

Spaces, Surfaces, and the Secret: The African Films of Isaki Lacuesta

Espais, superfícies i secret: Les pel·lícules africanes d'Isaki Lacuesta

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Abstract

This essay focuses on the two films that Isaki Lacuesta directed in Mali in 2011. Both films feature the Majorcan artist, Miquel Barceló. They were shot simultaneously and, in different ways, address questions of artistic processes. *Los pasos dobles*, is a work of fiction loosely based on the apocryphal stories surrounding the life and legacy of François Augiéras, the US-born French writer and artist *maudit*, who spent a number of years in different parts of northern-central Africa in the 1950s. The accompanying documentary, *El cuaderno de barro*, centers on the performance of Barceló and Serbian choreographer and dancer Josef Nadj titled “El Paso Doble” that takes place in the same locations as the work of fiction, and the preparations in advance of the performance. As the very notion of “paso doble” suggests, these films draw on the motif of the double that characterizes most, if not all, of Lacuesta’s filmic corpus. The article considers the idea of surface in all its forms: the desert landscape, the artist’s canvas, the wall of a cave, the screen, and the skin of the human body, among others. It seeks to tease out the respective spatial and tactile configurations of each and all of them; their secrets, as it were. At the same time, it maps a filmic and artistic genealogy that links Augiéras to Barceló, Lacuesta with Jean Rouch, and the historical avant-garde with contemporary art and filmmaking.

Keywords

Texture; Painting; Secret; Surface; Tactile; Body; Biopic; Griot

Resum

Aquest assaig se centra en les dues pel·lícules que Isaki Lacuesta va dirigir a Mali l'any 2011, ambdues protagonitzades per l'artista mallorquí Miquel Barceló. Es van rodar simultàniament i, de diferents maneres, aborden qüestions del procés artístic. *Los pasos dobles* és una obra de ficció basada lliurement en les històries apòcrifes que envolten la vida i el llegat de François Augiéras, l'escriptor i artista *maudit* francès, nascut als Estats Units, que va passar uns quants anys a diferents parts del nord d'Àfrica central als anys 50. El documental que l'acompanya, *El cuaderno de barro*, se centra en la *performance* de Barceló i del coreògraf i ballari serbi Josef Nadj titulada “El paso doble” que té lloc als mateixos espais que l'obra de ficció, i en els preparatius previs a la representació. Tal com suggereix la mateixa noció de “paso doble”, aquestes pel·lícules es basen en el motiu del doble que caracteritza la majoria, si no tot, del corpus fílmic de Lacuesta. L'article aborda la idea de superfície en totes les seves dimensions: el paisatge desèrtic, el llenç de l'artista, la paret d'una cova, la pantalla i la pell del cos humà, entre d'altres. Pretén dibuixar les configuracions espacials i tàctils de totes i cadascuna d'elles—els seus secrets. Al mateix temps, cartografia una genealogia fílmica i artística que vincula Augiéras amb Barceló, Lacuesta amb Jean Rouch, o l'avantguarda històrica amb l'art i el cinema contemporanis.

Mots clau

Textura; Pintura; Secret; Superfície; Tàctil; Cos; Biopic; Griot

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“The close-up in film treats the face primarily as a landscape.”
—Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987, 172)

“... his face took on a divine grace. His eyes were filled with longing for the vast hills, the blue valleys.” —François Augiéras (2011, 96)

In the five-minute short, *Rouch, un noir*, shot in January 2003, Isaki Lacuesta and Sergi Dies film Jean Rouch sitting on a bench on the Rambla de Raval in Barcelona.¹ The legendary ethnographic filmmaker and pioneer of intercultural cinema reads a fragment of the “Mauvais Sang” section of Arthur Rimbaud’s *A Season in Hell* (1873). The text is an enraged consideration of origins, nation, and race. At one point, a jovial Rouch stops, bursts into laughter and points to the ruined building on the other side of the street as a symbol of the times and the future to come. Unbeknown to him, the building would shortly thereafter be renovated to become the new headquarters of the Filmoteca de Catalunya. It is an unwitting locus of cinephilia: a filmmaker cites Rimbaud’s text whose title had previously been appropriated by Leos Carax for his second feature in 1986 and does so while in close proximity to the future center of cinematic projection and study. This brief film, in retrospect, functions as a synecdoche for Lacuesta’s work in its entirety.

Two images. The first: a white uneven surface, its pock-marked texture shimmering and luminous in the sun, a sheet of bleached space, a partition set against a backdrop of sheer rock rising to the sky, obscuring the opening of the gaping mouth of a cave. Bubbles form on the glistening surface, black insect-like shapes stir on the thick, blanched plane. A crackling, popping sound seeps from unseen loudspeakers located inside the cave. Slowly the shapes take a different form as hands emerge from the expanse of the clay wall. At each end of the space two holes form; fingers then arms, bulky shapes bulge outwards, as if some sort of natural birthing process were underway. Thus commences the two-man performance of Miquel Barceló and choreographer Josef Nadj titled “Paso Doble”,

¹ The title is a pun on that of Rouch’s own 1958 film *Moi, un noir*.

the work at the heart of Lacuesta's documentary *El cuaderno de barro* (2011), the companion piece to his feature *Los pasos dobles*.

