
High-Fidelity Reconstructions of Strong Lenses in the Data-Driven Generative Modeling Era

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Abstract

1 We achieve state-of-the-art reconstructions of strong gravitational lensing systems
2 from the Sloan Lens ACS (SLACS) survey by leveraging score-based diffusion
3 models as high-dimensional priors over major components of the lensing system:
4 the background source, foreground lens light, and point-spread function (PSF).
5 Our approach produces high-resolution models that substantially reduce residuals
6 compared to previous lens modeling attempts. To our knowledge, this is the first
7 application of data-driven generative priors to real strong lensing observations,
8 establishing a new benchmark for precision lens modeling in preparation for
9 upcoming large-scale imaging surveys.

10 1 Introduction

11 Strong gravitational lensing, in which the light from a distant galaxy is deflected and magnified by a
12 foreground mass, is a cornerstone tool for precision cosmology [Wong et al., 2019, Shajib et al., 2020,
13 Qi et al., 2021, Colaço et al., 2025], dark-matter studies [Mao and Schneider, 1998, Vegetti et al.,
14 2010, Hezaveh et al., 2016, Gilman et al., 2019, Powell et al., 2023, Ballard et al., 2024, Lange et al.,
15 2025], and probing galaxy structure at high redshift [Coe et al., 2012, Fan et al., 2019, Shajib, Anowar
16 J. et al., 2023]. Unlocking this potential requires lens modeling—inferring the physical components
17 of a lensing system, including the mass distribution of the lens galaxy and the light profiles of both
18 the lens and background source.

19 Traditional lens modeling has long been constrained by computational cost and simplifying assumptions.
20 Parametric models impose rigid functional forms, while handcrafted pixel-based priors often
21 fail to capture the true morphological complexity of galaxies [Bolton et al., 2008, Savary, E. et al.,
22 2022, Knabel et al., 2023, Huang et al., 2025, Cao et al., 2025]. These limitations can prevent accurate
23 modeling of the data and bias the inferred lens parameters [Xu et al., 2015, Sonnenfeld, 2018, Galan,
24 A. et al., 2024, Ballard et al., 2024].

25 Recent advances in generative modeling provide a powerful alternative. Data-driven approaches,
26 such as diffusion models [Song and Ermon, 2019, Ho et al., 2020, Song et al., 2020, 2021, Yang
27 et al., 2022], can learn rich, high-dimensional priors directly from data, enabling reconstructions that
28 incorporate realistic astrophysical structure [Dia et al., 2023, Adam et al., 2023, Legin et al., 2023b,
29 Bourdin et al., 2024, Cuesta-Lazaro and Mishra-Sharma, 2024, Adam et al., 2025, Barco et al., 2025,
30 Boruah et al., 2025].

31 In this work, we revisit high-quality strong lensing observations from the SLACS survey and achieve
32 state-of-the-art lens models by incorporating high-dimensional, data-driven priors into the lens
33 modeling process. We focus on galaxy-galaxy strong lensing systems, jointly inferring the mass
34 distribution of the foreground lens, the light profiles of both the lens and background source galaxies,
35 and instrumental components such as the PSF of the telescope.

36 **2 Methods**

37 **Lens Data**

38 We model 30 strong gravitational lensing systems from the SLACS survey [Bolton et al., 2008],
39 observed with the Hubble Space Telescope (HST) in the F814W filter (program ID 10886, 10174,
40 10587) available from the Mikulski Archive for Space Telescopes (MAST)¹. For each system, we use
41 four dithered FLT exposures and extract 128×128 pixel cutouts centered on the lens galaxy as our
42 data for lens modeling, denoted $\mathbf{D} = \{\mathbf{d}_i\}_{i=1}^4$.

43 **Lens Modeling**

44 For each lensing system, we jointly infer the lens light, lens mass, source, per-exposure PSFs, and
45 alignment shifts. We denote the full set of parameters as

$$\Theta = \{\mathbf{L}, \mathbf{M}, \mathbf{S}\}, \quad \mathbf{P} = \{\mathbf{P}_i\}_{i=1}^4, \quad \boldsymbol{\delta} = \{\boldsymbol{\delta}_i\}_{i=1}^4,$$

46 where \mathbf{L} , \mathbf{M} , and \mathbf{S} describe the lens light, lens mass, and source, while \mathbf{P}_i and $\boldsymbol{\delta}_i$ denote the PSF
47 and alignment shift for each exposure i .

48 The goal is to sample from the posterior distribution

$$p(\boldsymbol{\delta}, \mathbf{P}, \Theta | \mathbf{D}) \propto \prod_{i=1}^4 p(\mathbf{d}_i | \boldsymbol{\delta}_i, \mathbf{P}_i, \Theta) p(\boldsymbol{\delta}_i) p(\mathbf{P}_i) p(\mathbf{L}) p(\mathbf{M}) p(\mathbf{S}), \quad (1)$$

49 where the per-exposure likelihood $p(\mathbf{d}_i | \boldsymbol{\delta}_i, \mathbf{P}_i, \Theta)$ is assumed Gaussian with pixel-wise variance
50 obtained from the FITS file ERR arrays. Cosmic rays and other artifacts are masked using data-quality
51 DQ flags and manual inspection.

52 The lens mass \mathbf{M} is represented by a parametric model consisting of an Elliptical Power-Law (EPL)
53 profile (Einstein radius R_E , axis ratio q , orientation ϕ_{EPL} , and slope t), an external shear (amplitude
54 γ_{ext} and orientation ϕ_{ext}), and multipoles of order $m = 3, 4$, with amplitudes a_3, a_4 and orientations
55 ϕ_3, ϕ_4 [Tessore, Nicolas and Benton Metcalf, R., 2015, Xu et al., 2015, Meneghetti, 2022]. We adopt
56 broad uniform priors for all parameters, except $t \sim \mathcal{N}(1.0, 0.2)$ and $a_3, a_4 \sim \mathcal{N}(0, 0.01)$. Alignment
57 shifts $\boldsymbol{\delta}$ follow uniform priors over the full field of view of the data cutouts.

58 We model the lens light \mathbf{L} , source \mathbf{S} , and PSFs \mathbf{P} as pixelated images (256^2 , 256^2 , and 128^2 pixels,
59 respectively). Bilinear interpolation is used to evaluate \mathbf{S} and \mathbf{L} at arbitrary coordinates when
60 performing lens raytracing simulations.

61 **Data-Driven Priors**

62 We train score-based diffusion models [Song et al., 2020] with the `scoremodels` package [Adam,
63 2025], adopting NCSN++ U-Net architectures to learn high-dimensional priors for the source \mathbf{S} , lens
64 light \mathbf{L} , and PSF \mathbf{P} . The source prior was trained on $\sim 2,000$ galaxies from the PROBES dataset
65 [Stone and Courteau, 2019, Stone et al., 2021] for 1000 epochs with a batch size of 4, while the lens
66 light prior was trained for 24 hours with a batch size of 16 on on-the-fly simulations containing 1 to 5
67 Sérsic components [Sérsic, 1963]. The PSF prior was trained for 50 epochs with a batch size of 32
68 on $\sim 10,000$ upsampled empirical PSFs derived from HST/ACS WFC star cutouts [Anderson and
69 King, 2006]. For all models, we adopt a Variance Exploding SDE with a geometric noise schedule,
70 using $(\sigma_{\min}, \sigma_{\max}) = (10^{-5}, 500)$ for \mathbf{S} , $(10^{-5}, 200)$ for \mathbf{L} , and $(10^{-3}, 100)$ for \mathbf{P} . All models
71 were trained on NVIDIA A100 40 GB GPUs.

72 **Joint Posterior Sampling**

73 We draw samples from the posterior distribution in Equation 1 using a Gibbs sampling scheme,
74 cycling through the components one at a time while holding the others fixed:

$$\mathbf{S} \rightarrow (\mathbf{M}, \boldsymbol{\delta}) \rightarrow \mathbf{L} \rightarrow \mathbf{P}.$$

75 The lens mass \mathbf{M} and alignment shifts $\boldsymbol{\delta}$ are sampled jointly using the Metropolis-Adjusted Langevin
76 Algorithm (MALA) [Roberts and Tweedie, 1996]. The source \mathbf{S} , lens light \mathbf{L} , and PSFs \mathbf{P} are sampled

¹<https://mast.stsci.edu>

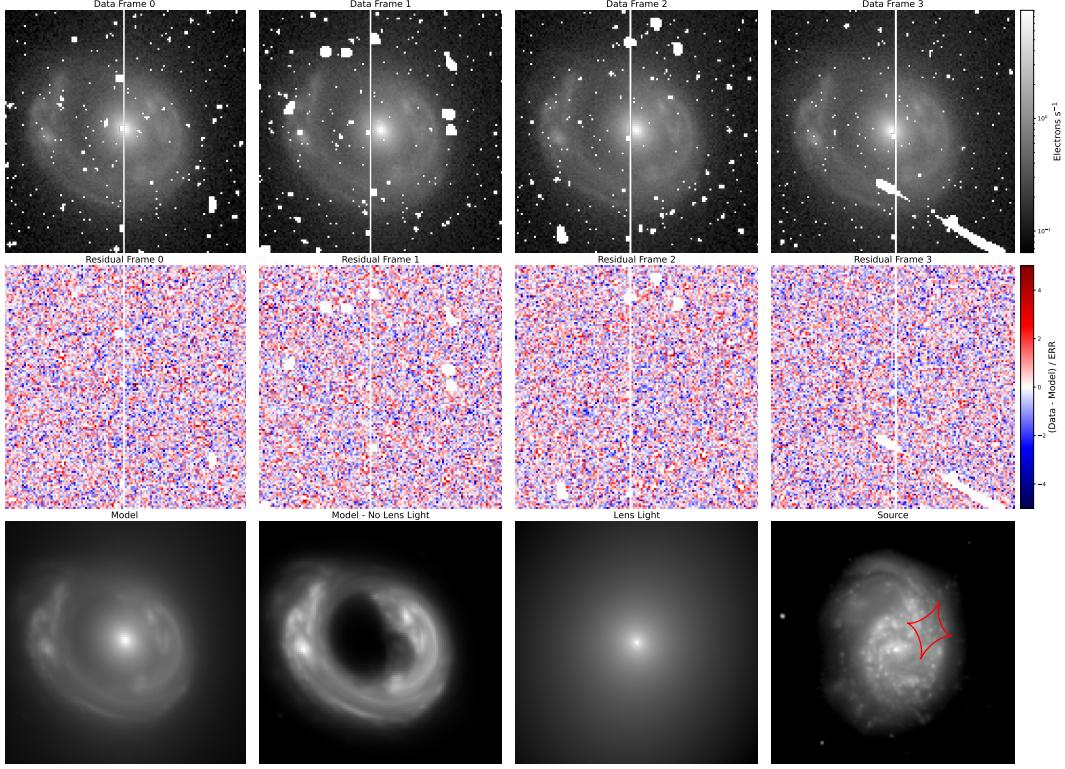


Figure 1: Lens model of SDSSJ1430+4105. From top to bottom: the four data exposures (log-scaled), normalized data-model residuals per exposure with colormap centered and clipped at ± 5 (5σ); and a summary of the lens model. The bottom row shows, from left to right, the lens model, the lens model without lens light, the lens light model, and the reconstructed background source (all in log-scale). The red curve indicates the lensing caustic overlaid on the source model: source features inside the caustic are lensed into four observable images, while those outside produce only two.

77 by solving the reverse-time posterior SDE under the convolved Gaussian likelihood approximation
78 following Adam et al. [2022]

79 The PSF models \mathbf{P} are treated separately from the physical lens model: for each exposure, \mathbf{P}_i is
80 sampled from cutouts of stars within the same data frame, excluding the region containing the main
81 lensing system. Therefore, our PSF posterior sampling is conditionally independent of the physical
82 lens model parameters $\Theta = \{\mathbf{L}, \mathbf{M}, \mathbf{S}\}$.

83 Our Gibbs procedure proceeds in three stages: (1) **Initialization:** a short chain to move the sampler
84 toward a region of high posterior probability; (2) **Annealed sampling:** 100 Gibbs steps (20 burn-in)
85 with inflated likelihood variance to encourage exploration; (3) **Fine-tuning:** starting from each
86 annealed sample, we run additional Gibbs updates with the true likelihood to obtain posterior samples
87 without annealing. The full Gibbs procedure for one lensing system requires approximately 160 GPU
88 hours on an NVIDIA A100 40 GB GPU. For the first stage, we initialize the foreground mass model
89 parameters \mathbf{M} using the results of Bolton et al. [2008].

