to escape for years, and how this experience influences our life today.

Then *Leftovers* is more like private life and I'm trying to understand what it means to be a child, growing up under communism and then suddenly, at 12 find yourself in a mess, some transition – you don't know where it leads. It's still in the process, which is in a way very exciting but also very confusing.

And then you have this hidden, double-coded world. Very important for me, because it's something we shouldn't see and understand.

I decided to do research on fictional films because they reveal what the hidden reality is in a "so-called fiction". I think the most complicated thing to accept for censors, was "that" reality, "they" created and directors were trying to show through typologies: people, situations, e.t.c

**The logic of censorship is extremely hard to describe because officially, censorship does not exist after 1968. It was a completely abstract thing. There was no document, or law saying what you could or could not do. We had untold rules. People would realise only after they made some mistake and others had to learn from it. Not to repeat it!**

**Clare Butcher:** Because there is no logic.

**LN:** Exactly, no logic, but you can talk about it by giving examples. I will interpret Miloš Forman - a Czech director.

*(I didn't find something similar from a Slovak director. We were Czechoslovakia – one country until 1992 – so I thought, okay, this is a good example. I like it, same logic.)*

There was a great theatre called Semaphore where two very important actors were playing (Suchý & Šlitr). They used very poetic, double coded language.

In the 1950s, you weren't allowed to say 'Rock 'n Roll'. This was very powerful. You could be kicked out of school by saying it. Suchý & Šlitr had a song 'Year by year, we are surprised, how we are changing ourselves'…but in our language it's, "*Rok co rok se divíme, jak rok co rok se měníme*",

Basically they would use similar words or similar sounding words, but the meaning would be different. This "Hidden/Banned world" was incredibly creative. Some poets would call that era a blessing.

Another example would be Karel Vachek (also Czech director) who couldn't do films, so decided to use parts of existing texts, usually from historic books. Basically, he created a book (*which he call a film)* out of the different texts, those published even hundreds of years ago.

You would read different storybook texts inside of his "inner film", connected by common moments, where people are showing their vitality. He would put them together. For example he was trying to show how we, Czechs and Slovaks, were trying to be independent from Austro-Hungarian rule. There were different actions taking place. Students were painting symbols of the monarchy on post-boxes. They would paint it with a special instrument, they made. They could tell you in which circumstances these symbols should be painted and how… e.t.c., in a way it would be very similar to what we [Czechs & Slovaks] were going through at that time. You know, you're trying to find a freedom.

**CB:** And creating a structure within that.

**LN:** Yes, he couldn't do a film. So he decided to work with something that already existed. Contemporary forever, somehow...

*(He emigrated, but after a few years of emigration, came back to Czechoslovakia in 1985, before the "Velvet Revolution" in 1989. There was no hope that things would ever change at that time. It was crazy thing to do: become a free prisoner back in your homeland. He was lucky to manage it.)*

There were many intellectuals and artists who escaped after 1968, in the beginning of the Normalization period.

One Slovak writer, Ladislav Mňačko, who had to leave the country, bought a house very close to the Slovak border, from where he could see the Bratislava Castle from the Austrian side. He would look at the castle, work on his books and get drunk everyday.

*(Bratislava is the capital of Slovakia)*

But coming back to the films, Slovak films. I was really surprised how many bad ones were hidden/banned. They are full of compromises and clichés.

**CB:** And self awareness.

**LN:** Yes, but also you can see how the logic of what was hidden/banned was changing from '69 to '89. In'68 there were many films with different characters and personalities. Then during the years they became very similar.

It's also funny that many films they put into the Tresor (Communist film censorship board) only after millions people had already seen it in the cinemas or on television. An official would go accidentally to the cinema and not like one or two scenes and then…

**CB:** So two viewers could have gone to see the same film in name but seen completely different things…

**LN:** "Maestros of interpretation" – you can always find a way of interpreting strangely if you want. In general there was an unwritten rule that censors would rather allow less to pass through their filters, than more.