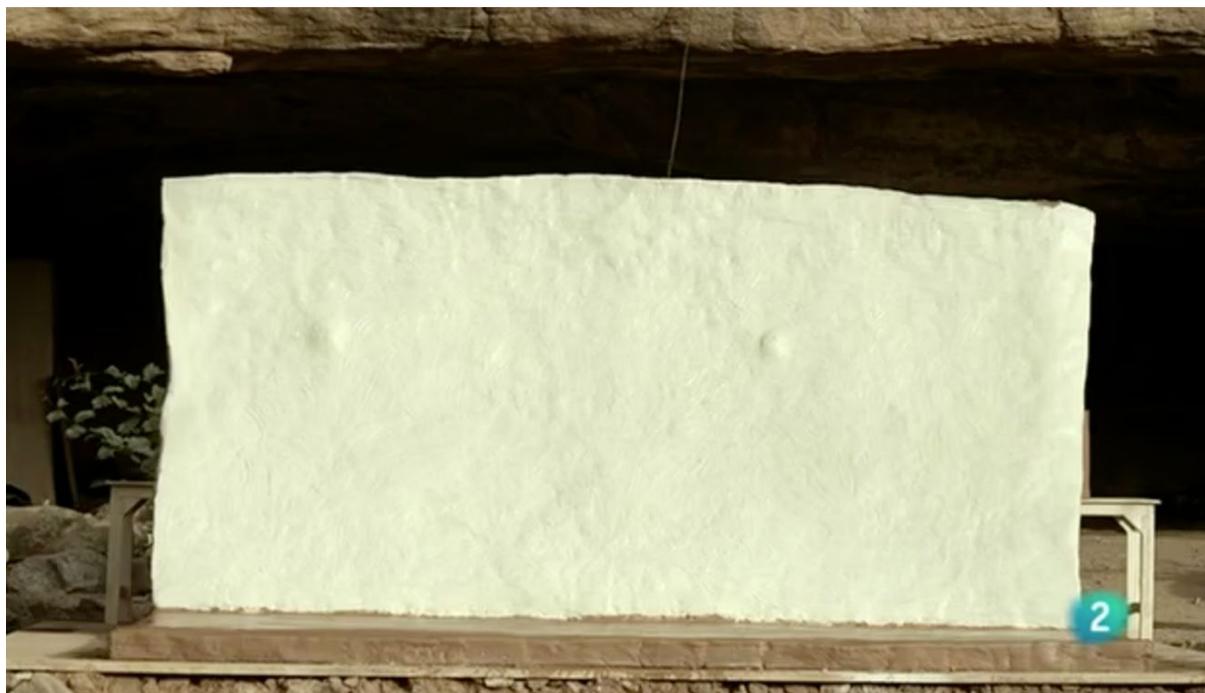


Figure 1 – The white clay surface screen of “Paso Doble”, the performance of Miquel Barceló and Josef Nadj. © La Termita Films

The second: a photograph from 1958 shows writer and artist *maudit* François Augiéras —a figure greatly influenced by Rimbaud— standing on the battlements of the Zirara fortress, northwest of El Goléa, Algeria, his back to the camera as he looks out across the expanse of desert below, his rifle hooked horizontally upon his shoulders and his arms slung across each end of the gun. The same image of the posture of men and their rifles is reproduced at least twice in *Los pasos dobles*.



Figure 2 – François Augiéras on the battlements of the Zirara fortress. © Óscar Fernández Orengo

Both these images point to different surfaces, the white clay wall and the landscape. In what follows I want to consider surface as a concept, whether surface as the space of the artist's canvas or sheets of paper, or the peripatetic traipsing across the sands and rocks of Dogon Country in Mali. In turn, I will examine the extended conceptualization of the genre of the "biopic" present in Lacuesta's Malian pieces. The feature follows in the footsteps of both Rouch and Augiéras. Lacuesta's films were shot in the same region (and on occasions in the same sites) where Rouch had previously filmed ceremonies for his series of films of the region's

“Sigui” celebrations and even reproduces certain similar shots to those of Rouch’s. *Los pasos dobles* and *El cuaderno de barro* were filmed together, simultaneously, with the same crew, technical equipment, and often at the same time with the actors unaware at times of which film they were shooting or appearing in. This essay centers on the importance of surface, depth, the face and the landscape in the two films, the ways in which these elements relate to one another and to the materials they employ. It also draws on the relation between pictorial art, literature, and cinema.

Based on the largely apocryphal legacy and the autobiographical writings of Augiéras, *Los pasos dobles* (2011) premiered amid controversy. Winner of the Concha de Oro Prize at the San Sebastián Film Festival, it was panned by a sector of the critics who accused it of obfuscation, of insulting the spectator with its ill-fitting plot lines, of misusing what veteran film pundit Carlos Boyero labelled “legend” in its relation to reality (and realism), and accusing Lacuesta of deploying an incoherent ethnography.² In my view, however, the enigmatic, circuitous, and often baffling quality of *Los pasos dobles* is, contrary to the prejudices of its detractors, the source of the film’s strength rather than a weakness. The vitriol of the criticism aside, the film is certainly not straightforward. Lacuesta gambles in favor of formal experimentation. On one level, it is a film about *traces*, of secrets, of riddles, plays on identities, and the search for buried treasure.³ On the other, it documents the artistic process and the element of chance belying that process. In any event, as a work of fiction it is inseparable from its documentary counterpart.

