

Project:

# Film to Wit

Fellow:

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Since this project concerns film, death comes up a lot. We are now in the last throes of film as an artistic medium. As digital distribution expands, the last reason to use film—the 35mm screen print—will be extinguished. The odd thing about film is that the end of its material production is really only the most recent pose in a prolonged death scene that has lasted even since its birth in the late nineteenth century. Film is like one of those cowboys in a western, slowly coming to rest in the dust after a long drawn out dance of worsening paroxysms. Auguste Lumière, one of the inventors of film, and his strange aphorism that “the cinematograph is an invention without a future” tells us that the prognosis wasn’t too good even at the outset.<sup>1</sup> Ed Halter, the film critic of the *Village Voice*, puts a much finer point on it when he says, “Film might be seen centuries from now as a really long slow piece of performance art that just took a century, and then it was over. That’s the last performance.”<sup>2</sup> A performance—in other words, a sequence of actions at whose very beginning is the seed of obsolescence. In the case of film, a medium that defies any attempt of archival preservation, this intrinsic expiration date has been ever present. It’s just a matter of opinion as to when the time of death actually occurs. For the filmmaker

Hollis Frampton, it occurred with the advent of radar:

*Cinema is the Last Machine. It is probably the last art that will reach the mind through the senses. It is customary to mark the end of the Age of Machines at the advent of video. The point in time is imprecise: I prefer radar, which replaced the mechanical reconnaissance aircraft with a static, anonymous black box. Its introduction coincides quite closely with the making of Maya Deren’s Meshes of the Afternoon and Willard Maas’s Geography of the Body.<sup>3</sup>*

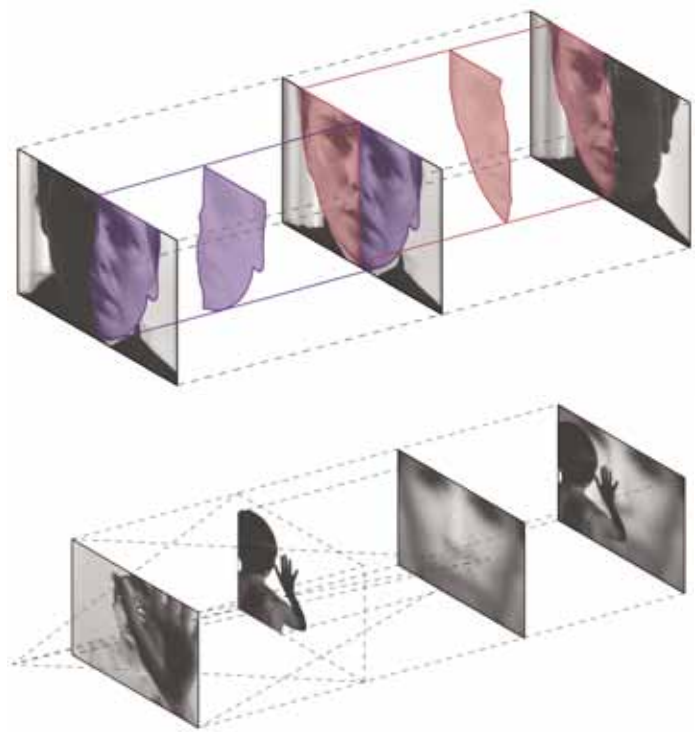
Frampton’s point being that film’s “end of an age” status has to do with the unlocking of the medium’s artistic potential and consequently the existence of Deren and Maas’ films: “As one era slowly dissolves into the next, some individuals metabolize the former means for physical survival into new means for psychic survival. These latter we call art.”<sup>4</sup> Much the way that painting becomes an art when it is not called upon, in the dim light of a cave, to illuminate the delicacies of bison hunting, so too can film pursue its own essential tectonics when it is no longer needed as a tool to instruct us



Film still  
Scenes from Ingmar Bergman's *Persona*, 1966

### Double Exposure Diagrams

The diagram looks at Ingmar Bergman's *Persona*. When the images of two women's faces in a conversation are brought together in double exposure, the two lit halves cancel out the halves in shadow and a bizarre mixture of the two faces is created.



