

Le Phare

A short film by David K. Ross

s16mm transferred to 2K, Dolby 5.1

13 minutes, 20 seconds, 2012

Screening formats available in DCP, HDcamSR, HDcam, Blu-ray



Still from *Le Phare* (2012)

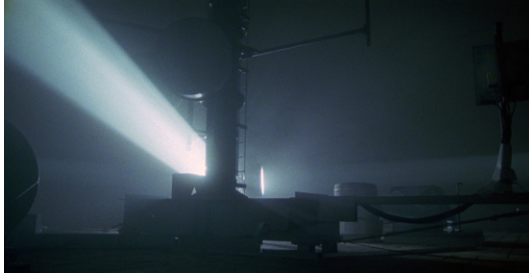
Unlike the Eiffel Tower or the Empire State Building, Montreal's iconic urban landmark is not tall and solid, but horizontal and spectral. This luminous landmark, located on the rooftop of the city's highest building, 1 Place Ville Marie, is the subject of *Le Phare* (2012). The film is a portrait of this spinning beacon, a nocturnal marker that has been raking four long beams of light across Montreal's environs since 1972. Filmed entirely in close proximity to the rotating fixture, *Le Phare* provides an opportunity to view the light in detail and to observe what it "sees."

Le Phare presents the intricate qualities of this enigmatic beacon in operation. Revealed through a series of long takes depicting its slow and prosaic functioning, the light and its distorted, inverted vistas of the city come into view when the camera frames the four reflecting mirrors which are at the heart of the apparatus. Steel, light, and glass fill the screen, rotate out of view, and then return. In another series of views — captured by the camera that has been mounted directly on the rotating armature — our eyes follow the beams of light as they trace out their circular route across the nighttime sky. As darkness falls, clouds encircle the top ten floors of the 48-storey building, and the camera moves back from the fixture, providing views of its operation against the backdrop of a city shrouded in a thick mist. The film ends with the rotating machine seen in its entirety, a device that evokes the space-age in which it was conceived, engineered, and built. Accompanied by a sound track crafted from on-location field, contact and induction recordings, *Le Phare* uses its 13 minute, 20 second duration to spin the viewer into an otherworldly understanding of a piece of urban infrastructure.

Because of its lofty status high above the city streets, the beacon atop 1 Place Ville Marie is literally and figuratively known by residents and visitors to Montréal only from afar. The continuous presence of this illuminated urban fixture is, for some individuals, reassuring and pleasantly orienting while, for others, it represents a more ominous, irritating, or intrusive presence. Either way, the beacon is perplexing in its lack of pragmatic function: it plays no role in reconnoitering for aviation; it is not synced to act as a time keeping device; nor is it commemorative of any event or person. Indeed, the light fixture serves no practical function or particular memorializing role whatsoever. Rather, it is an evanescent, immaterial monument only to itself.

As a horizontal illuminated icon, the beacon's role within Montréal's urban environment is further complicated because it is, in fact, most evident only when seen from a distance. This "best from afar" factor leads to an interesting paradox: the optimum circumstances for viewing the this enigmatic cypher are the same ones which cause the

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Still from *Le Phare* (2012)

famous building[†] which supports it to ostensibly disappear. The less of 1 Place Ville Marie one can see, the more spectacular the beacon becomes. Hidden amongst the cluster of tall office buildings in central Montréal, tucked behind Mont-Royal or, as is often the case, obfuscated by inclement weather, the source of Montréal's iconic night-time effect is frequently impossible to locate. Its home-base becomes, in essence, dematerialized.