I like one joke about the theatre censors: "A good censor would find faulty words even in a pantomime". That's very tricky. Some of the films were in the Tresor and after years they went out because the system had changed a little. It became much more open after the Perestroika in '85. So it's like, hey, what didn't you want to show? Why are you showing it now?

**CB:** It just shows how arbitrary it all is.

**LN:** Yes, and some of the directors had a distance from their work for many years. They get a chance to work again, if they agreed to do historical topics, or fairytales for children, but nothing contemporary. Others, the government tried to pay off. If they made a statement publicly, that they felt ashamed and would like to improve, of course, they would get another chance.

When I started with *Double Coding*, I looked at the films as a photographer. I felt like I was going to the countryside, which I'd never seen before and was curious. I was going to take some pictures for myself, for my memory. Then I realised that many things I was trying to show were not photographs, but rather moments.

Time is very important inside of them. They need time. So I opted for moments.

Moments are what I consider most important in my own logic of hidden/banned.

**CB:** So we go from the photographs to the moments…your films have a very photographic quality because of this static shot that you use. The time happens within the frame…where time happens and events happen completely differently from what the fiction might be.

**LN:** And at the same time, it's a double channel video because I felt, that moments should talk to each other. They should have a life in between them. But at the same time they could work independently. I can talk about each moment separately, but…there will be always something untold.

For example in the beginning, there is an image of the girl, chewing the gum. It is my representation, my own auto-portrait. While living in Amsterdam, I was trying to understand, why I could not live in Slovakia?

*(Chewing gum was a symbol of the West in the past for me.)*

This girl, outside of the country, with some distance, is trying to see (understand) what's there. She is not judging, but rather trying to be optimistically open enough, to see what is on view without prejudice.

This shot and many others I used in *Double Coding* are something, you could officially consider, as a part of a bad film *(and many Slovak theoreticians still do)*. I think it's very easy to put something to the side like that, and not give it the time. There are many very interesting things for us to learn.

For the shot in the beginning I selected the sentence:

**"Oči sa menia podľa toho, na čo sa pozeráš"**

***The eyes change according to what you are looking at.***

...I like the idea of this girl there, chewing gum, which was really my position. I was unofficial and also leftover. So I decided which moments I would like to photograph if I could at that time. I was a child. In the end my portrait is there. And as with *Leftovers*, this is my childhood, but from another position.

*(*Double Coding *is maybe naïve and childish, but I believe it's important and I don't care that I don't know everything about the topic.)*

When I met some theoreticians, I told them that I don't care. I don't know all the films or works of those directors. Because of course there is a logic in which they develop their work. But I don't want to know, until afterwards, when I've made my own intuitive, emotional selection from what was hidden/banned, from the films that were with the censorship board, you know – that's what interests me. I asked specific questions to a theoretician about films he'd never seen and didn't know they existed . And he sad, "Oh, but you can't judge someone for making "bad" film. He made also many good films." But I don't care.

*(This is my world. Inner world. Otherwise it would be something else. The whole life project)*

**CB:** And it's also not the point.

**LN:** Which is almost the case with history in all of Eastern Europe – the moment you start to dig, it's goes on forever. So I found something specific that I was interested in and that's it.

Another sentence in the video installation would be:

**"The real experience can not be illness."**

I use it in the spilt seconds where you see the 12 year-old boy *(well, he's not really a child anymore)* walking on his hands in pigsty *(it's a shot from fairytale)*. It's very symbolic. It's such a small moment in the film, but for me it's about, what anyone who tries to do something in such a society *(even now)* feels like. You are a comedian for them. You're not serious enough, but in a way, you are stubborn enough to do it. Whatever it might be. You could have fun, but for me it's more of a statement. In a way something like this:

*(I don't mind how you see it, or how responsible you might think it is. It's my "little part". My way of showing freedom.)*

The second shot in *Double Coding*, is a guy cleaning a lens. And I like it, because it's a logic that exists between photography and video – he's treating the video camera as a photographic camera. He's building an image of the inhabitants of his own house. If you look a bit closer, you can see that the house is built from completely different materials. Every month they were saving money to build a small part of it, and it's like "My house, my castle" and the whole family is involved, it is usually their whole life's project.