### Shoot the Master

*Rio Bravo*, Howard Hawks, 1959.

In two separate scenes of the film, after we had drawn the plan, we saw that the 180 degree rule had the consequence of consistently bifurcating space into two parts either in front of or behind the axis.

about new technologies, social arrangements, urbanization and war.

For the purposes of *Film to Wit*, the time of death should be Lumière's and not Frampton's; our post-mortem films can and do occur at any time along film's lifespan. That is to say that film dies when it is born and the living film (that is not art) coexists with the dead film (that is art). *Film to Wit* is concerned with the latter. Furthermore, *Film to Wit* looks at film selectively. It is only concerned with films that instantiate a model of filmic space. *Film to Wit* arranges a number of these instances of filmic space in a menagerie of sorts.

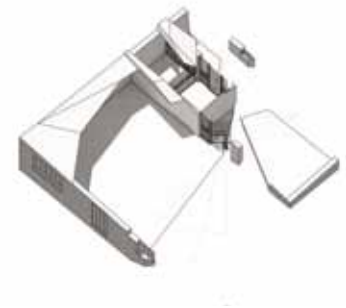
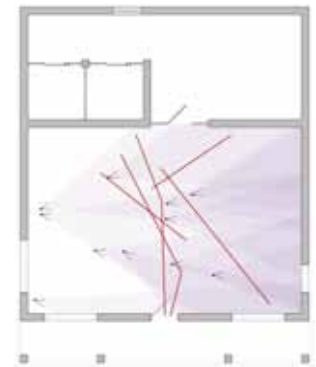
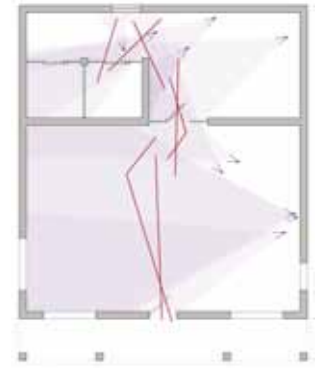
To begin with however, *Film to Wit* needed to define what it would not include. An example from Classical Cinema served to define what filmic space wasn't. In Classic Cinema, there is an orthodox editing technique called the 180 degree rule which posits that once an axis is defined in a scene, by an eye line, a movement (such as a car coming across the scene), or a conversation between two people, the camera cannot cross that axis without disturbing the spatial legibility of the scene to the viewer. We looked at an example of this method in use—the 1959 Howard Hawks film, *Rio Bravo*. In two separate scenes, after we had drawn the plan, we saw that the 180 degree rule had the consequence of consistently bifurcating space into two parts either in front of or behind the axis. There is nothing in the medium or the apparatus of film that leads to the 180 degree rule; it is a holdover, a trope taken from the proscenium stage of the theater. Thus, in order to maintain the clarity of its message, the directors of Classical Cinema saw fit to assume a spatial model from another medium entirely. We are not concerned with the message of Classical Cinema, but we are now certain that it is conveying that message

through non-filmic space, which is paradoxically the space of living film.

In the menagerie collected for *Film to Wit*, we looked at films that leave Hollywood orthodoxy behind or never stopped there in the first place—films that set up their own spatial models. These models were loosely divided into two overarching patterns. The first conceived of film as a liminal space, a somewhat flat translucent medium floating between things. Not unlike the fleeting registrations of orthographic projection, these films come closest to the etymology of the medium—a skin, a thin membrane. They are retinal. The second paradigm went further and made use of these fleeting liminal projections over time to construct virtual geometries and spaces in the mind.