90 3 Results and Discussion

91 For each strong lensing system, we present data–model residuals from posterior samples (Figure 1,
92 Appendix 3). A gallery of sampled sources across the SLACS lensing systems is shown in Figure 2.
93 We also present full joint posterior statistics of SDSSJ1430+4105 in Figure 3 and for a subset of
94 lenses, foreground mass-model parameter uncertainties in Table 1 marginalized over \mathbf{S} , \mathbf{L} , \mathbf{P} , and δ .

95 The results demonstrate that the vast majority of signal in Hubble-resolution data can be effec-
96 tively modeled by combining parametric lens mass models with high-dimensional, data-driven

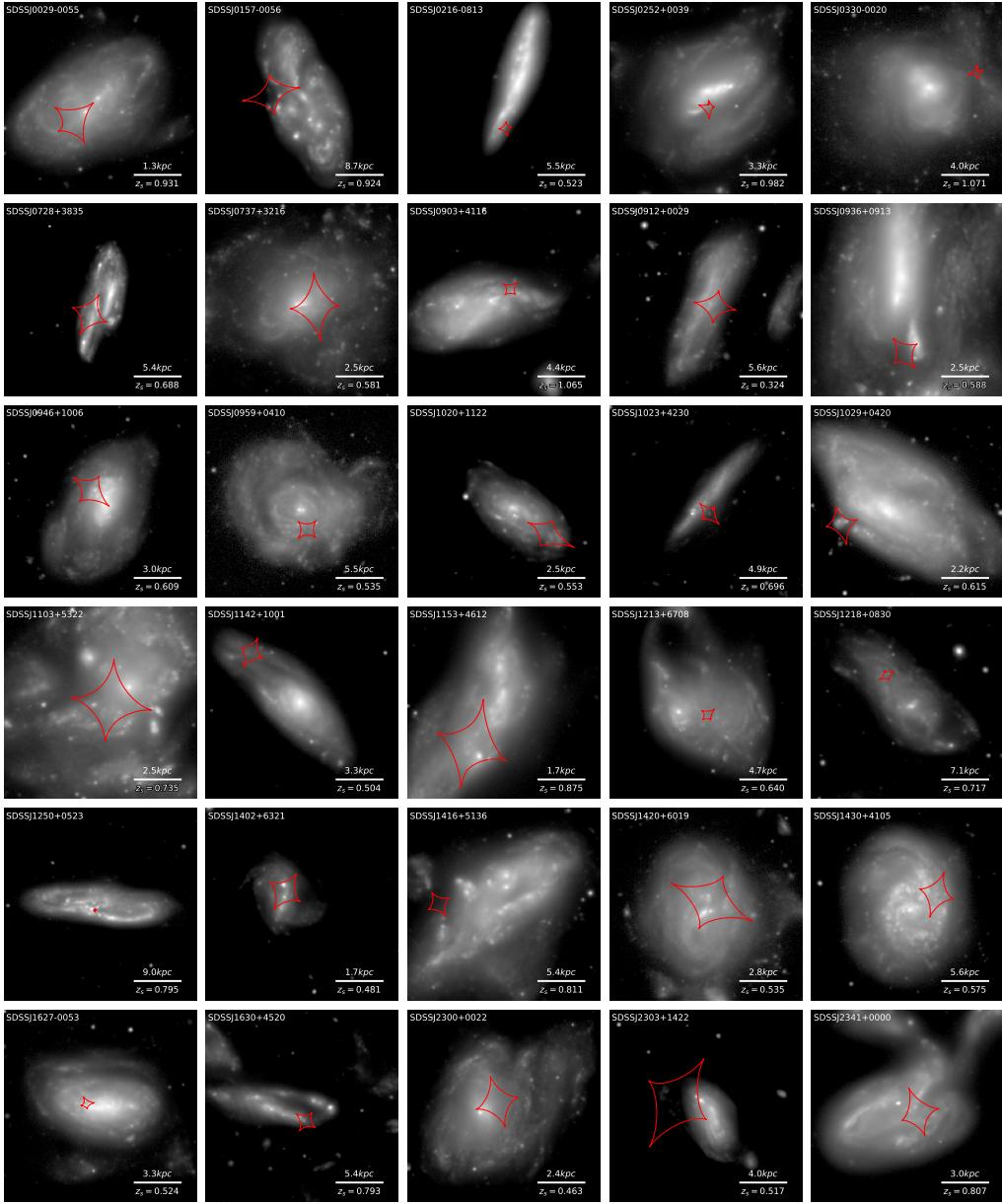


Figure 2: Example posterior sample of the background source for representative lensing systems. Each panel shows the reconstructed source with the lensing caustic overlaid, along with the name of the lensing system, source redshift and a physical reference scale in kiloparsecs (kpc). The physical scale is computed assuming a flat Λ CDM cosmology with $\Omega_m = 0.3$, $\Omega_\Lambda = 0.7$, and $H_0 = 70 \text{ km s}^{-1} \text{ Mpc}^{-1}$.

97 prior models for the source, lens light, and PSF. Nonetheless, there are a few current limitations.
 98 First, a few systems, in particular SDSSJ2341+0000 (Figure 32), SDSSJ1103+5322 (Figure 19)
 99 and SDSSJ0959+0410 (Figure 15), show residuals traceable to the lens light prior trained largely
 100 on parametric Sérsic profiles, indicating the need for training on real or simulated galaxies with
 101 richer morphologies. Second, our Gaussian likelihood ignores known non-Gaussian HST noise, so
 102 integrating learned noise statistics (e.g., score-based, Legin et al. [2023a]) into the likelihood model
 103 would yield improved residuals.

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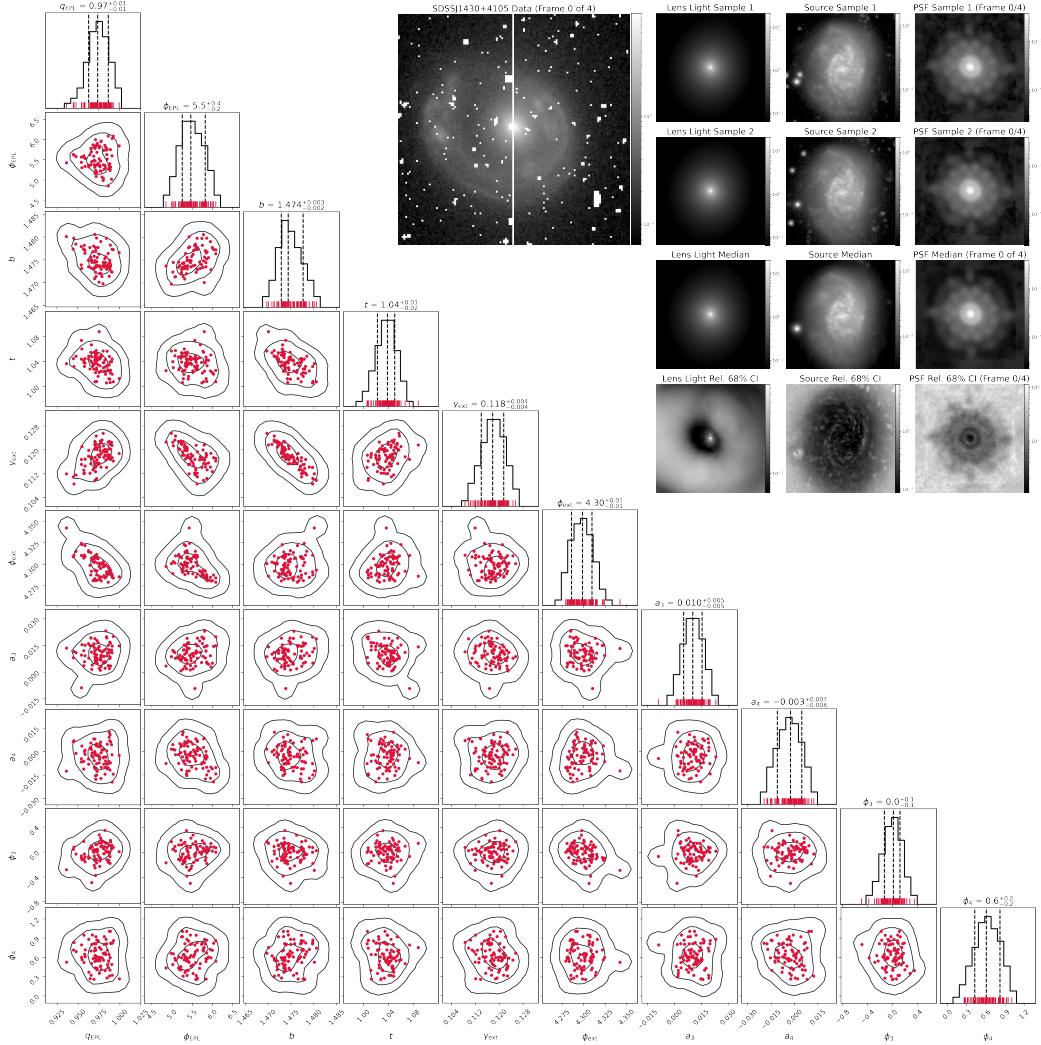


Figure 3: Joint posterior distribution for SDSSJ1430+4105. The corner plot shows posterior samples (red) of the foreground mass parameters \mathbf{M} , with contours (black) marking the 1σ , 2σ and 3σ regions. The 1-D corner plot marginals display the posterior median of the foreground mass parameters \mathbf{M} with 16th–84th percentile uncertainties, indicated by dashed vertical lines and reported above each panel. Posterior samples and uncertainties for the source \mathbf{S} , lens light \mathbf{L} , and PSF model \mathbf{P}_0 (frame 0 of 4) are also shown. The upper-right panels display, from top to bottom, two posterior samples, the median model, and the relative 68% credible interval (interval width divided by the median). All results are based on 80 posterior samples and are marginalized over alignment parameters $\boldsymbol{\delta}$.

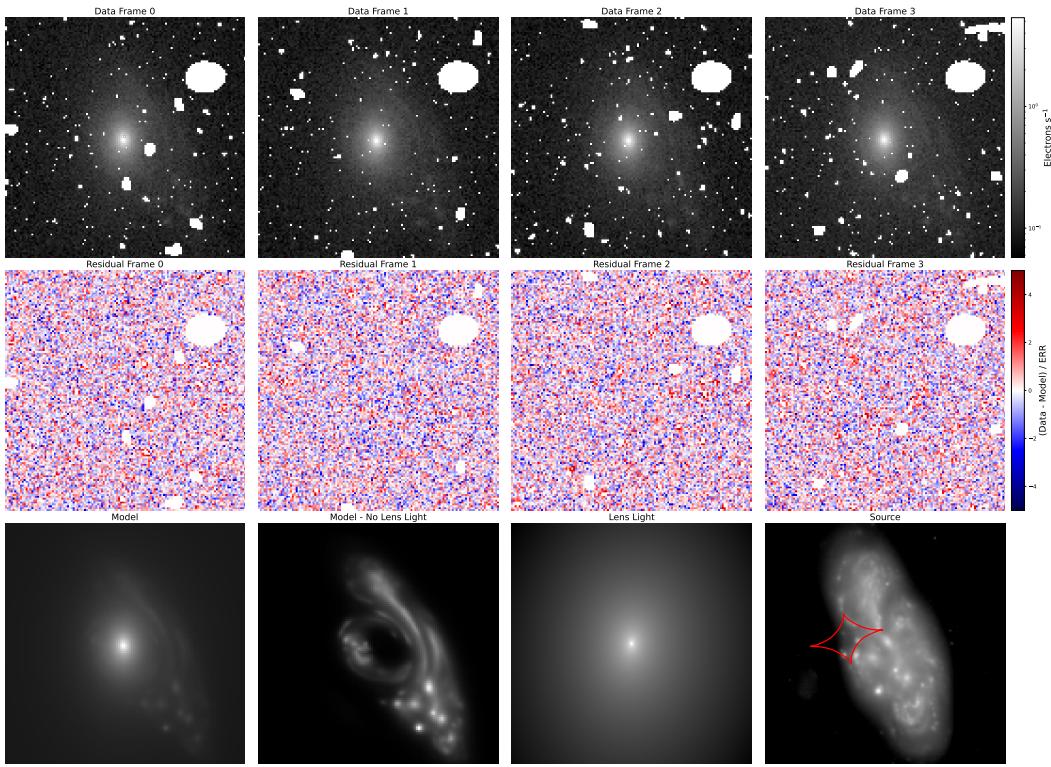


Figure 5: Same as Fig. 1, but for SDSSJ0157-0056.