In Eastern Europe, it's something important, that you build your own house. Bigger, better. In the end the whole family would live only in the kitchen. You have it, but you have to save it for the future.

I like the sound in the scene as well. They are sawing wood continuously. It's this physical sound. It's constant work, hard work behind it, and you see this image – the family image. The setting and everything…

**CB:** And that time continues.

**LN:** Yes, and then you have an image of the little fly on the milk. Alive. Milk, something very tasty and then you see this image.

During the time, you had food, you had education, but there was still something missing. Which means you're surviving but not alive. You don't know if you've escaped or you fell down. You're in this border.

And then you have an image of a man showing a naked woman. It appears and disappears. Men would have this kind of images in their wallet, because nudity was not allowed to show publicly.

It's possible for somebody to even think, that all communist officials were secretly bigoted Catholics inside.

*(By the way, many of important, very high positioned, officials from the past, started to support catholic religion publicly after the revolution. It fits to their new profiles. From all, I will mention only our freely voted second Slovak president, Rudolf Shuster.*

*Religion was forbidden during the Communist period.)*

In general you have nudity in the films from '68 but afterwards it was usually hidden/banned.

The image of the nude is connected to the previous shot of the fly in the milk. As in this one, you have a fly on the table, behind the changing images of nudity, when you look closer.

*(Flies usually follow something smelly. In Dutch art history, insects made painting more real).*

It's also on the periphery. All these images, they happen on there because if people didn't want to be part of the support system, they ended up in peripheral settings.

All my double coded moments represent the periphery.

Hidden nudity is exactly the logic of all these films. It's something you are doing, you know: "Rok co rok se divíme, jak rok co rok se měníme." *Year by year we are surprised, how we adjusted ourselves".*

In a way it's also boredom. These are bored people. It's also certain typologies. Workers who meant to be celebrated. But suddenly you have these typologies in different circumstances. You know, they're bored. They have no hope, no responsibility.

The worker. Drinking coffee and smoking. It's such an important moment. You see this half-drunken fourth cold coffee of that day, and you know, "it's like plenty of times". What could you really do about it? It's their life.

I used this sentence for the shot:

**"Nemôžem s nimi žiť, ja sa smejem, oni plačú, ja plačem, oni sa smejú."**

*We cannot live together, when I laugh, they cry, when I cry they laugh.*

It's a complete misunderstanding. In every sense you can imagine.

In *Unofficial* project, I showed workers who didn't want to be heroes. They are just doing their work, that's all. They do not like to play official games. They do not want to be puppets. But they are caught. Officially documented.

*(Who is not against us, is automatically with us.)*

When we come back to the *Double Coding* installation and watch further, sound is becoming very important, very physical. For example, the boiling water, the eggs on the hot pan.

The way, man is cooking the eggs. It's very aggressive.

**CB:** and it's really messy, disturbing.

**LN:** Yes, in a way it's a very banal image, showing passive aggression. Compressed and present everywhere.

*(That was my intention, that you physically feel it, wherever you are in the room.)*

When you hear water boiling for the long time, there's something wrong.

Then you have a car with flat tyre/puncture. And that's a moment you can imagine. You know, it's raining, you're approaching the city, there are many nervous people in cars behind you and you're aware. And you feel the sound of the cars coming past you.

**CB:** and the frustration. You know all of that is being channelled towards you even though, everybody is simultaneously identifying with you.

**LN:** And you are at the beginning of this typical communist town, where thousands of similar stories happen all day long. Something is broken. You have to survive. You have all basics you need, but something you can hardly describe is broken.

**CB:** In the machinery there's something broken.

**LN:** And then the last image is with a Slovak traditional song and you see a typical shot of the Hight Tatras Mountains in the television.