Lacuesta has often played not only on the dichotomy between surface and depth (a key motif of the avant-garde tradition that has always interested him), but also with the concept of the material, the natural elements of the earth, the ground, clay, water, and pigmentation. He is in many ways a telluric filmmaker, similar to Barceló, the painter, with whom he clearly feels an affinity. Or at the very least, Barceló’s artistic process is imitated by Lacuesta in these films.⁴ Painting involves acting upon a surface, on paper, canvas, slate, on the walls of a cave or, indeed, a screen. Barceló also mixes and molds clay, shapes it, as we can see in this film and in the accompanying documentary. According to the story, announced at the beginning of *Los pasos dobles*, Augiéras covered the surface of the interior space, the walls and ceiling of an abandoned underground bunker, with frescos, proclaiming it a kind of Sistine Chapel of the desert, and subsequently abandoned it to be buried beneath the sands of the Sahara, leaving few (if any) clues as to its whereabouts.

² See Boyero’s 2011 venomous article in *El País*.

³ Again, a constant in Lacuestas *oeuvre*. In 2007 he created a video installation titled *Traços/Traces*.

⁴ Lacuesta’s interest in these raw, natural materials, such as earth or the “ground,” predates his encounter with Barceló. I allude to this “ontological” or terrestrial, earthly aspect of Lacuesta’s work in a much earlier text of mine (Marsh 2014, 209–22). While that essay focuses *Los condenados* (2009), we might also include among these films *Soldats anònims* (2008), a short documentary that records the excavations of the bodies of those who were “disappeared” in the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War.

Condensing many films into one, to paraphrase critic Jordi Costa (2011), the film follows two narrative threads. Undergirded by the biography of Augiéras, the “plot” of *Los pasos dobles* is shaped by a variety of literal displacements. A group of fortune seekers embark on a search for the secret bunker, aided by a fragmentary map they have chanced upon. Paralleling this is the story of a young African man who calls himself variously François Augiéras and Abdallah Chamba (one of Augiéras’s pen names). The spectral —largely non-speaking— presence of Barceló, punctuates these two storylines. Barceló plays himself but several pointers suggest him as a resuscitated Augiéras (he is thought to be the reincarnation of Augiéras by the locals, at least in the version of the film’s unreliable narrator). Then there is the writer-artist’s nomadic wandering, a ghostly futurity located in the present by the presence of his heirs (and they are multiple) and, beyond that, the biopic as a genre is displaced. In terms of its register, *Los pasos dobles* is also a film which seeks to express itself through oral traditions: storytelling, fables, legends, parables, music, and riddles. This is what arguably might be called “griot” filmmaking, within the West African tradition, emphasized by the voice-off narration, which intervenes periodically throughout the film.⁵ Anthropologist Paul Stoller notes that the griot’s narrative is often meandering, like that of Lacuesta’s film, distinguished by detours and the narrator’s deployment of puzzles, wordplays, and the like (Stoller, 1992).

Enfolded within the film is an allusive structure of source material; the writings and paintings of Augiéras himself; multiple filmic references and citations (Claire Denis’s *Beau Travail*, Monty Python’s *Life of Brian* [Terry Jones], and *The Limits of Control* [Jim Jarmusch],⁶ among others); the lengthy tradition of avant-garde ethnographers and filmmakers (Michel Leiras, Pier Paolo Pasolini, and, above all else, Jean Rouch himself) who, like Augiéras, were fascinated by Africa. The film, moreover, ends with brief clips from Augiéras’s own domestic films, footage shot in Super-8 format mainly in the 1950s. While Lacuesta has filmed variations on doubling ever since his first feature, there has been less discussion of his interest in film history and his directly filmic engagement with that history. A clear example in *Los pasos dobles* is the antecedent of Rouch, his use of the same locations —in the region of Mali known as Dogon country— where the French ethnographer once filmed. Together with Lacuesta’s *sampling* of the short films that Augiéras himself made, it makes for an unwieldy cinephilic palimpsest of sorts (like, as we will see, the decaying mound of Barceló’s work on paper), an intermingling of surface and depth, time measured in ragged layers punctured with holes. Lacuesta’s signature motif —the doubling— takes on here as much a formal or material quality as that which manifests itself in the content or concept. *Los pasos dobles* is also indebted to Augiéras’s literary production. The life of Augiéras was notably elusive and difficult to categorize beyond his autobiographical works and notebooks and the

⁵ Clearly, for a white Western director, this is a problematic definition, albeit one pioneered by Jean Rouch himself. Rouch was very aware of this and changed his way of filmmaking as a result. Paul Stoller, one of Rouch’s disciples, authored the book *The Cinematic Griot: The Ethnography of Jean Rouch*.

⁶ I am indebted to Ingrid Guardiola’s review of *Los pasos dobles* (2011) for this reference to Jarmusch’s film. On rewatching the latter, I agree with her. *The Limits of Control*, incidentally, was shot largely in Spain.

film captures his slippery figure in a series of invented personages, personas, and alter egos: Abdallah Chamba, Miquel Barceló, and others.