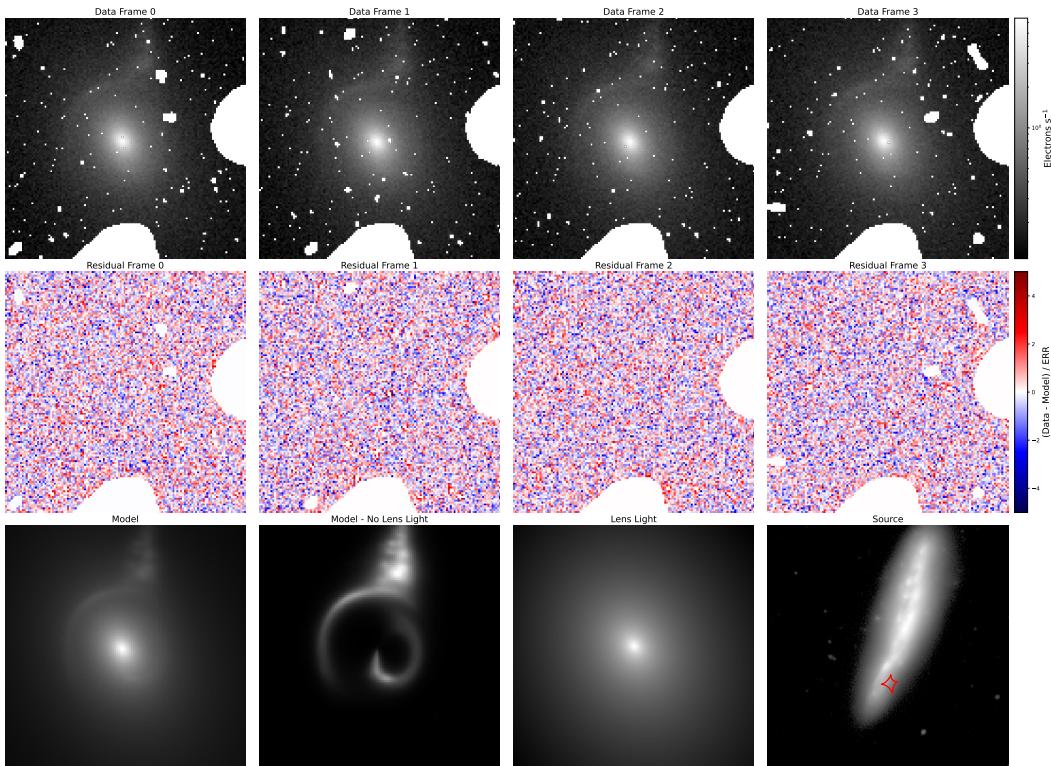


Figure 6: Same as Fig. 1, but for SDSSJ0216-0813.

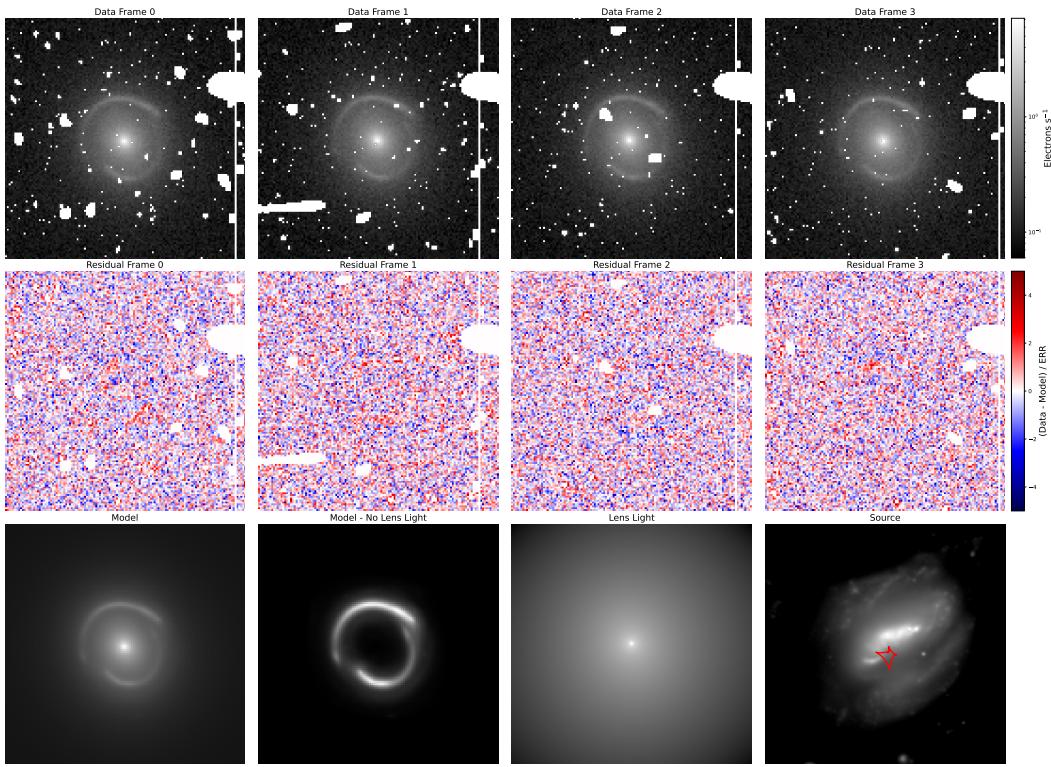


Figure 7: Same as Fig. 1, but for SDSSJ0252+0039.

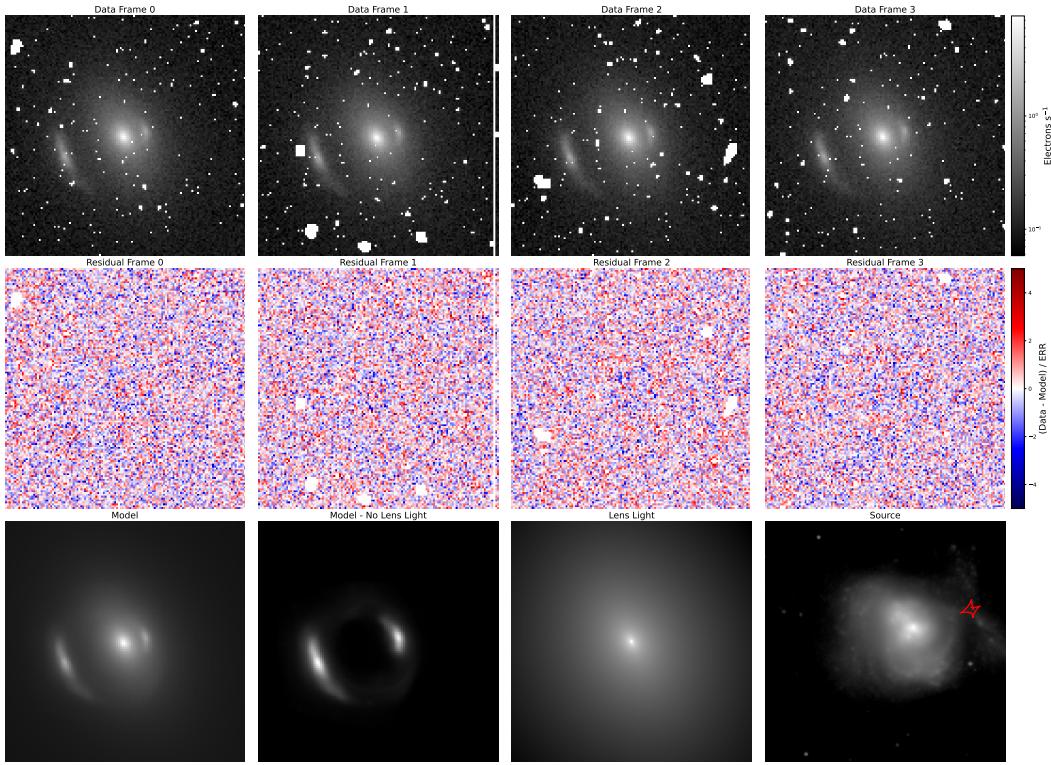


Figure 8: Same as Fig. 1, but for SDSSJ0330-0020.

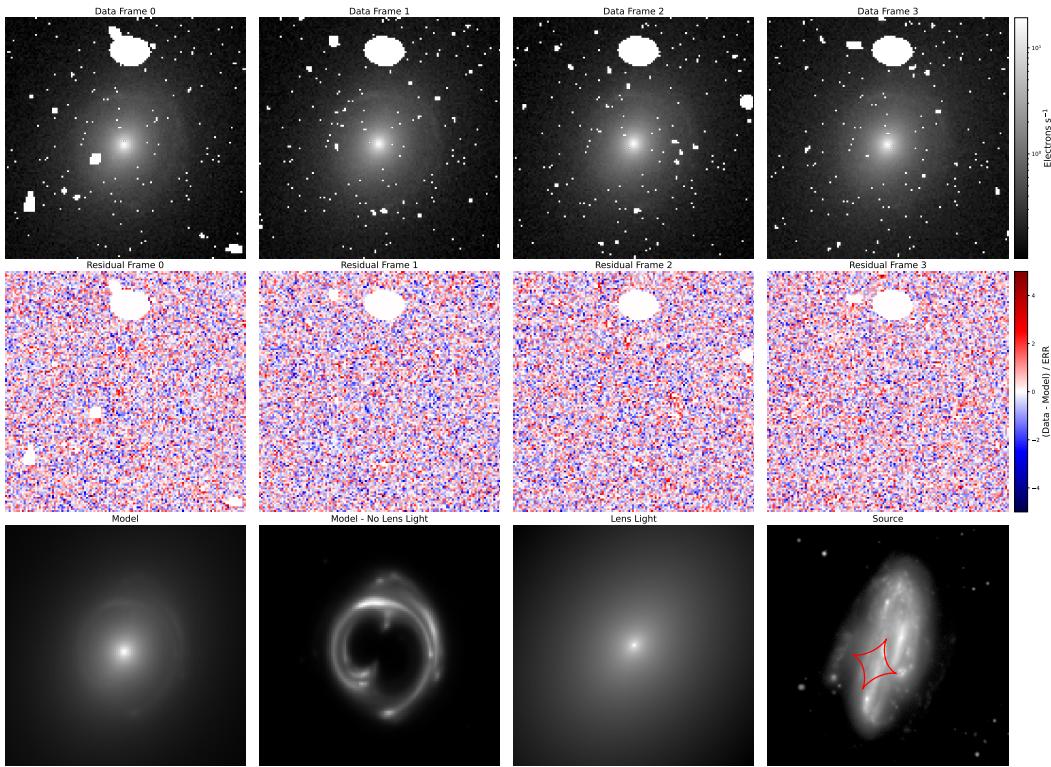


Figure 9: Same as Fig. 1, but for SDSSJ0728+3835.