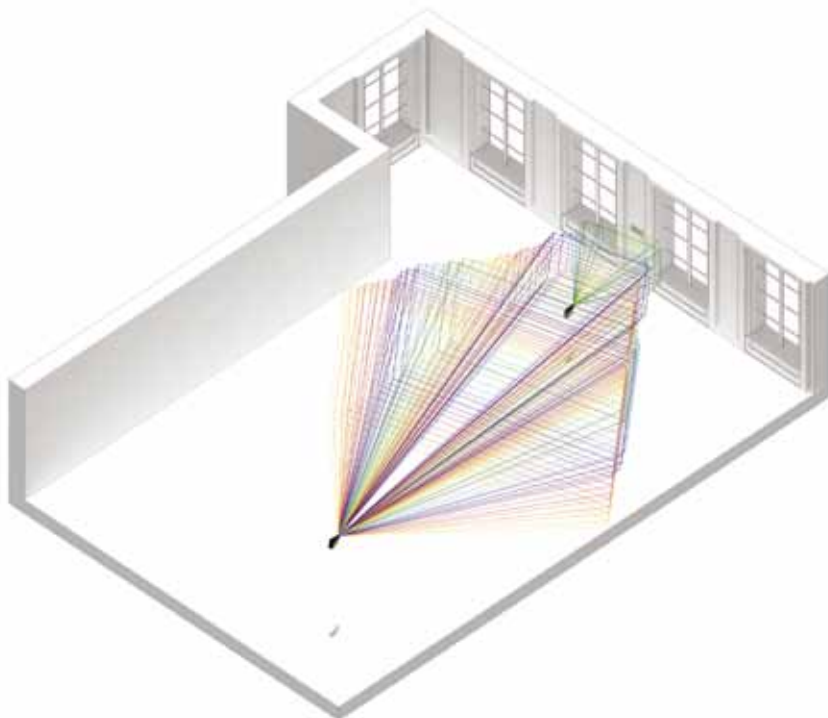
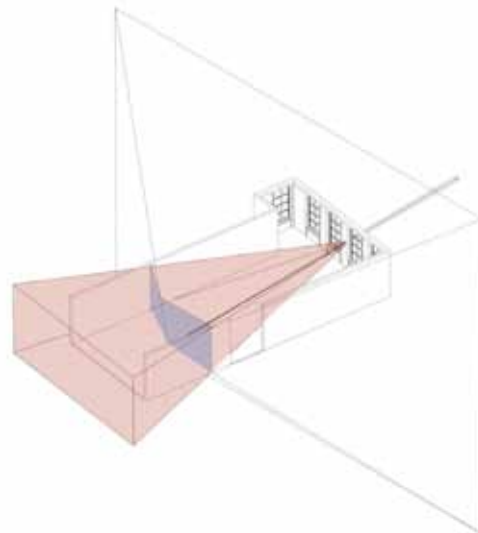
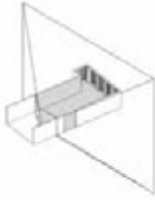
Two of the liminal films are Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* and Hollis Frampton's (*nostalgia*). The diagram at the left looks at the most famous shot in *Persona*—a conversation between two women, Alma and Elisabet. They are both lit from the same side, but since they are facing opposite directions, the light falls on the opposite side of their faces. When the images are brought together in double exposure, the two lit halves cancel out the halves in shadow and a bizarre mixture of the two faces is created. Where does this film exist but in the space between the two faces? The film hovers to catch the registration of the light in much the same way that architectural drawings move through space but can't contain it. This model for filmic space is reiterated throughout the film, to the point where the actual material of the film is shown to be torn by the apparatus of the projector or burnt by its bulb.

Hollis Frampton's film (*nostalgia*) also involves the impression of a projected image, but this time it is on the picture plane of a



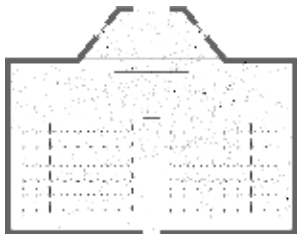
#### Diagrams of Shoot the Master

In *Rio Bravo*, there is nothing in the medium or the apparatus of film that leads to the 180 degree rule; it is a holdover, a trope taken from the proscenium stage of the theater.



#### Wavelength Diagram

The diagram is an attempt to know what the shape of viewing range looks like, precisely what geometry the film has been chiseling at for 45 minutes of zooming at New York loft apartment.



