In the year of the opening of Le Centre national d’art et de culture Georges Pompidou, Roberto Rossellini came to shoot a documentary about the Centre and the public’s reaction to it. This film would in fact be his last: Beaubourg, centre d’art et de culture Georges Pompidou (1977). It was commissioned by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. At the same time, Jacques Grandclaude, with his production company (Création 9 Information), made a documentary about Rossellini.

Rossellini’s film starts with a wide shot of a Parisian cityscape, then moves onto Beaubourg, where the Centre Pompidou is located. Throughout the movie, Roberto Rossellini uses repetitive zoom movements, resembling those of a fluid eye, wandering in the space of the Centre. In order to capture the real reactions of the first groups of visitors, Rossellini scattered microphones all over the building. Later on, during the editing, he combined zooms and tracking shots, removed the cuts, and avoided montage, as he tried to reduce the artificial practice as much as possible. The dislocation with the sound and image strengthens the artistic expression of the documentary by providing it with a dream-like texture and atmosphere. Unfortunately, it has not been screened much until recently.

If Rossellini’s Beaubourg is a genuine contribution to the Centre Pompidou and the history of the 20th century, then, Jacques Grandclaude’s Rossellini au travail (1977) is vital for being a movie outside the previous one. Grandclaude shows how Beaubourg, centre d’art et de culture Georges Pompidou was made and how the movie became an important work for the institution. It provides some precious images from behind the scenes. Portraying Rossellini as just another visitor, the documentary weaves the invisible thread that connects him to the Centre.

In Grandclaude’s film, Rossellini discusses with his colleagues how to design the trajectory of the camera movement, as well as the ideal position for capturing the spectacle of people entering the Centre for the first time. Grandclaude’s movie also depicts how Rossellini built the autonomous zoom technique: he installed the zoom on a tripod with a needle that changed the framing. With no monitor feedback, he only had visual estimation of the images. Roberto Rossellini was not inclined to frame the Centre precisely, but to create the effect of a moving gaze observing the mass.

As Jacques Grandclaude suggests in the warning page before his film: this selection from 20 hours of recorded images on 16mm, 30 hours of sound recording, and from 2500 photographs, answers Roberto Rossellini’s hope “to represent things as they are to stay in the realm of honesty” [représenter les choses telles qu’elles sont pour rester sur le terrain de l’honnêteté]. In late August 2022, Grandclaude gave his archives to the Centre Pompidou’s Kandinsky Library: 11 hours of rushes filmed on 16mm and 147 boxes of sound recordings.

The two films thus become counterparts, as one is the lens through which to see the other, to understand it. Grandclaude’s shooting side by side with Rossellini showed the birth of the Centre Pompidou and the last journey of the Italian director. In a sense, both films are the Centre’s mirror image. Through shedding light on its materiality, providing a perspective on it that is at once general and particular, and entering into a dialogue with it, they create a mise en abyme of the Centre Pompidou.

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Centre Pompidou in mise en abyme: Rossellini and Grandclaude