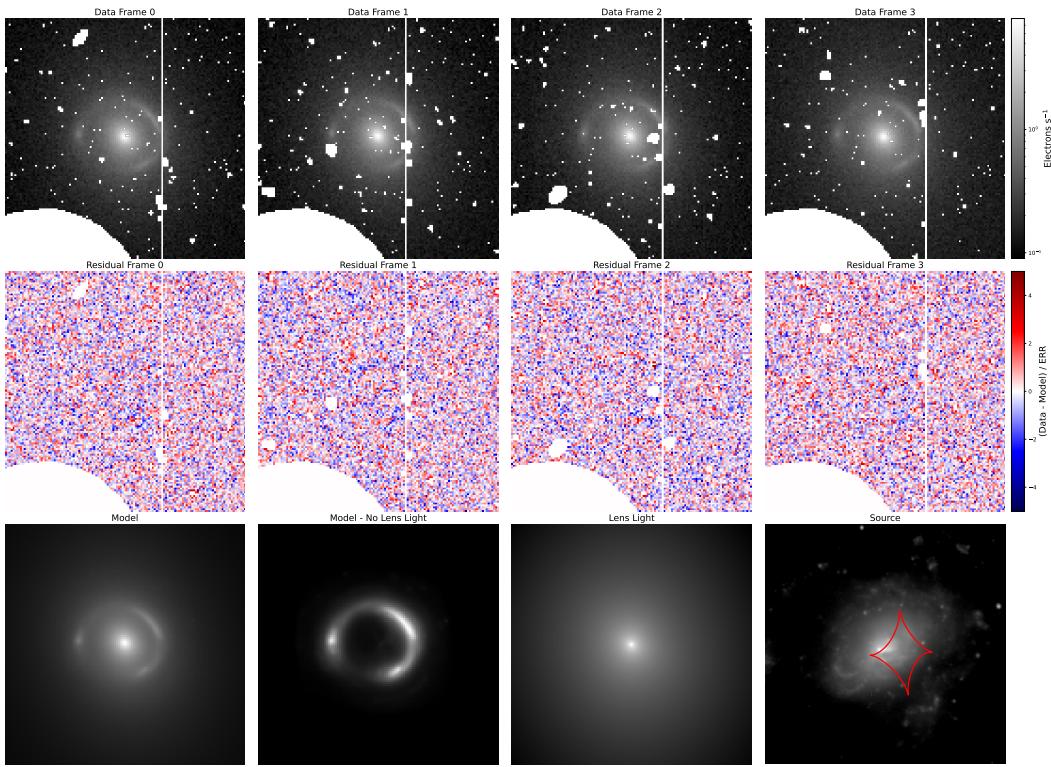


Figure 10: Same as Fig. 1, but for SDSSJ0737+3216.

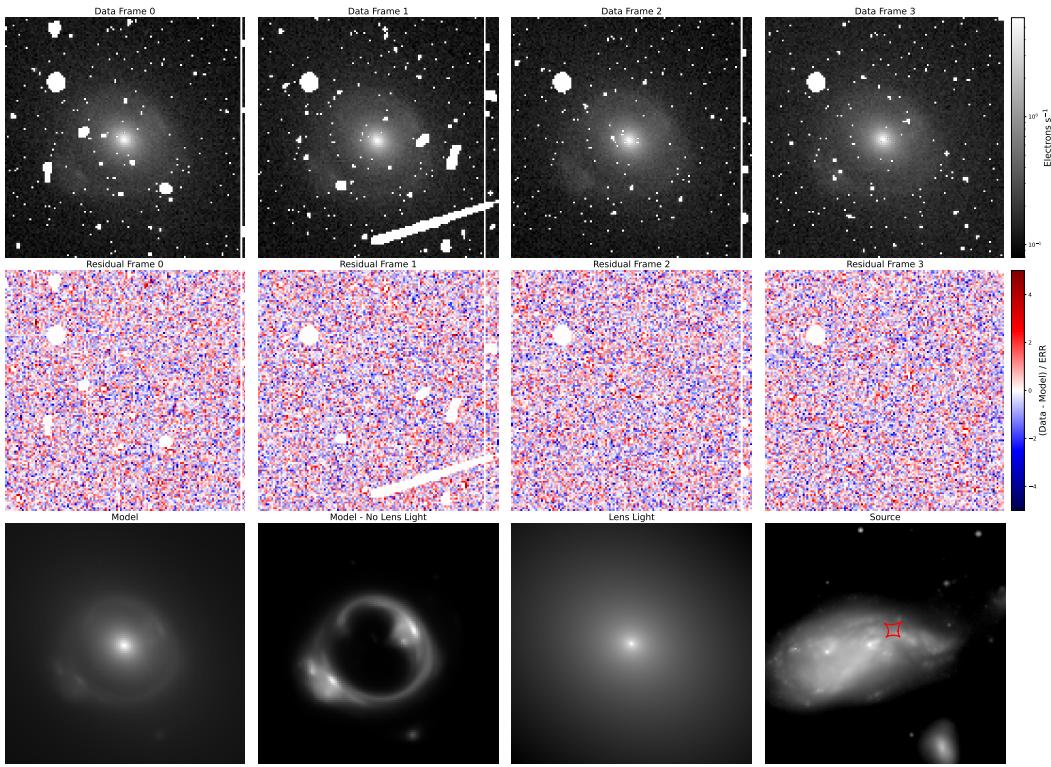


Figure 11: Same as Fig. 1, but for SDSSJ0903+4116.

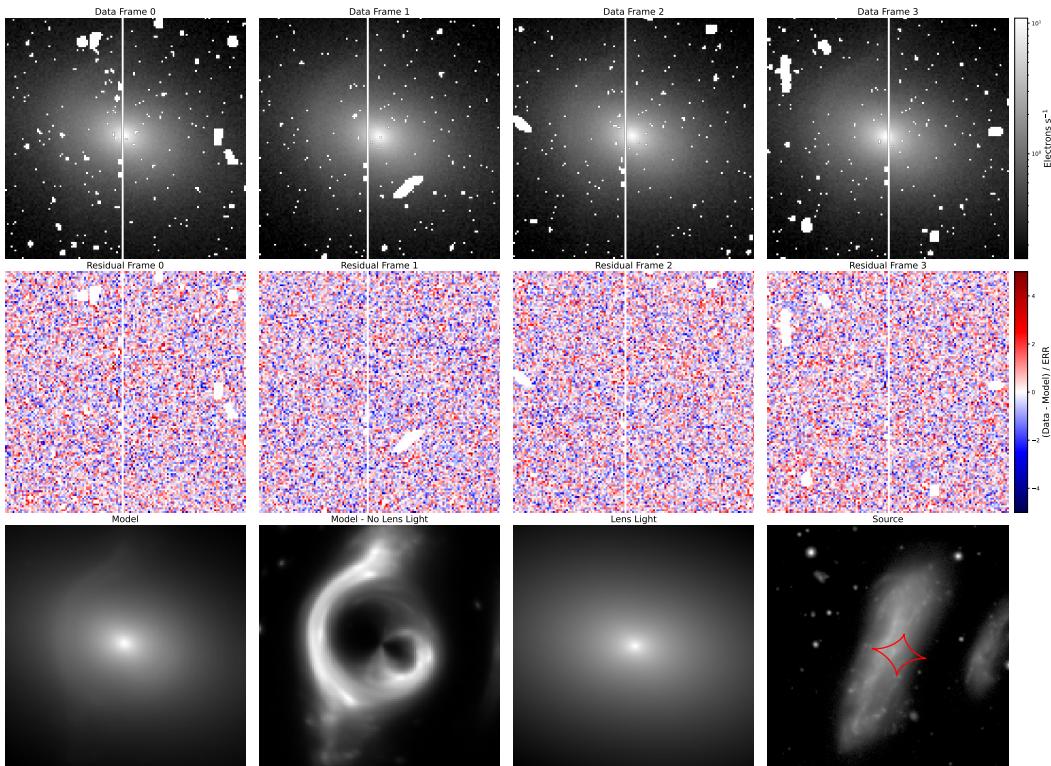


Figure 12: Same as Fig. 1, but for SDSSJ0912+0029.

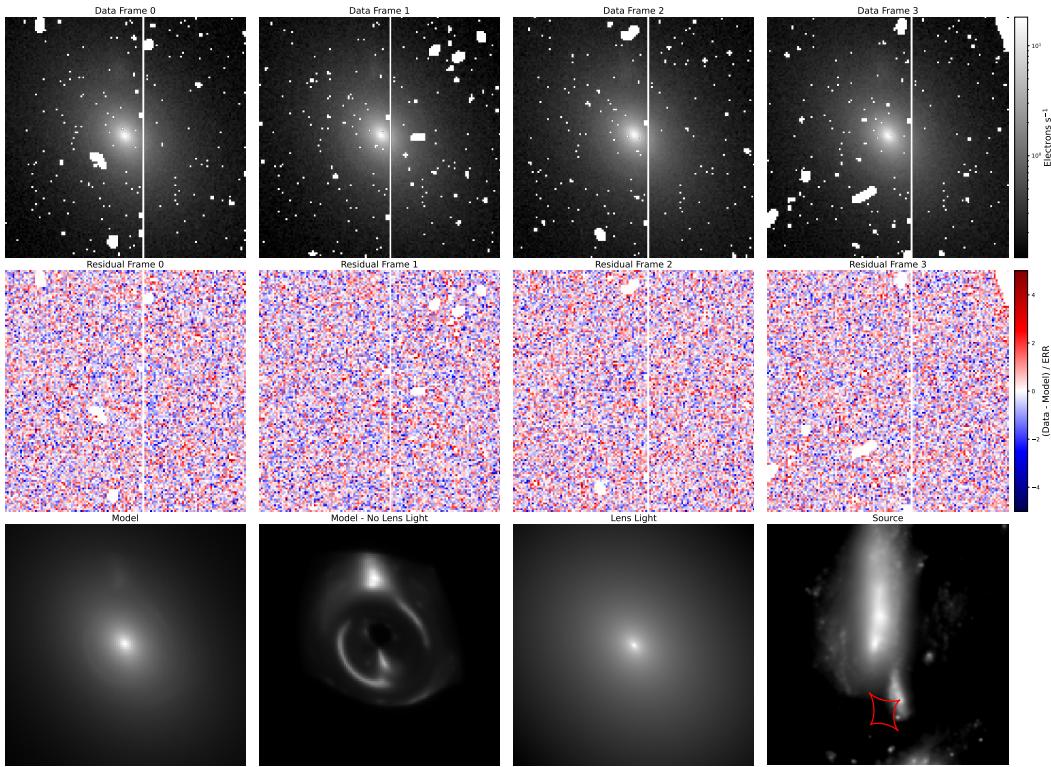


Figure 13: Same as Fig. 1, but for SDSSJ0936+0913.

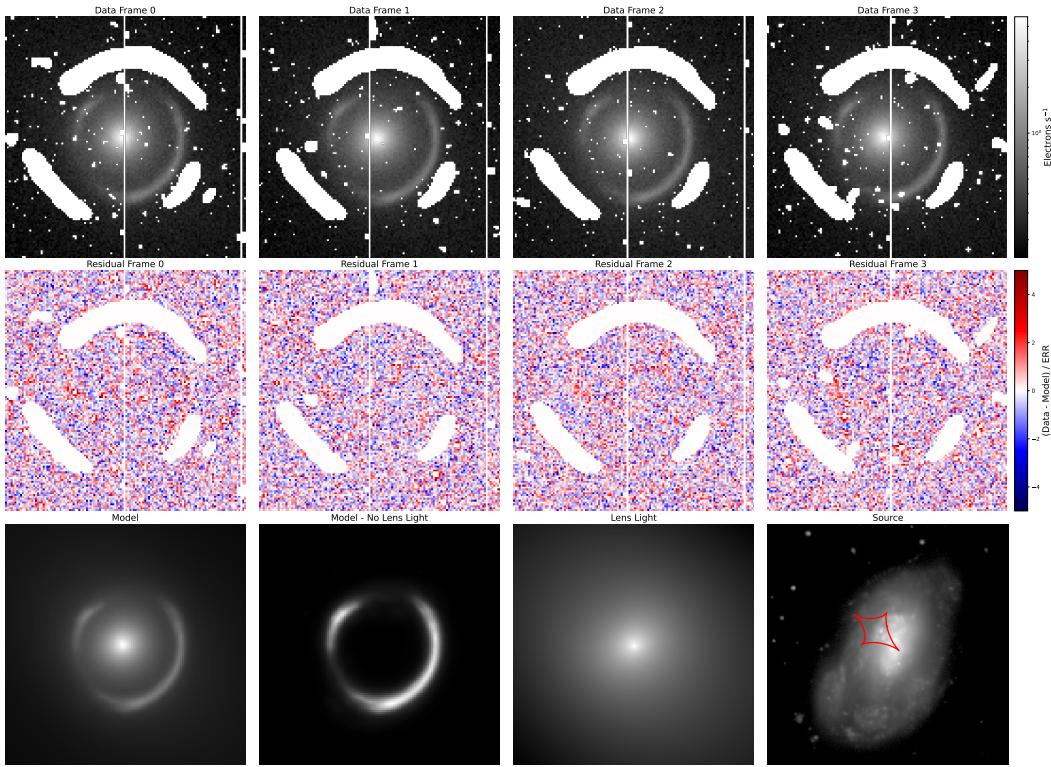


Figure 14: Same as Fig. 1, but for SDSSJ0946+1006.