1. Face, Landscape, and Skin

The first shot of *Los pasos dobles* is a portrait; a young African man (Bouba Dembelé) whose face in close-up occupies the frame. Then there ensues a violent interrogation over his name. A voice off-screen barks aggressively, “¿Cómo te llamas?” The screen turns to black and then returns. The shot and the question are repeated. The hand of the anonymous interrogator slaps him across the face. Again, the scene is repeated, interrupted once more by the black screen. Finally, the young man responds: “Me llamo François Augiéras y un día te mataré.” The black screen gives way to a medium-close-up of the textured, stony ground pounded by military boots: the face and the earth juxtaposed. Later the same “character” —the young African soldier— will identify himself as Abdallah Chamba. The film follows the soldier who, after an act of indiscipline, is abandoned by his unit to his fate in the desert. It is an echo of a similar scenario taken from Claire Denis’s 1999 *Beau Travail*, one of several references to Denis’s film that feature in *Los pasos dobles*. In retrospect we surmise that the abusive off-screen voice of the initial sequence is that of his uncle, the colonel, charged with commanding the barracks, who flogs him during the day and then makes love to him at night.⁷ The final —very brief— shot of the film’s fourteen-minute prologue is another portrait, an extreme close-up of the uncle’s bearded face.

“The face is a surface: facial traits, lines, wrinkles; long face, square face, triangular face; the face is a map” write Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987, 170). Portraits —those shot by Lacuesta and those painted by Barceló— punctuate this film. The passage quoted continues as follows: “the face is a map, even when it is applied to and wraps a volume, even when it surrounds and borders cavities that are now no more than holes” (1987, 170).⁸

In an early sequence, Barceló and an assistant enter the artist’s workshop to discover that termites have destroyed his work. Shuffling through the folds of ragged paper —a palimpsest of gnawed laminas superimposed upon one another— the painter rues the damage done before the realization (the voice is that of the off-screen narrator) that the natural art of the termites offers possibilities. Barceló sets to work painting around and through the holes created by the termites. The perforated paper is like the face described by Deleuze and Guattari, which, in its flimsy contours “surrounds and borders cavities that are now no more than holes” (1987, 170). Furthermore, if “the face is a map,” as an inspired Barceló builds on the work of the termites, the dark paint or ink he uses seeps through the gaps in onto a

⁷ The actor here, Hamadoun Kassogue, is the only professional in the cast. His is also the unidentified voice of the off-screen narrator.

⁸ Béla Balázs was one of the first film theorists to link the face to objects and to the close-up: “Facial expression. This most subjective and individual of human manifestations is rendered objective in the close-up” (1992, 262).

very real map, which the treasure hunters, into whose hands it has fallen, interpret.⁹ It is a fortuitous leakage through time, space, and texture; from one folded text to another, a visual flow that creates a narrative—from the mass of paper to the painting to the map, a creative encounter between the onslaught of nature (the termites) and human technique (Barceló's painting), a production, an elaborate set of orifices crafted artfully by termites, refined and modified by Barceló's intervention. The inky paint stain prompts a wordless doily-like account of decay that leaves its trace on the map spread out on a table, that in this subsequent sequence leads the treasure hunters to identify the location of Augiéras's lost bunker.

Deleuze and Guattari's use of the word "cavities" here seems particularly apt in the context of the cave as a site of creativity, itself a cavity, a burrow within the rockface of the towering cliffs, and prominent in both films as both a contrasting depth to the surface space and whose walls provide a surface upon which to draw or paint the false clues and to confuse the distinct temporalities associated with Augiéras, reincarnated as Barceló. The motifs or pattern of narrative coincidence fuse notions of names, surfaces, spaces, and depths that come together in one of the final sequences of *Los pasos dobles*. On the miraculous discovery of a real bunker buried beneath the sand dunes and bolted tight with a metal plaque, one of the treasure hunters—the same man who has previously painted (Barceló's) watercolors in the back seat of the car and is thus associated with the legacy that emanates from the spectral figure of Augiéras—descends beneath the ground through a man-made *hole* into a cavity beneath the desert and paints the murals on the apparently unadorned walls, becoming—having already incarnated Barceló—in effect a kind of ghost-artist of Augiéras, in yet another embodiment of the mysterious and elusive figure at the heart of the film.

If the linkage between the sequence of Barceló's destroyed paintings and the treasure hunters in *Los pasos dobles* is vertical, amassed in a pile, then a subsequent sequence is linked horizontally, metonymically by contiguity in ways that point up the connections between the feature and the documentary, but also between the aesthetics of filmmaking and those of painting, an extending seepage. A brief reading of this reveals many of the film's secrets. First there is a shot of the ochre-colored wall of the cave with its faint traces of the charcoal drawings left by Barceló and subsequently erased by the group of treasure hunters that fades imperceptibly as it combines with the sands and scrub of the desert. Similarly, Abdallah Chamba, shot from above as he struggles across the landscape, encroaches onto a liquid topology, flowing into the space of Barceló's watercolor. Amid the montage, the figure of Chamba finds himself in the wake, the shadow, of his own silhouetted representation. In what is an elaborate array of curvilinear superimpositions on different expanses—wall, desert, paper—blend into one

⁹ The actors who play the three treasure hunters are, like almost all the other actors in the film, non-professionals. They reappear as themselves early in *Los cuadernos de barro* and it transpires they are friends of Barceló.

another as a kaleidoscope of surfaces simultaneously represented on the same plane.