#### Diagrams of *Dancer in the Dark*

The technique for the filming allows the dancers and actors complete freedom, because the entire space should be covered.

perspective. The film shows a succession of photographs that are eventually revealed to be resting on a hot plate. As the film progresses, the photographs slowly burn and are destroyed by the spiral shape of the hot plate. Thus, beginning with the photograph, we have the classic model of Alberti's window—the photograph is a picture plane, a section of the pyramid proceeding from the world into the camera. The window addresses the viewer upright. As the photographs burn, the arrangement changes. We slowly rotate down to a horizontal view of the scene, a plan view of the hot plate, and the ashes of the photograph. This is not unlike the horizontality of some of Jackson Pollock's paintings, but with

the distinction of time passing through the rotational operation. Other films in the study took the liminal film model as a pretext for the construction of virtual geometries. Using duration, these films string flat impressions of images together along the contours of a shape or volume that is assembled in the viewer's mind. Two films by Michael Snow, *Wavelength* and *La Région Centrale* will illustrate how this filmic space exists.

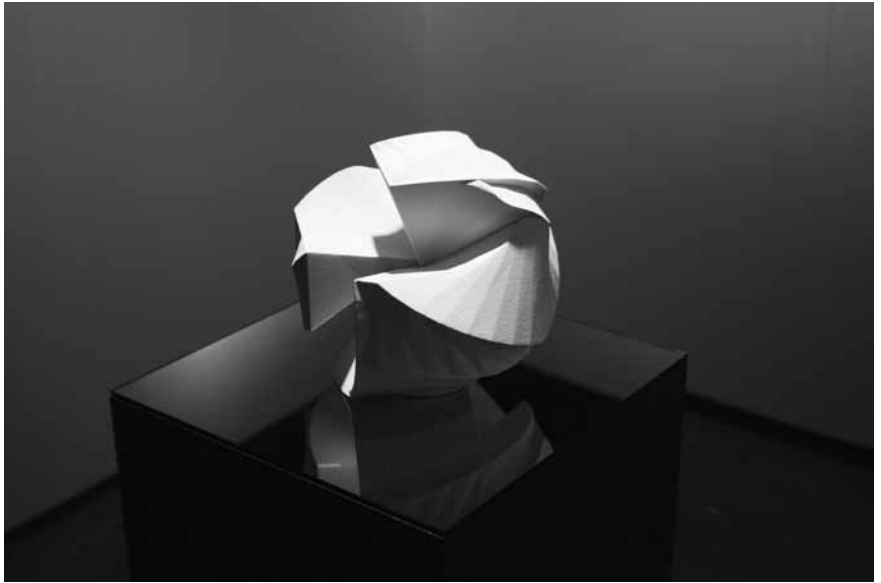
*Wavelength* consists of a 45-minute zoom of a New York loft apartment. In a zoom, as the space inside the zoom lens gets larger, the space outside—or the space we inhabit when we watch the film—gets smaller. The

#### Scenes from *Dancer in the Dark*

During the recording, 100 cameras are aimed at the dance scenes.

#### *La Région Centrale Model*

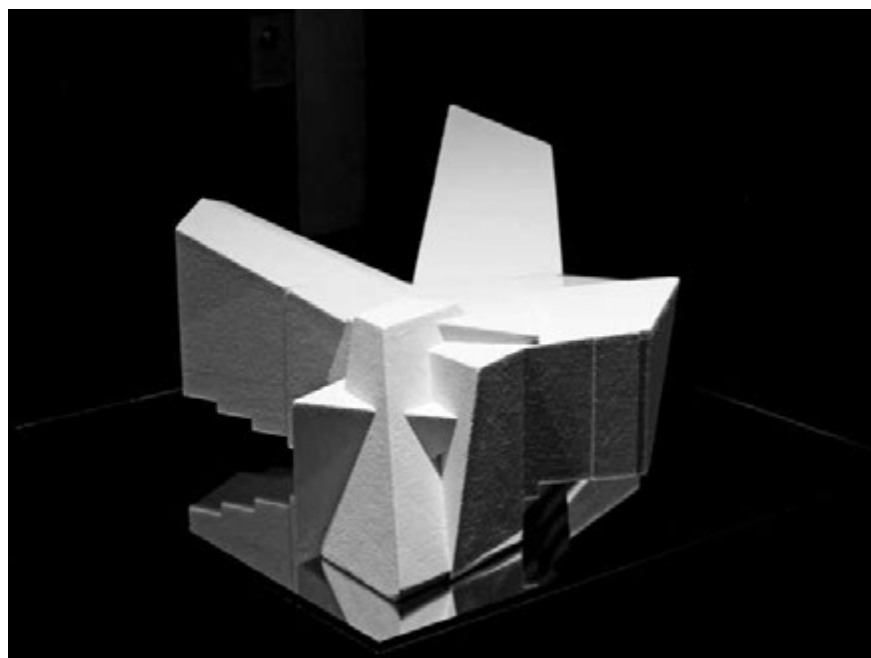
The project reconstructed an episode of the film in order to register that loose fit of the virtual and the real. And it was modelled as a turbulent surface gathered around an empty center similar to a torus, created by the central axis of the camera mount.