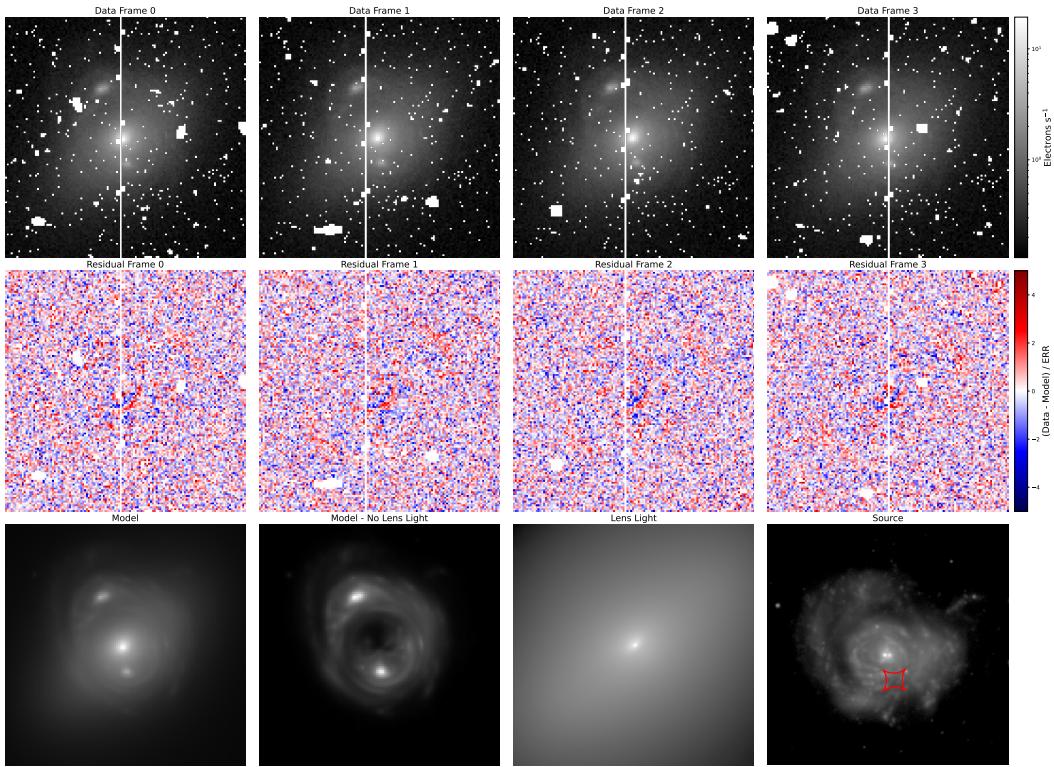


Figure 15: Same as Fig. 1, but for SDSSJ0959+0410.

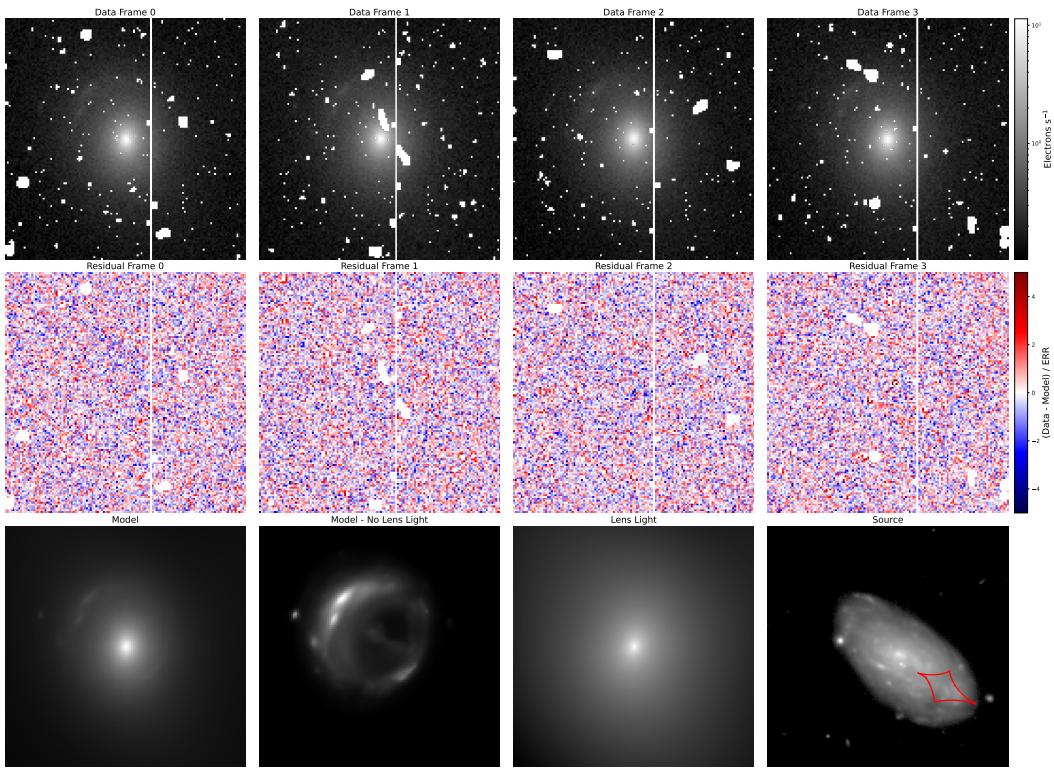


Figure 16: Same as Fig. 1, but for SDSSJ1020+1122.

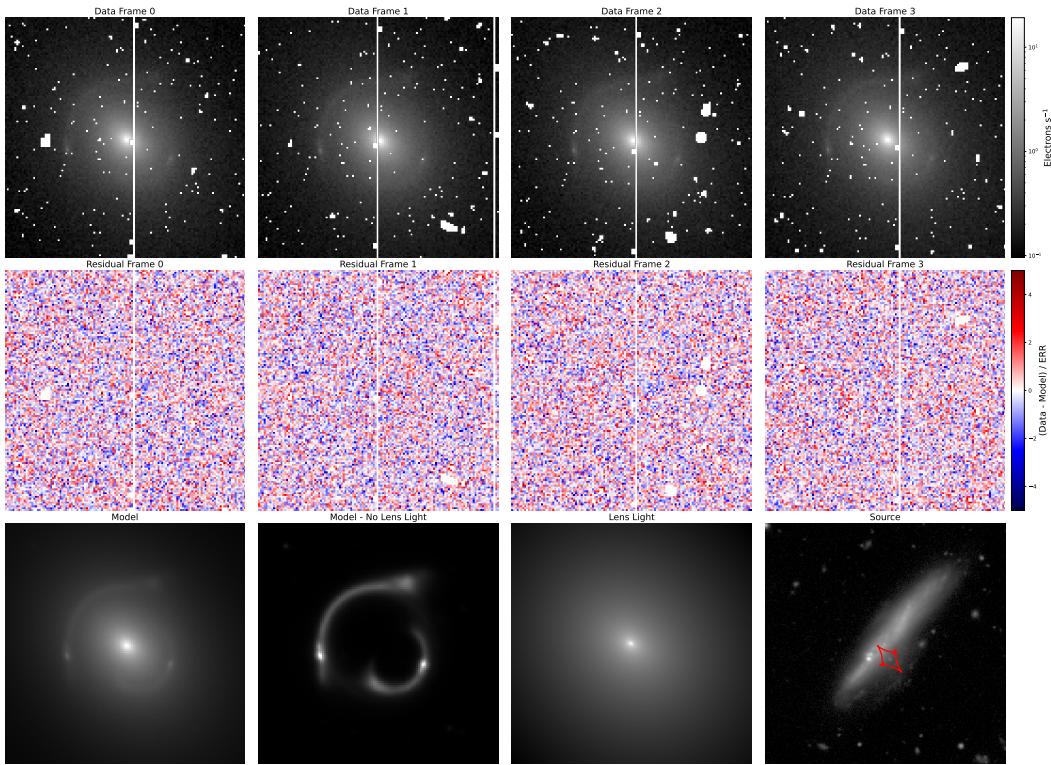


Figure 17: Same as Fig. 1, but for SDSSJ1023+4230.

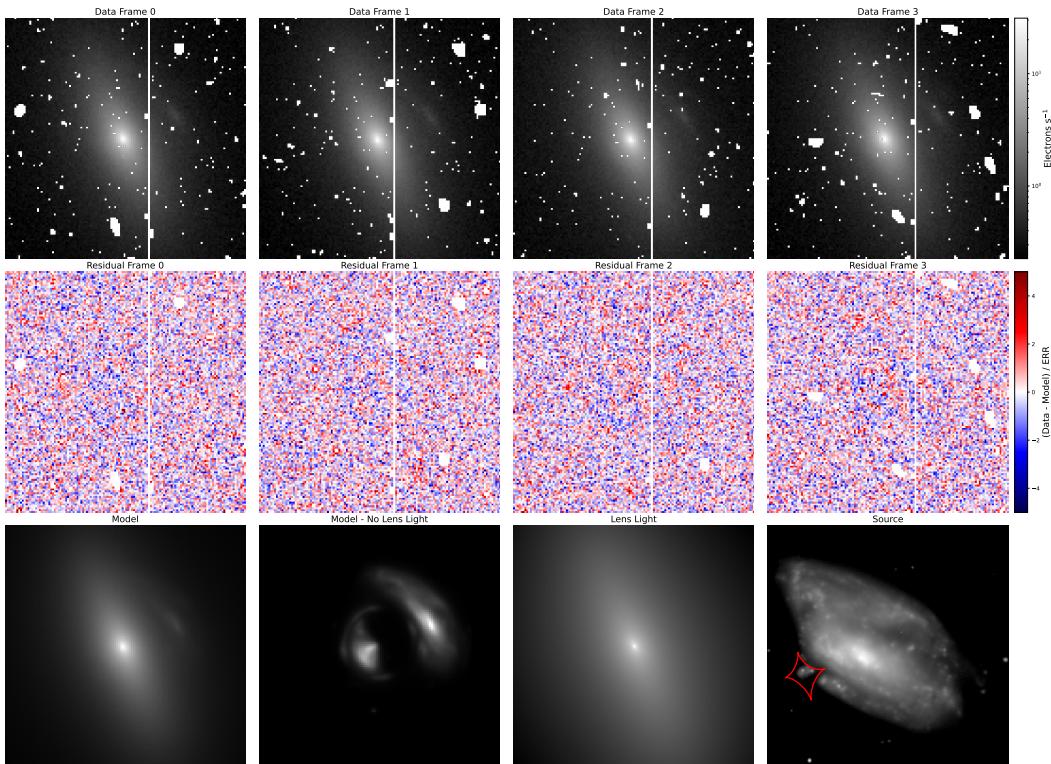


Figure 18: Same as Fig. 1, but for SDSSJ1029+0420.