Figure 3 – Abdallah Chamba encroaches on his own image in Barceló's watercolor. © La Termita Films

Noteworthy here is the fact that the material employed to make the paper used for watercolors is cotton—a textile upon which a visual text is written that blends with the movement of human bodies and has a relation to skin. It is a tactile, sensorial material that condenses other elements of embodiment that pervade the film. The surface textile, its texture, also opens up many of the film's secrets. While “secret” is one of the film's keywords, deployed insistently from beginning to end, it provides another means to interpret the film, through the mystery of skin as surface.¹⁰

I began this essay with a reference to Lacuesta's 2003 brief film *Rouch, un noir*. I want to turn now to another short he made the following year. *Teoría de los cuerpos* (2004) is an exquisitely shot four-minute—the duration of the Amalia Rodrigues fado that resounds throughout—film of sexual encounters between people of different generations, focusing—in a move away from the face—on bodily detail, specifically on the skin of the protagonists, the folds of flesh, the undulations, the blemishes, the tones, and textures. The surface of skin provides a tensile topology upon which a non-verbal textual message is delineated, another secret. It is an enigmatic story, expressed wordlessly through the surface flesh of the body, of the passage of time. Again, like the artist's termite-ravaged pile of papers, it is a process of decay. It is a film, much like *Los pasos dobles*, that

¹⁰ The film itself turns on a series of enigmas and riddles that mark its trajectory as much or more than plot twists. The very word “secret” is also the solution to one of the central riddles of the film.

emphasizes difference in ways that elude discursive closure, it is marked by bodily affects, “sensations” and “instincts” (Deleuze 2003, 39).

In *Los pasos dobles* three two-person sequences stand out for their diegetic intensity, each of which corresponds to sensorial affects associated with the masculine body, namely violence, movement, and homoeroticism. The first of these occurs—in another echo of *Beau travail*—when Chamba fails to collaborate in a game of trust during military training in the desert. The sergeant in charge of the exercise punishes Chamba by ordering him to fight the soldier whose trust he has betrayed and whom he has let fall to the ground. The latter is provided with a stick to give him an advantage. The two men strip to their waists, their muscles rippling in the sun, their bodies twisting and flying through the air in combat. The brutal encounter is highly orchestrated, choreographed as if it were a dance sequence. Indeed, later in the film, Chamba and the leader of the gang of bandits compete in a dance standoff. In their strutting, swirling, and twirling manipulation of their bodies, the bending, rolling, spasmodic, convulsive motion, the two adversaries engage in a different kind of physical contest without touching amidst a crowd whooping in appreciation.¹¹ In one of two homoerotic sequences of *Los pasos dobles*, echoing in some ways the close corporeal shots of the entwined bodies of *Teoría de cuerpos*, the Augiéras/Chamba character and a member of the group of refugee albinos that, in one of the film’s eeriest sequences, the bandits stumble across at night, explore one another’s bodies. Augiéras/Chamba is fascinated by the brown freckles that spread across the white face and body of the albino. He interrogates him about their bodily differences, about their different and differentiating pigmentation. It is a tender moment that focuses upon a sensorial fascination with skin as blemished surface marked like a painted canvas or paper: skin as an erotic space whose otherness provokes fascination. Notably pigmentation is a word also used in the mixture and blending of combinations of painting material. On one occasion early in the film Barceló folds his painting pad closed to leave an imprint on the page *facing* the one he has been working on and thereby producing a doubled effect signaled by the flow of the still wet paint. “[L]as multiplica, las desdobra” says the off-screen narrator. One of the interesting features of this is the coexistence between instantaneous superimposition and sequentiality. Many of these doubled impressions become series of paintings, such as the set of nine “Aubergine” watercolors, or the portraits of the albinos that I will return to briefly in the final section of this essay.

These three masculine encounters charged with bodily-erotic violence provide a complication of the customary doubling in Lacuesta’s corpus, one that is reminiscent of the triptych of couplings that Deleuze identifies in the work of Francis Bacon (2003, 69). The antonyms within the doubling that often distinguishes Lacuesta’s films go beyond the uncanniness of twins, clones, and doppelgängers, etcetera, that cinema has traditionally exploited (particularly in horror films).

¹¹ The two actors are in fact professional dancers recruited by Lacuesta’s casting team from the local community to perform in the film.

Lacuesta's work has been distinguished not only by its use of doubles, but also by the presence of odd pairings, of couples who are unlike, who are incommensurable. Rather than unsettling identical figures, these are, variously, allied combatants whose shared past is torn asunder by unforgivable betrayal (*Los condenados* [2009]), divided by sibling rivalry (*La leyenda de tiempo* [2006]), or by their opposing and competing vocations as boxer and poet, popular sportsman and figure of the cultural avant-garde (*Craven versus Craven* [2002])—individuals incompatible at times, antagonistic at others, ill at ease in their own circumstances. However, Lacuesta has also been consistently interested throughout his career in the marginalized figure.¹² In the films discussed in this essay the doubling is perhaps even more complex, in that it is more enigmatic, more to do with the secret. The title of the feature —*Los pasos dobles*— contains within it an explicit sense of the double. *El cuaderno de barro* has the performance “Paso doble” at its center; the doubling of the characters, the Spanish musical form and dance (a version of which resounds in the soundtrack to bring the film to an end). A dance is often, as we will see below, a game in the open space of concealed identities, false names, a duplicity borne of duplication, of secret codes, hints and traces, feigned or choreographed movement. Shortly after an important moment concerning Barceló and his sketchpad, the anonymous seer-like griot narrator states the following:

En el interior de cada fruta hay un pescado. Pero los cuerpos aparentemente idénticos, son infinitamente diferentes. Como los animales que se camuflan en el paisaje, la mejor manera de esconderse es inventar a alguien igual que uno mismo y enviarlo a recorrer los caminos en nuestro nombre. Ése es el secreto de los pasos dobles.