#### *Nostalgia Model*

In opposition to a film that would make architecture legible, Tarkovsky gives us a totally synthetic suture of architectural space. What were once absolutes in the architecture (the apse, the altar, the eastern direction) become relative conditions depending upon the contingencies of the camera's field of view.

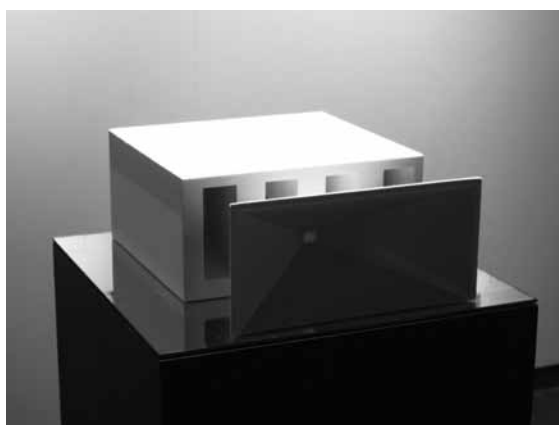




**100 Cameras Model from *Dancer in the Dark***  
The unmanned cameras leads to loads of random effects throughout the film.

#### Models at Exhibition

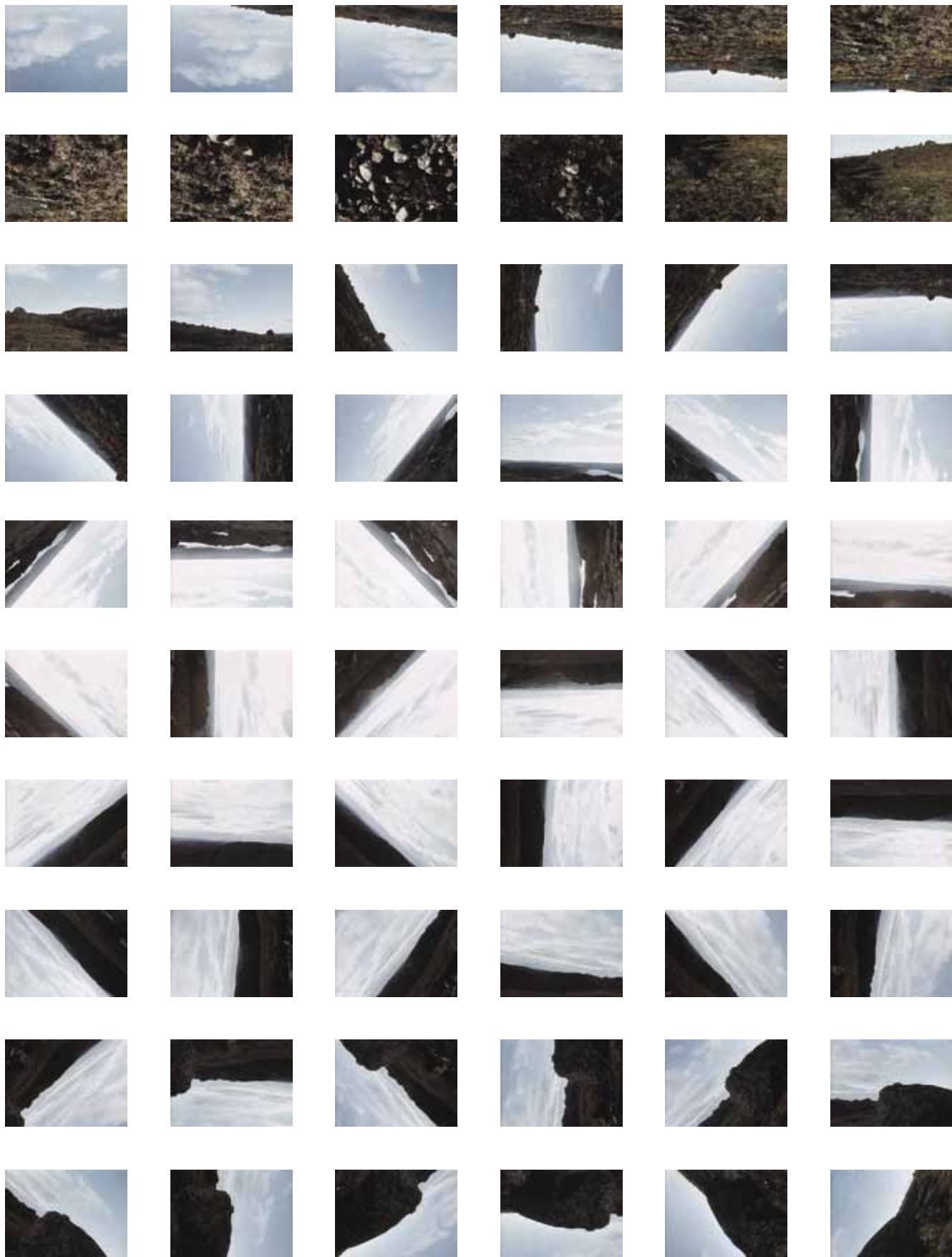
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#### **Wavelength Model**