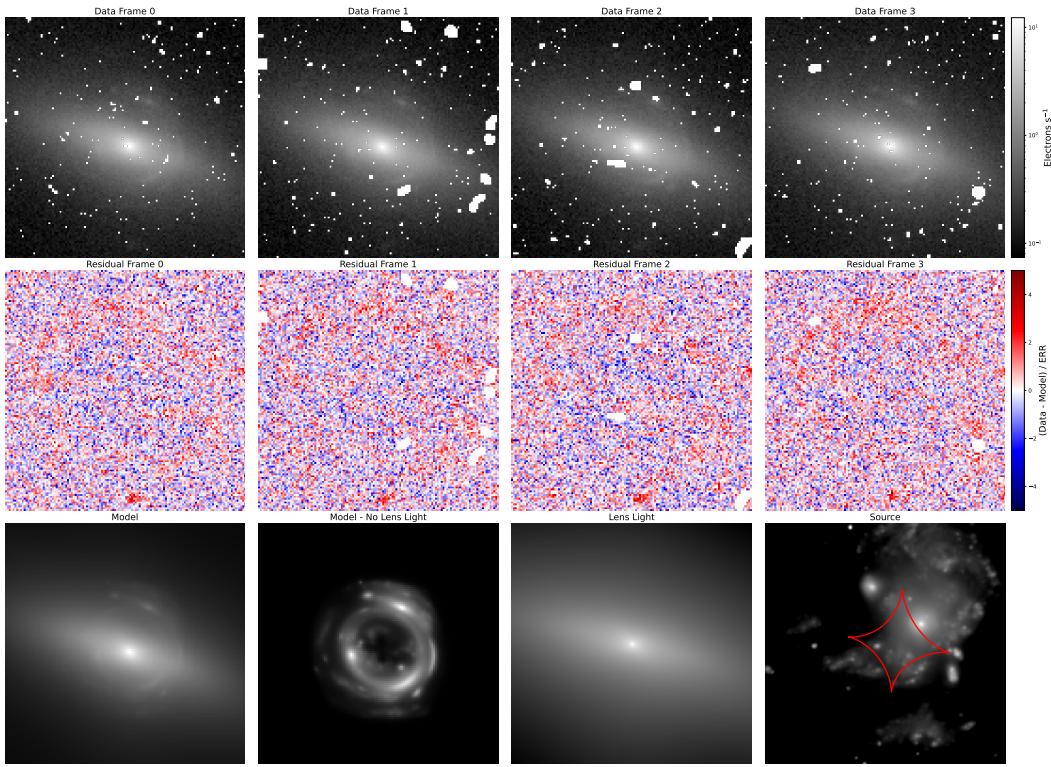


Figure 19: Same as Fig. 1, but for SDSSJ1103+5322.

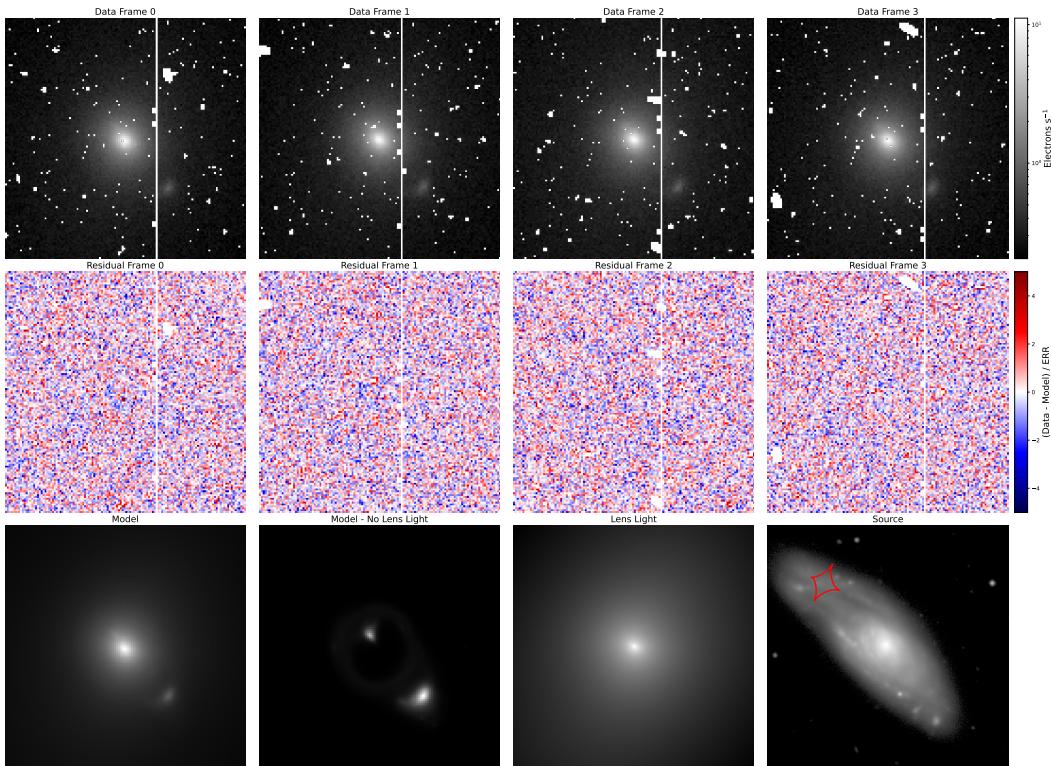


Figure 20: Same as Fig. 1, but for SDSSJ1142+1001.

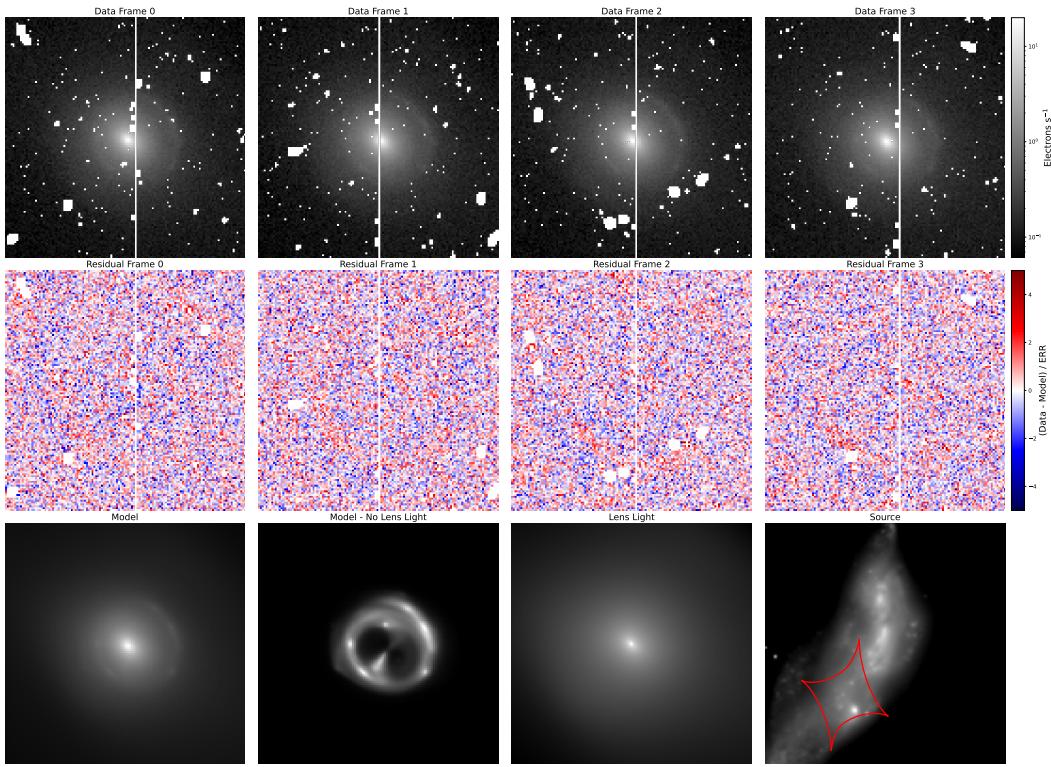


Figure 21: Same as Fig. 1, but for SDSSJ1153+4612.

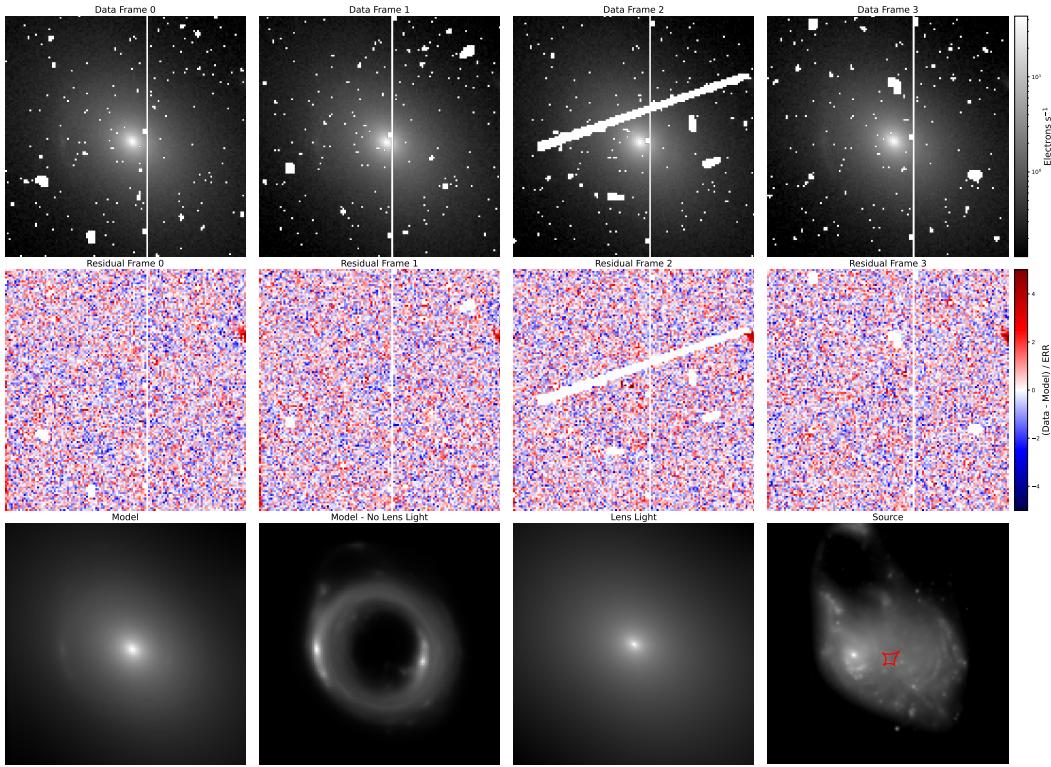


Figure 22: Same as Fig. 1, but for SDSSJ1213+6708.

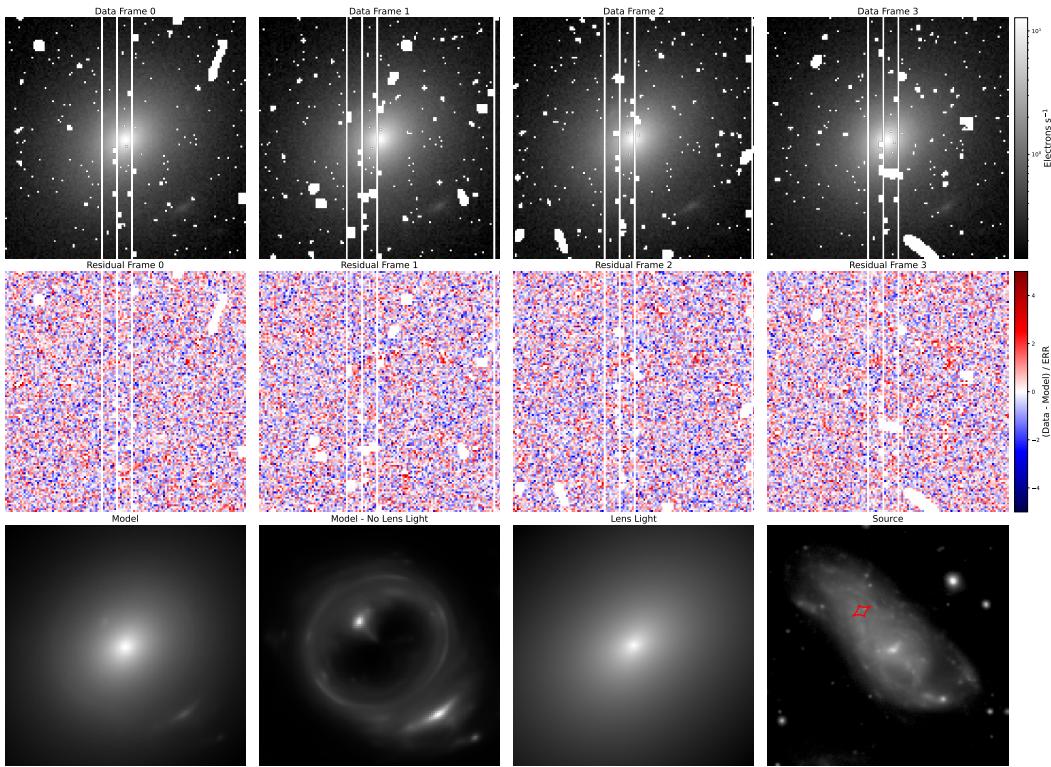


Figure 23: Same as Fig. 1, but for SDSSJ1218+0830.