In a notable shift in tone mid-way through *Los pasos dobles*, we find ourselves in a panoramic establishing shot of the market activity in the urban streets dominated by the great mosque of Djenné. Constructed of adobe, its façade blends with that of the desert sands and the flat-roofed houses of the city dwellings over which it looms.¹³ Abdullah Chamba, whose hair has grown since his flight from the military, weaves his way through the crowds at the market. He makes a record at a street *phonaton* —significant in a film in which music is central, indeed eponymous. Yet it is also the case that a record or disc is a depository, a vinyl space—a surface— upon which a voice is registered; it quite literally is marked by the impression of an audio or oral trace. It is symptomatic of the encounter between surface and depth, the exteriority of the roofs—in the pastel colors of the daylight— by which, with the sweep of the camera, we are introduced to the bandits and then

¹² The real life Augiéras saw himself very much as an outcast from mainstream society and died living as a hermit.

¹³ Djenné was part of the Songhai empire prior to the European conquest of west and central Africa. In a text on embodiment, memory, and tribal ritual in the Songhai region, Stoller notes the following: “In anthropology it is [...] important to consider the body’s smells, tastes, textures, and sensations, especially in those societies in which the Eurocentric notions of text and textual interpretation are not important” (1994, 637). Rouch’s scholarship is focused on the Songhai people.

to the shadowy interior of the brothel. In this urban picaresque the architectonics of the city combine with shadowy erotics. The understated flirtatious encounter with the young prostitute, in intimate and muted confines after the panoramic shots and the bustling space of the city exteriors, hinges upon a debate over surface: clothing and the naked body (the textile and the tactile), resolved by the music that Chamba has recorded in the street. In this there is an allusion to the film's initial image of the face brutalized, the landscape traversed and the sexual encounter between Augiéras/Chamba and his abusive uncle.

The group of bandits, meanwhile, are first depicted to us in a formation similar to that of the soldiers at work with pickaxes in the early part of the film. Here the gang is seen from above as its members pass stolen goods from one roof to another in an organized human chain. The light is dazzling and there is an orchestrated, rhythmic pattern—a brazen quality—to their muscular work, like a homoerotic ritual. Much later, in a contrasting sequence that emphasizes the juxtaposition between depth and surface, we see the bandits in a single line squeezed in a narrow passage between two rock faces deep at the base of the crevice through which they move in wary silence.

There is a final body in the film, a seemingly dead one, an enshrouded figure, key to the ethnographic register surreptitiously undergirding the film. I refer here to the final sequences of the film, the shots of an inert corpse, part of the Dogon people's mortuary rituals, at the center of the celebration of the Sigui festival; a body hoisted up the sheer cliff face by rope, embalmed and anonymous, winched unsteadily, towards the highest cave where it is to be interred with honors.¹⁴

2. Reincarnation

The embalmed corpse or effigy raised to rest in a secret place high on the cliff forms part of the astrological alignment that gives rise to the Sigui festivities celebrated for several weeks each sixty years and whose return and repetition suggests reincarnation. Reincarnation in *Los pasos dobles* is conceived of as a continuation of haphazard sequences, a seemingly arbitrary legacy of sorts, a retracing of steps and missteps doubled in time, previous lives embodied anew in different form and forms. If Augiéras saw himself as a reincarnated Rimbaud, and Barceló is dubbed a reincarnated Augiéras, then Lacuesta is perhaps the reincarnation of Rouch, the same Rouch who quotes Rimbaud in the short film discussed at the beginning of this essay. The late sequences of the film return us to Rouch's work. *Los pasos dobles* ends with the wild celebrations of the Sigui festivities celebrated every time the star Sirius crosses with the Earth and aligns with the aperture between the summits of two mountains in Dogon Country (perhaps the same crevice through

¹⁴ There is no explanation in *Los pasos dobles* of whether the bound figure is a real person or a symbol. One might speculate that it is an effigy of Lébé, an ancestral figure in Dogon cosmology whose shrine is located in one of the caves high on the Bandiagara cliffs and who is celebrated each year (Stoller 1992, 181). Significantly, a number of the people who have featured in the film, including those who previously died (such as Augiéras's uncle/colonel apparently revived) appear in this late sequence of the film.

which the bandits squeeze). These celebrations have only been filmed twice, the first time by Rouch and decades later by Lacuesta.¹⁵ The filmed location—the area around the Bandiagora cliffs—becomes a site of cinephilia. Like his fellow anthropologist filmmakers Margaret Mead, Gregory Bateson, and Maya Deren, Rouch was a pioneer of trance cinema. He made films that registered the rituals of festivities among ethnic groups, and which were bound up with his scholarship as an ethnographer.

A “paso doble” of course, is more than just a dance or a musical theme; in the rules of its form it becomes a kind of rite. We might recall that it is a musical form often associated with the ritual of bullfighting. In *Los pasos dobles* (and *Los cuadernos de barro*) paso doble is the articulating link in a choreographed combat between man and animal, between the human and the natural, between techne and physis, between the ground and what lies beneath, the earth and the sky. In another griot-like pronouncement, the narrator reflects on the mystery of ritual movement: “En el desierto, aprenderás a esconderte y a disimular tu rastro caminando hacia atrás sobre tus propias huellas. Ahí reside el secreto de los pasos dobles.” The trance film is often—spectacularly dramatized by Rouch in *Les maître fous* (1955)—a ritualized communication with other inaccessible worlds, with cosmic realms. Trance is more than the spellbound intoxicated state induced by drink and narcotics, it is an intermediary place situated between the dead and the living. *Los pasos dobles* makes a point of referring to the local customs and superstitions: the soothsayer-astrologer-diviner consulted by the treasure hunters, who foresees their journey (notably he interprets the patterns left in the sand after he casts stones on the surface), the amulet that Barceló molds out of clay and animal excrement that he sears into solid form through fire and cold water, and which reappears hanging from a woman’s neck in the course of a robbery perpetrated by the bandits. “Tarde o temprano necesitáis encontrar un amuleto,” intones the rhapsodic off-screen narrator. “Un fruto capaz de salir del fuego sin quemarse.”