The schematic version of this relationship of space to focal length can be seen in the model. The result is this vaguely funnel-like shape that the viewer is going into.







schematic version of this relationship of space to focal length is a vaguely funnel-like shape that the viewer is going into. But we were suspicious of this diagram and of its simplicity, so we diagrammed it again and included all of the inconsistencies of the film. This included the moment at which the initial zoom wouldn't quite work; Snow had to move his camera right in front of the photograph to get the last ten minutes or so. The diagram is an attempt to know what that shape of duration looks like, precisely what geometry the film has been chiseling at for 45 minutes.

*La Région Centrale* is a three-hour film that was made on a custom camera mount in the wilderness of northern Quebec. The camera mount's movements are such that the camera theoretically occupies all points of a sphere going outwards. The film presents itself as a pure sphere when reconstructed from images. In Snow's words, "If you become completely involved in the reality of these circular movements, it's you who is spinning surrounded by

everything, or conversely you are a stationary centre and it's all revolving around you."<sup>5</sup> However, in this example we were again curious as to what the difference was between the geometry of the space created by the film and the geometry it actually used to create it. So we looked into the machine that was used to make it and found that it has three axes of rotation. The base, a counterweighted arm, and the camera itself can turn around in its own direction. Using those parameters, and knowing something about the film, we reconstructed an episode of the film in order to register that loose fit of the virtual and the real. And what we found was not a sphere at all but a turbulent surface gathered around an empty center similar to a torus, created by the central axis of the camera mount.

These films are obviously not just about space. Even the most overtly spatial of them has a narrative. However each of them houses that narrative in a spatial system that is custom made, in a sense tailored to the site or the story. ▢

#### Scenes from *La Région Centrale*

Opposite page: In *La Région Centrale*, a 3 hour film that was made on a custom camera mount in the wilderness of northern Quebec, the camera mount's movements are such that the camera theoretically occupies all points of a sphere going outwards.

#### Camera Mount for *La Région Centrale*

Top: The base, a counterweighted arm, and the camera itself can turn around in its own direction.

#### Mechanism of the Camera Mount

Right: The project studied the mechanism behind the camera mount that was used to make the film and found that it has three axes of rotation.