*(The Hight Tatras Mountains are in a way something that we "as a nation" did not create. It was already there, a very long time before we came. Can we really be proud of them?)*

They had to find something typical, which could be used as a symbol of pride. All totalitarian regimes are based on propaganda and propaganda is based on censorship.

The very last shot from the installation:

A man smoking his last cigarette, in bed, before sleeping. You expect that he's waiting for somebody (maybe his wife?) but he's watching television. He's in communication with propaganda.

All the films I was working with in *Double Coding* are supposed to be in that television. But they are not. Rather, there is folklore with beautiful girls nicely dressed, singing. Everything's great.

**CB:** the fly is in the milk.

**LN:** So it's very simple.

Then [in the installation] there is a table with coins projection from the ceiling. You hear a sound of the coins. This was to simulate the position and feeling of a censor, while deciding what should be hidden/banned. The shot of the coins was repeated in many hidden/banned Slovak films and would normally be located in the worst pubs in peripheral places, where coins would fall on the bad side. The most interesting intellectuals often met there, as they couldn't meet in official places, and talk openly, if they did not want to have serious problems: pubs became the best unofficial universities.

*("Well, today we have one side, but tomorrow we could have another, so let's play.")*

I feel the same sometimes about my own work. If I were to look at these films in ten years, maybe I would select different moments, and maybe not. It could never be finished?

**CB:** It's always contingent.

**LN:** And it's just a try, to pay attention to something significant.

**CB:** And where is this particular coin footage from?

**LN:** Also from films.

**CB:** Yes, but I was wondering whether this was something you came across during your first work on *Double Coding* or if this was something that came up later?

**LN:** Well when I was first working on *Double Coding*, I already had these coin selections but I didn't use them, because somehow they didn't work for me in the rhythm and logic of double channel video. For me, they're somehow independent.

**CB:** But always ongoing behind these other things.

**LN:** If you only showed it for a little while, like a shot of the spirits that man's hand is pouring into the beer, it would not be enough. I like that shot in *Double Coding*. It's very short, but very physical.

*(It is a public secret, but everybody knows, that we had/ have many alcoholics. It is a fact.)*

When I imagine what censors could feel like, it would definitely be represented by the coin.

**CB:** As you select their selections.

**LN:** The audience could sit behind this table and look at my work, but at the same time, think about paradoxes.

*(They could be in a same position anytime, but coming from a different background)*

**CB:** And the other possibilities. What lies outside the frame?

**LN:** And so, this is the censor seat.

**CB:** And can you tell me about the actual process of censorship?

**LN:** In general we can say that film was the most severely affected by censorship amongst all the other fields of art. There were censors for every part of the filmmaking process. Usually you would call them ideological workers, or lectors, responsible for certain parts of the film. (Scripts, shooting, etc) It's completely paradoxical, that these films exist at all.

In the past you would work from negatives, so they couldn't control every second as you could now. It was always a little bit surprising in the end, what the result would be like. There were always parts, you could hide somehow – that's why these films exist. That's why they happened on the periphery.

If we imagine the world now, with our technologies, there would be very little chance, that you could officially hide something, but at the same time you have a chance to make your own independent film at your own computer, behind your own desk, without anybody knowing, if you like.

**CB:** And yet self-censorship is becoming so much more prevalent.

**LN:** Yes, it's happening more and more. It always looks "official", how we're trying to help with all these technologies, but there's always another side.

**CB:** The coin.

**LN:** Interesting is the fact, that some of the filmmakers became friends with censors. They built relationships after the years of cooperation. Basically directors started to create, so called "white crows moments" just for the censors, inside of the film.

*(White crows moments, were meant to please officials, or make them busy with something unimportant, so they would not pay attention to the most important double coded messages.)*

 **CB:** Like a decoy.

**LN:** In the end you never know if they capture the white crows. They could keep them and cut out something you wanted, or the opposite. You can easily notice scenes made to please censors.You'd suddenly have a scene in the mountains where two old men are sitting close to the fire and talking about partisan times in a very socially critical film from countryside. And they'd say, 'Oh, do you remember partisan times?' And you'd think…

**CB:** did I just hear that?

**LN:** what are partisans doing in this film?! Come on! And in a completely different setting than the rest of the film!