That Abdallah Chamba should be proclaimed by the villagers who pursue him as reincarnated is apt. He is indeed the reincarnation of Augiéras in the sense of having assumed both his name and his nom de plume in another form of doubling. It is also a dramatization of spirit possession, one of the key features of the Dogon cosmology and cosmogony. After his exhausting trek across the desert, Chamba reaches an ancient baobab tree, on the outskirts of the village, in which a blind man sits. According to Lacuesta, this original inhabitant—the actor—appeared in Rouch’s films thirty or forty years previously in another example of the historical cinephilia that Lacuesta is so interested in.¹⁶ The baobab tree’s gnarled surface and silvery bark with multiple protuberances facilitate Chamba’s ascent to the summit. In a parody of *The Life of Brian* (already a parody), Chamba is

¹⁵ “[A] ceremony called the *sigui*, which occurs when the star Sirius appears between two mountain peaks. Before the ceremony, young men go into seclusion for three months, during which they talk in a secret language. The general ceremony rests on the belief that some 3,000 years ago amphibious beings from Sirius visited the Dogon” (“sigui” n.d.)

¹⁶ See Miguel Gil’s 2011 interview with Lacuesta.

acclaimed by the locals as the messiah. When in a bodily, scatological moment he urinates from his position in the heights of the tree, he is proclaimed a deity —“el hombre de la lluvia”— by the crowd assembled at its base. Yet the parodic register is aptly also a form of masquerade in the vein of the Sigui festivities, in which the mask figures prominently, and sits well with the ethnography of the film itself. Chamba spends an indeterminate period of time in the tree. One night, in a hint of bestiality, Chamba descends to embrace a young goat.¹⁷ Following this he becomes goat, camouflaged as if to conceal his tracks, like the narrator’s earlier definition of the secret of the *paso doble*. As if it were a mask —the face, the close-up portrait shot by which we were introduced to him is concealed— he dons a false beard molded from the goat’s white hide and hair to ill-fit his chin and speaks an unintelligible gibberish that no-one can understand, like the prophet he is claimed (like Augiéras) to be.¹⁸ Chamba’s apparent mysticism —the pursuit of what Christopher Moncrieff, Augiéras’s translator, describes as “purity” (Augiéras 2011, 259)— captures that of his predecessor and conforms to Rouch’s trance genre with which Lacuesta seems to seek to enter into dialogue, as well as the film’s surreptitious cinephilia. It is significant that at this point a lone man —an itinerant traveler— appears below the baobab tree to announce the death of Chamba’s uncle. Death, sex, and the mask are linked. The creation of a white beard from the goat’s hair also recalls the beard of his uncle. Chamba is, apparently, also *his* incarnation, *his reincarnation*. There are overtones here of Rouch’s ethnographic research into what Stoller describes as “pre-Islamic Songhay religious life: sorcery, sacrifice, and spirit possession” (2004).¹⁹

As if to confirm the connection between “spirit possession” and filmmaking (which I have already emphasized at various points in this essay), Augiéras himself is brought back to life in the final moments of *Los pasos dobles*, during the credit sequence, resurrected in the Super-8 films of the 1950s that Lacuesta salvaged from the archive of Augiéras’s friend Paul Placet, with whom he shot some of them. The grainy surface and garish colors of the eight-millimeter format stand out as a temporal marker in the face of the smooth digital surface of Lacuesta’s frame. And the film’s themes of the circular nature of life, of return and reincarnation, and the secret —the final word spoken by the griot narrator— are given additional force by the images of the real body of François Augiéras resuscitated once again.

¹⁷ Augiéras had an unabashed predilection for sex with sheep and goats which he documented in his writing (2011). There is a certain similarity between the submissiveness of the young goat Chamba embraces and Augiéras/Chamba in the arms of his uncle.

¹⁸ The sequences in the baobab tree evoke the early Christian tradition of the Stylites that Luis Buñuel parodies in his 1965 film *Simón del desierto*.

¹⁹ The only other text that discusses Lacuesta’s films from an “ethnographical” perspective is García Puchades and Corrella Lacasa’s essay (2014). It is an interesting text, though not altogether relevant to my own argument, insofar as it is primarily framed around and within the controversy prompted by the two films’ critical reception in Spain.

3. Conclusion: *El cuaderno de barro*

In one of the last moments of *Los pasos dobles* Miquel Barceló descends from the rocks in the heights of the Bandiagora Cliffs and steps out onto the promontory to take in the expansive view of the plain below. It is the same landscape we see in one of the final shots of Augiéras's domestic films. Very similar vistas predominate in Rouch's cycle of films, shot between 1967 and 1971, of the different elements of the Sigui festivities. Unlike the feature film, the documentary impresses upon us the names of people and places. In the introduction to *El cuaderno de barro* the plain is called Banani Lagar. A convergence emerges between Barceló, Augiéras, Rouch, and Lacuesta, a palimpsest of iterations, of coexisting times and personages that flows between (and overlaps with) each layer in the landscape, much like the superimposed images that blend one surface with another throughout the film or the serpentine narrative that guides and surprises us at every turn.