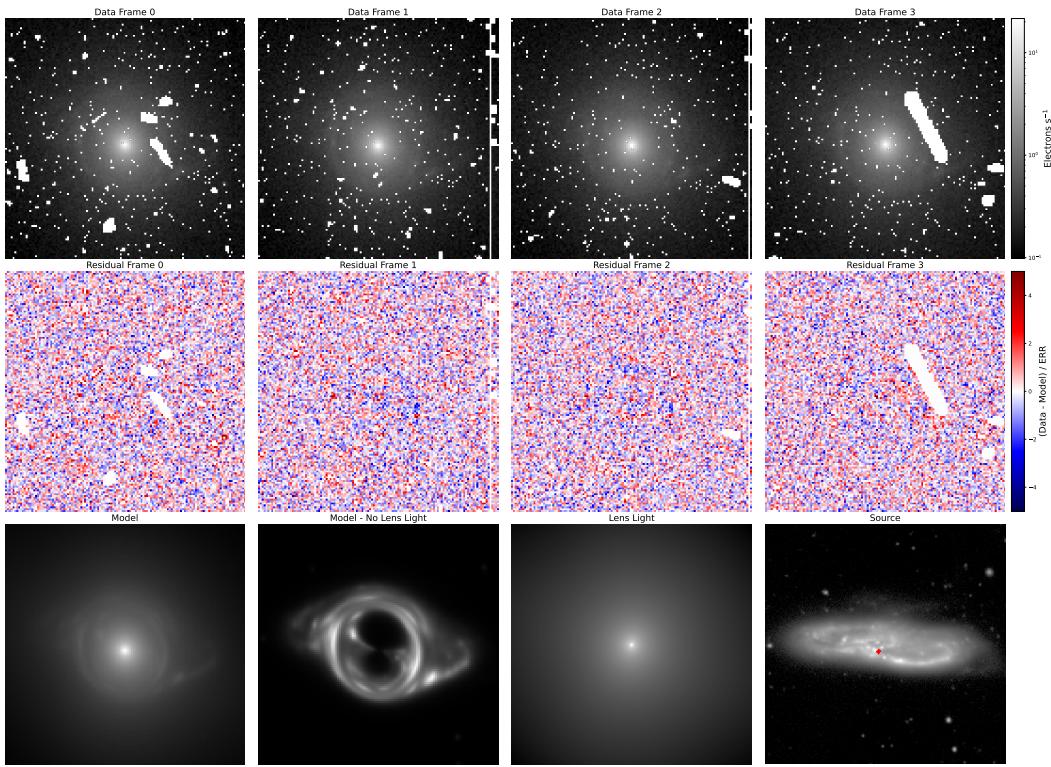


Figure 24: Same as Fig. 1, but for SDSSJ1250+0523.

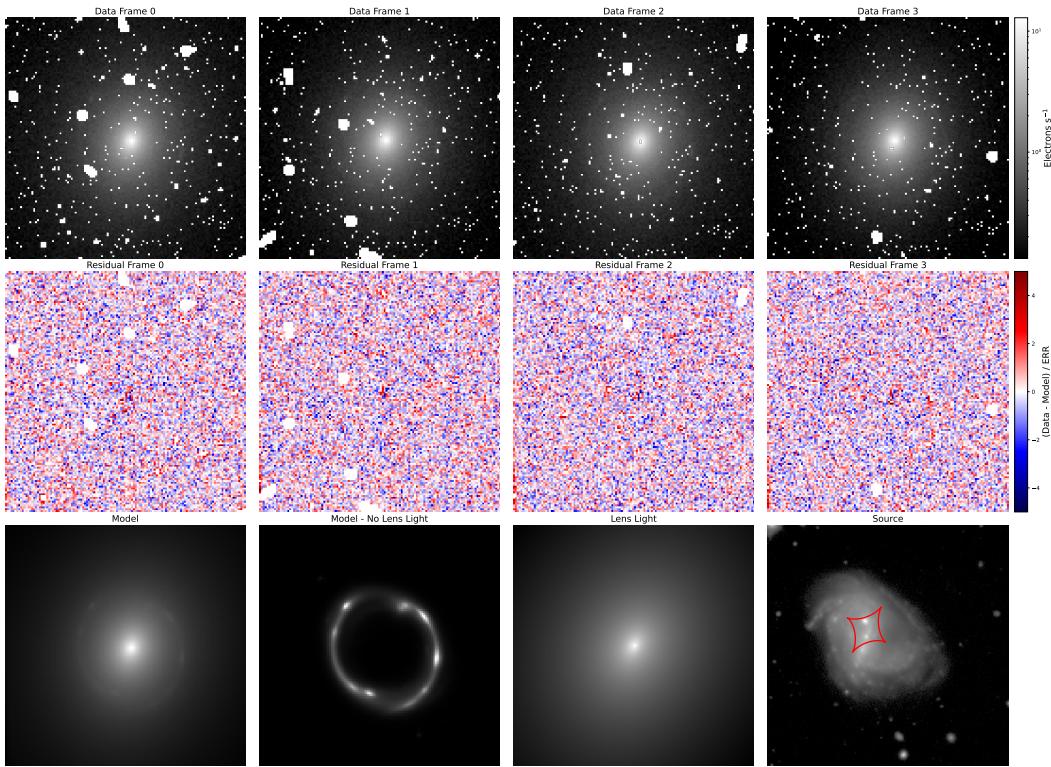


Figure 25: Same as Fig. 1, but for SDSSJ1402+6321.

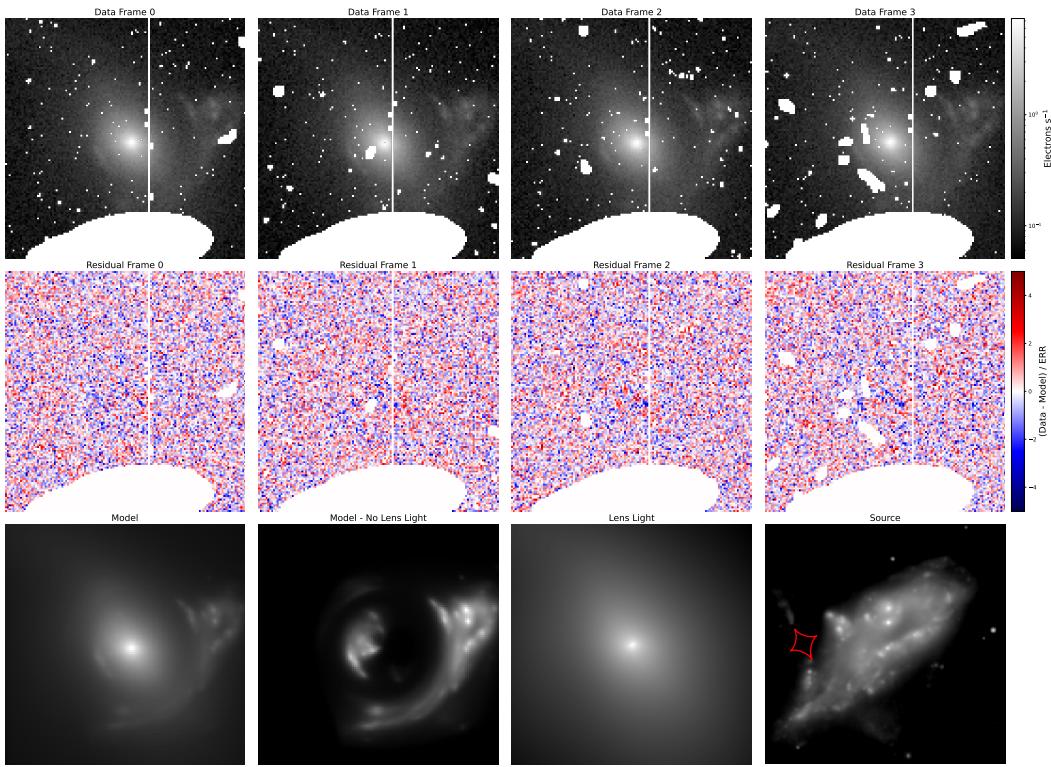


Figure 26: Same as Fig. 1, but for SDSSJ1416+5136.

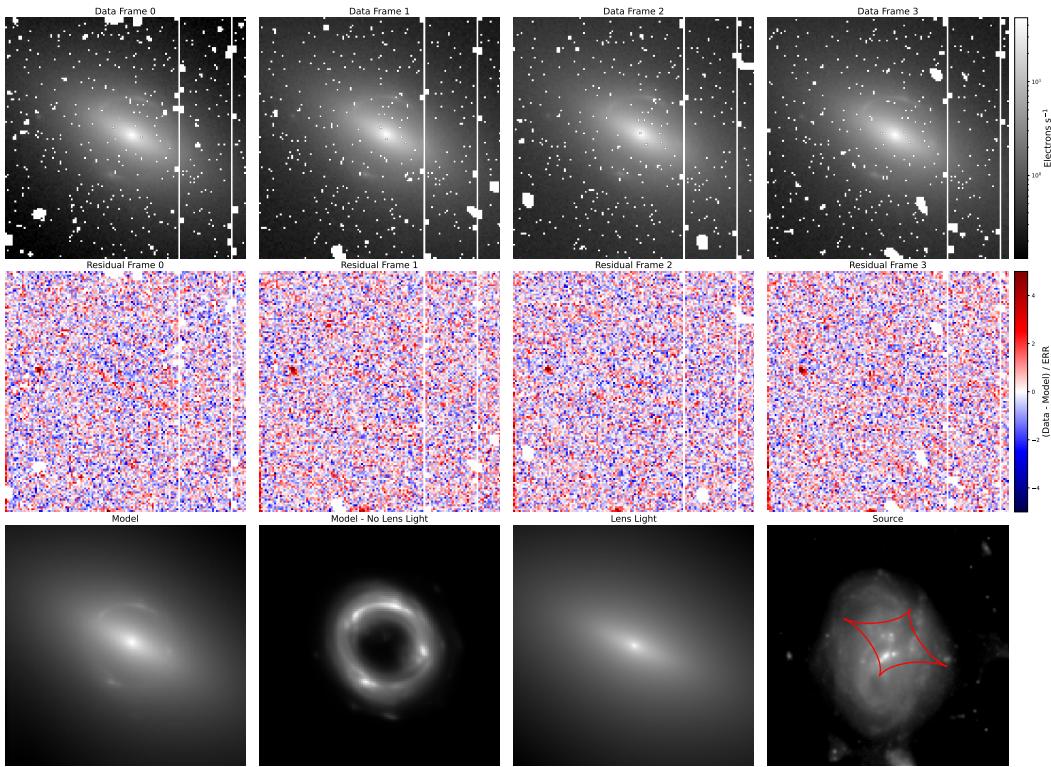


Figure 27: Same as Fig. 1, but for SDSSJ1420+6019.