**CB:** And you sort of take on the mind of the censor…

**LN:** This is something to please them, but hey, you as an audience would survive that. You come to enjoy another reality in this fiction.

**CB:** That's really interesting and gives a whole new meaning to this term 'co-creation'. I mean, who is the director in this case? When there's so much double-playing and things are made for different audiences, and there are so many people and it's all happening at such a complicated level.

**LN:** And imagine the audience. They had to be quite clever. You can't consider it as something to consume at the first level. You had to…

**CB:** There's always this distance.

**LN:** So I think it made people quite smart. And they laughed, and understood.

*(Many directors and writers had problems after communism failed. They didn't know how to deal with it. In a way they had spent their whole lives developing their style and it is suddenly not understandable anymore.)*

**CB:** Geared towards this very specific set of conditions.

**LN:** Yes, and then suddenly it's different. And it's not so easy to switch. You know, your whole existence.

**CB:** Pitted against this…

**LN:** And in a way it's very nice, not to change.

**CB:** It's very useful for creative material.

**LN:** It's a real prison condition where you become free and really smart trying to go up and down with all the unofficial rules. During the Normalisation, the system felt somehow offended, so you had to be very careful.

**CB:** It became this moral force.

**LN:** Paranoia. They just tried to make people happy in basic material ways. They built simple apartments, many children were born. But still…

**CB:** When did you start looking through the film archives?

**LN:** 2008. In 2006 I started with *Unofficial*. I like to do things in a concentrated way.

**CB:** Your methodology – is this project something you came across and went in and out of. Or did you go into the film archives in one solid moment?

**LN:** I like to be steeped in one work, but it does not have any rules in the beginning.

I knew about the baby negatives (for the *Leftovers* book) in my hometown for very long time, but I needed to be finished with the films beforehand. I needed to find hidden/banned answers.

You can always use plenty of found footage, but you have to decide, what you want to say by using it (for me it is usually something very specific).

My intention in the beginning was to show only the life of common people in my hometown, in a different reality setting: official and private, so it could represent the whole system in the end, but something hidden/banned deep inside our minds was missing. I was trying to see that world and it came to my mind when I saw the film *Satan's Tango* (2004) – it's an 8 hour film from Bella Tarr, a Hungarian director. He also couldn't present his films. One day I was really tired of looking at the baby pictures for the *Leftovers* project, so I took a "break" and I looked at the 8-hour *Satan's Tango*. It is heavy, but if you make it, the influence on you becomes permanent. It's completely different, I mean, it's 8 hours, so you watch it or you don't. You accept its rules or you don't. You get it, or you don't. The visual language of the film is photographic in the sense that the camera is slowly moving throughout the film, but in the end you do not look at the images, but at the almost non-changing long moments in time. You become part of it. And somehow those two things came together at that moment.

I asked myself what I was missing in the whole mosaic of the past I'm working on. It was a hidden world, a hidden/banned fiction.

First what I did, was, that I watched *Satan's Tango* again, and I made a test for myself. I stopped certain moments and tried to understand what they really mean to me, honestly. I decoded and translated visual moments for myself with all possible interpretations I could. I found that process very exciting. After one month I started to collect Slovak hidden films.

*(That was a total disaster for many reasons, I am not going to mention them now– there were too many. It took me half a year to get them.)*

*(*Double Coding *is in the end, a very intuitive work. I didn't expect that I could ever do it.)*

**CB:** How many films in total did you look at?

**LN:** 40 in total, not much, it's a small country thanks God! Imagine if you did hidden American movies!

It would be super interesting to look at the Pro-communistic, hidden films from the 50s in America. *(No idea how many there are?)*. I would analyse them from the other side, because "real" communism never happened, right? It succeeded in some other way as it was originally planned…

Back to the installation.