Landscape and portraiture, the two pictorial forms that bookend *Los pasos dobles*, are also standard forms of modern painting in the West, at least since the Renaissance. They mark the course and currents of the film in a pattern of expansion and contraction. *El cuaderno de barro*, the documentary counterpart to the feature flows similarly with the fictional film to that of the latter's content. Each seeps into the other. Together they form a diptych, a different kind of double, in which each film is ineludibly intertwined and yet simultaneously out of step with the other. Both films focus on the artistic process, the presence of Europeans in Africa, and the dialogue between the two: an encounter with otherness. They also re-evaluate the discourse of history of art in the West. According to Stoller, "The Dogon are best known in the West for their art" (1992, 175) and there are "mysterious cave etchings at Songo" (1992, 177) one of the villages of the Bandiagora.

The first, introductory images of *El cuaderno de barro* are of women washing fabrics in the river. Just as the cotton composition of the sketchpad paper and the discussion between Augiéras/Chamba and the prostitute about clothing in *Los pasos dobles*, there is a direct connection between textiles, the texture of the filmic text, and the canvas. The dye from the wet clothes runs as the women's firm hands wring them out in the water. It flows dark, blood-like, over the rocks into the swirl of the river. The close, detailed filming begs comparison with the sequence of the fleeing Chamba from the sand of the desert onto the painting, close on the heels of the figure representing him. Such a comparison is borne out by a sequence of close shots of the painter's brush work following closely on from the scene of the women washing. We see Barceló himself, accompanied by one of the albinos, walk to the back of the cave and pour bleach—a similar flow—onto the black, slate-like lamina, another *surface* he uses to paint the albino's portrait. There is a striking elemental combination in the sequence of skin, seepage, and cavity; that is, surface, fluidity, depth, and the human face. The portrait shots alternate with close-ups of the painting itself, the mixture of palettes, the pigmentation, that of the materials

and the freckles that sprinkle Cheick, the albino's, face. At one moment, in a reverse shot, we see the silhouettes of the two men set against the mouth of the cave and the plain stretching beyond.



Figure 4 – Portrait of one of the albinos in the films. © La Termita Films

Important to Barceló and Nadj's performance is the pre-recorded sound: the taped reproduction of the wind from the cliff across and through the plain below, the thud of the sticks used by the women to pound and grind millet. Incidental gurgling noises accompany the malleable wet clay vases that one after another sink down on Nadj's head, slowly collapsing to cover his upper torso, burying him beneath their weight. The sounds of a previously taped children's chorus intoning a song inside the Cave of the Lions drift into the performance, adding a faint lyricism to the soundscape, in a distant echo of a similar sequence filmed by Rouch at the same cave in 1969. A dense rock music-inflected set of riffs rumbles. The audience amassed below watches on with evident fascination. Some have climbed the baobab tree to get a better view.

The white wall of clay, captured in a wide-angle shot that takes in the aperture of the cavern and the cliff behind, is like a screen, a screen space whose texture shines smooth at a distance. The following close shots draw out the slimy lumps and knobs of its surface. The wrinkled matter becomes embodied, fingers and hands emerge, arms spawn the contorted bodies of the two men to make two-dimensional space three dimensional. Like the still-wet congealed paint on the pages of Barceló's watercolors that fold in upon themselves to produce a doubled

effect from within, this is a kind of unfolding outwards, from an interior to an exterior, from depth to surface, an expansive gesture of productivity from the precinct of the cave to the open world. Between the sheets of paper, behind the walls of the cave, the layers of skin, the texts, the aura of the enigmatic amulets, the textures woven within the textiles worn. Invisible to the naked eye, the murmur of the underground secret reverberates close beneath the surface like an aural variant on Plato's shadows projected against the cavern wall, an intimation of a secret pathway—marked by the footprints of doubled steps (*pasos dobles*) leading us blindly between the two entwined films.

The final sequence of *El cuaderno de barro* is a lengthy series of shots of Barceló drawing in charcoal on the wall of the cave where many of the scenes from both pieces were filmed. He is, in a manner of speaking or filming, and in the spirit of reincarnation, creating the frescos of the bunker that Augiéras purportedly left as his legacy. Barceló sets to work on the surface of the rock in a space, a subterranean and mystical space, charged with a secret, an unwritten and tremulous history of the culturally untranslatable, of otherness. Barceló, who barely speaks in *Los pasos dobles*, ends *El cuaderno de barro* with a lengthy monologue that reveals the aporias, the secrets of artistic techniques, their relationship with nature, metamorphosis, the proximity between life and death, creation and destruction, the materials that constitute the artifact, their debts to the past, and their endurance in the face of the passage of time. Here, to end this essay, I reproduce his words:

Mis primeras cerámicas están hechas con una técnica de hace 5.000 años con los nombres en dogón con las plantas, los colores, la lengua secreta que utilizan sólo para hacer las máscaras.... Utilizamos pigmentos que son mucho más estables que nuestra carne. El lapislázuli es eterno. Pero las termitas se lo comen todo, por eso está bien prever la destrucción como parte de la obra. Su destrucción a largo plazo. Su metamorfosis, diría yo, mejor que destrucción. Pero de todos modos es cuestión de tiempo: al final todo desaparece.

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