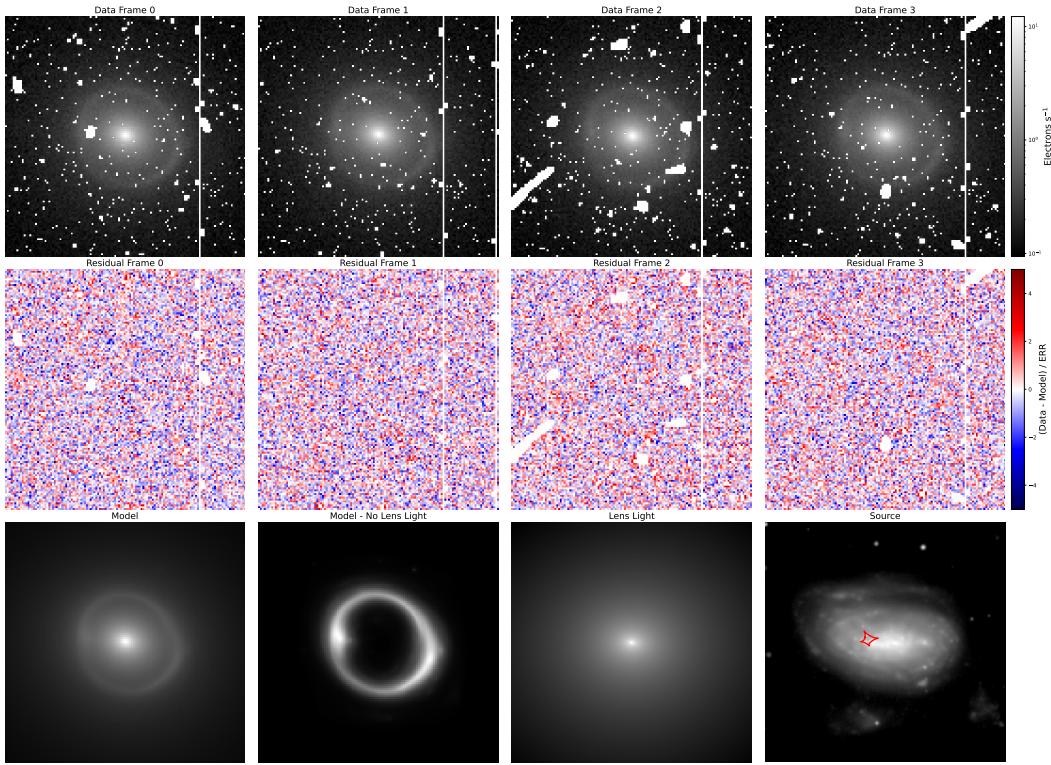


Figure 28: Same as Fig. 1, but for SDSSJ1627-0053.

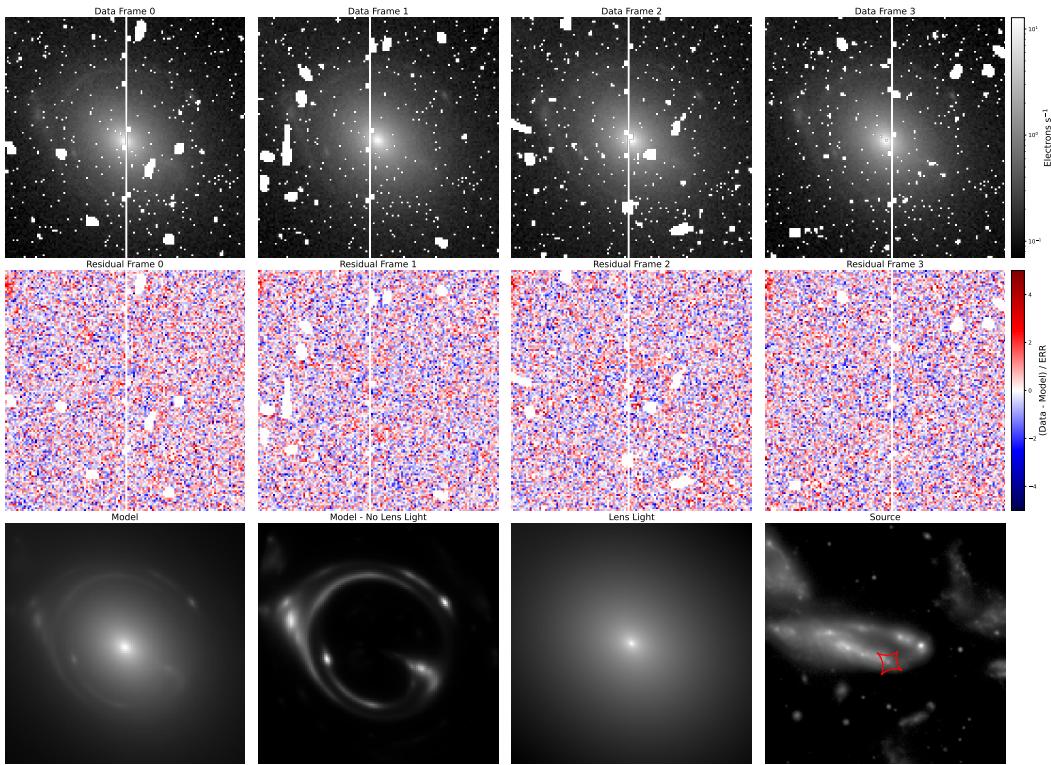


Figure 29: Same as Fig. 1, but for SDSSJ1630+4520.

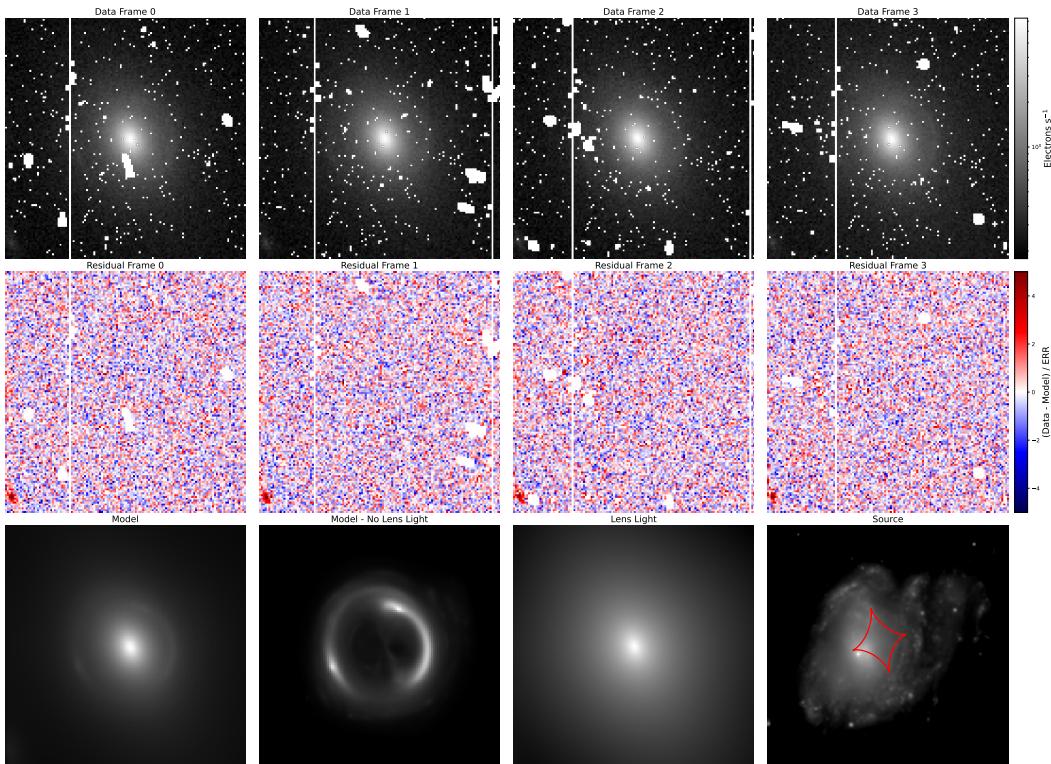


Figure 30: Same as Fig. 1, but for SDSSJ2300+0022.

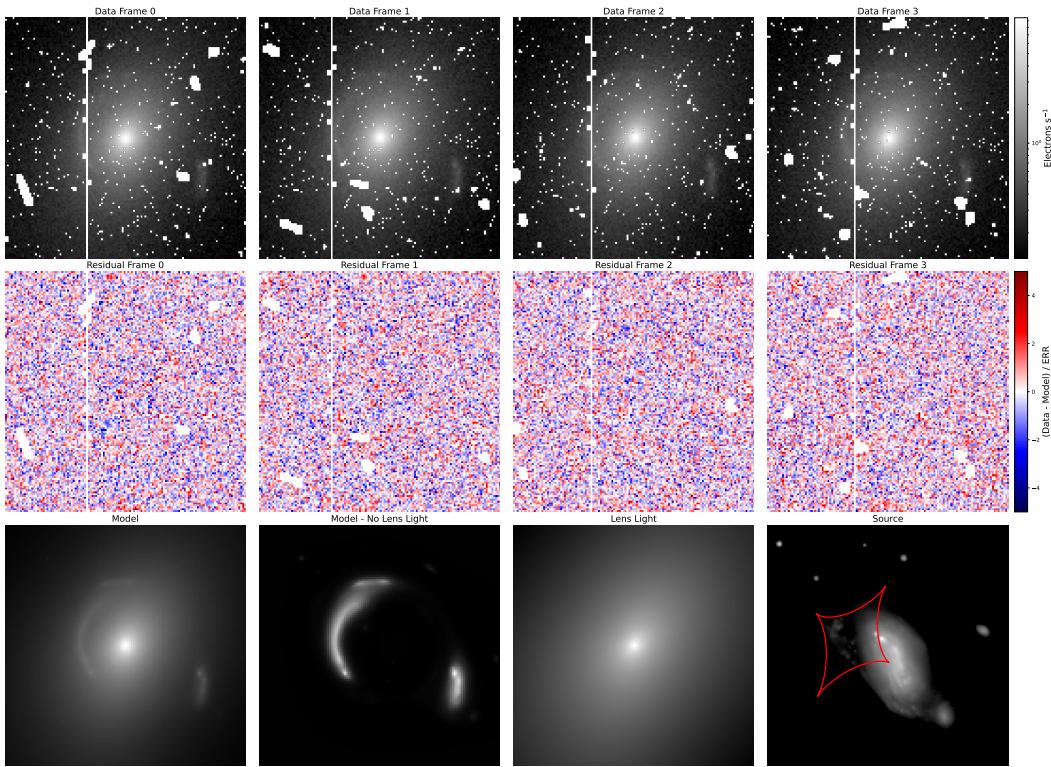


Figure 31: Same as Fig. 1, but for SDSSJ2303+1422.

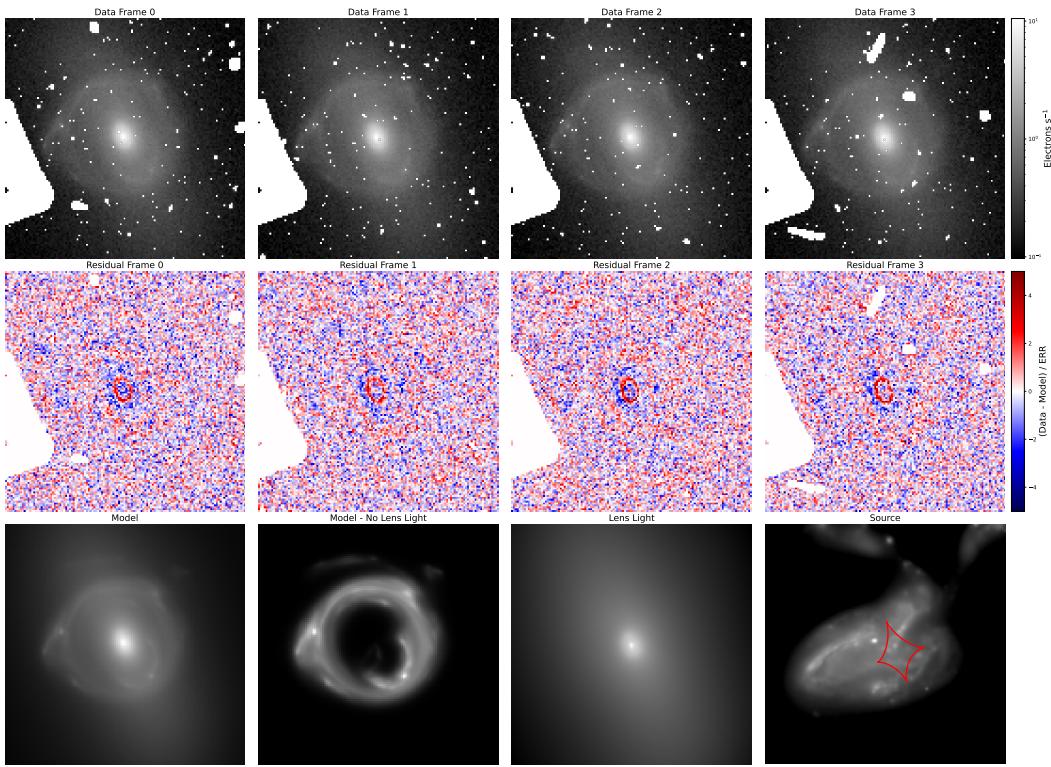


Figure 32: Same as Fig. 1, but for SDSSJ2341+0000.

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