In the back of the video room, there is a black and white shot of a teenage boy who cannot answer.

*(Boy, just cannot answer.)*

It's basically connected with the girl chewing the gum in the first shot. For me, it's important that everyone who would stand there, could watch him face to face with a disturbing light from the back projection. Light stops on the sanded plate, but also comes through. If you move to a face to face position, the light becomes disturbing.

**CB:** And you can't possibly see all of the installation at once, you have to take a position.

**LN:** Here, I can use the other sentence from censor speakers:

**"Koľkokrát si v živote povieš neviem, toľkokrát si prehral."**

*As many times as you say to yourself 'I don't know', you falter.*

**CB:** And what do you lose?

**LN:** Whatever you can imagine. You have to be careful not to lose your hope.

**CB:** Or you don't gain? A stasis? But sometimes the honest admission is actually where you gain.

**LN:** You're in the context of freedom. Because in the past, everyone would just say, 'I don't know', 'I don't want to know.'

**CB:** So it's a question of understanding, and not wanting to understand and therefore be responsible for that information.

**LN:** But this meaning is completely contextual.

**CB:** This apathy or a willing naivety.

**LN:** This not wanting responsibility. Someone else can take responsibility for your fate. So I suppose you were speaking from a capitalist society where saying you don't know is something different.

**CB:** Yes, that's where it's so revolutionary, saying I don't understand. Because knowledge is power.

**LN:** In my country it is *(was?)* the opposite, because people are not wondering about anything. All is happening, as it should, in general opinions of the masses manipulated by a populist government.

*(Let's never be the part of that)*

There are the others sentences from the installation I did not mention before:

**"Sme kohúty čo nekikiríkajú."**

*We are cockerels that do not crow.*

**"Už iba pozorujem, pozorované si pamätám a obklopuje ma ticho"**

*Now I only observe, I remember the observed and I am surrounded by silence.*

**"More, to je len pre vyvolených."**

*The sea is only for the lucky few ones.*

**"Tak choď, lebo ti pustím červenú."**

*Move, or I'll give you a red nose.*

**"Ušla si z knižky pre deti?"**

*Have you walked out of a children's book?*

**CB:** It's another layer of you on these images which look so documentary, saying "I've selected, I'm interpreting". Allowing your viewer to do the same, to be subjective and emotional.

**LN:** And outside the installation is a pedestal with a small TV set with a Women Selection.

In every project I do, I always include a work about women. In official culture, it was a slideshow 'Kiss' inspired by Prince's pop song:

*You don't have to be beautiful*
*to turn me on*
*I just need your body baby*
*From dusk till dawn*
*You don't need experience*
*To turn me out*
*You just leave it all up to me*
*I'm gonna show you what it's all about*

*You don't have to be rich*
*To be my girl*
*You don't have to be cool*
*To rule my world*
*Ain't no particular sign I'm more compatible with*
*I just want your extra time and your*

*Kiss*

You know it's something that was released at the same time as these official photographs of the women were taken. I like the lyrics and it's completely upside down, but it works and the rhythm of the song helped me to do the final edit.

In the hidden/banned films I selected moments of the women crying and running. They are plenty of them and you don't know where and why they want to run? They are usually directed.

I was thinking it would be fun to have these moments in front of the door…Maybe something like the toilet ladies in front of the installation, but who, at the same time, wanted to runaway. Somewhere.

**CB:** That's also something from your previous work.

**LN:** Then on the shelves there are 2 books displayed. One presents short information about all the films I used in the project with brief statements from all directors who made the films. The other is more like a sketch photo diary that I did in the very beginning of the *Double Cod*ing project. One page in my photo diary shows a guy trying to distract a factory-working woman from her work, so he can steal stuff. This happened all the time in the communist period. It belongs to everyone and no one, and therefore it could be mine!

(Text is based on the interview I made with Clare Buther on 6/12/09 in Eindhoven. It helped me as a structure for rewriting it during the Christmas in Amsterdam.)