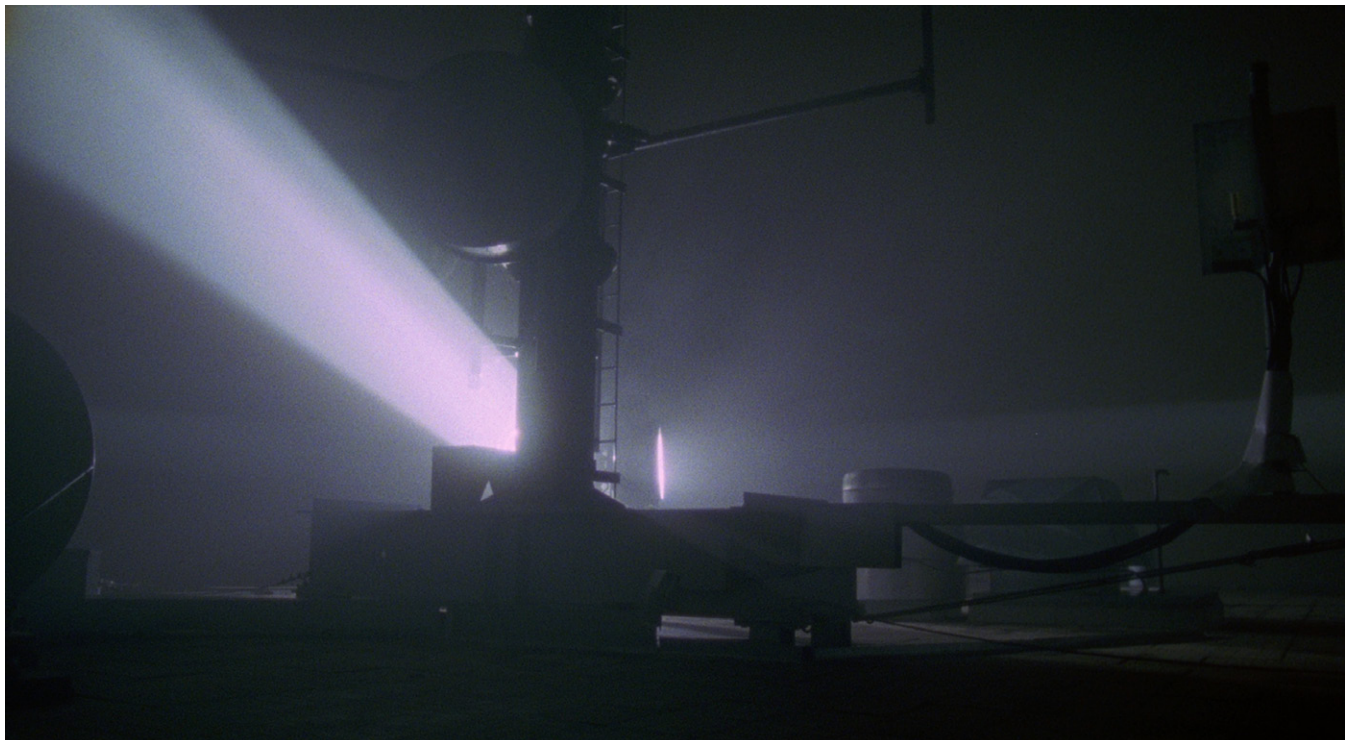
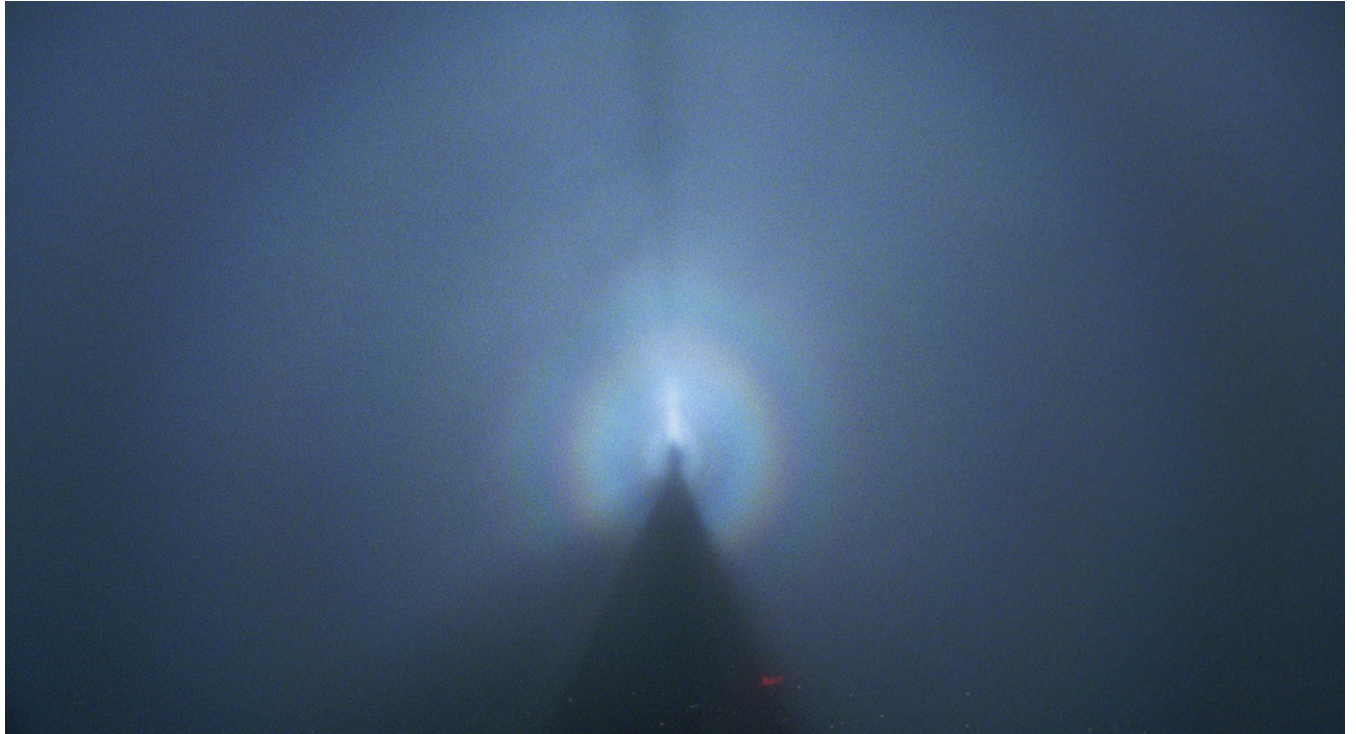
Mesmerizing in its calm, mechanical rotation, the apparatus has a potent, but publicly inaccessible materiality. What appears from afar to be a single revolving beacon is, in fact, four separate lights which have been mounted on a slowly turning armature. Equally spaced around this “turntable,” each of the horizontally-oriented light fixtures is equipped with a high-intensity bulb mounted within a large circular focusing mirror. This concave mirror reflects and projects a powerful illuminating beam that, on a clear night, can be seen 50 kilometers away. Constructed from custom built cast-iron components, steel I-beams, and heavy duty electrical wiring, the light apparatus is designed for durability, consistency, and reliability. In close to four decades of round the clock spinning, its moving parts have never ceased working or needed repair. With a total weight of approximately two metric tones, the mechanism which supports the lights has a physicality which stands in sharp contrast to the luminescent effect it generates. These conflicting factors — the beacon's iconic and yet immaterial status as a “monument,” its perfected engineering that has no particular pragmatic function, and its ubiquity of presence coupled with a frequent “un-locatability” — provided the impetus for making *Le Phare*.

David K. Ross
Montréal, 2012

[†] 1 Place Ville Marie, designed by I.M. Pei in 1957, is Canada's first High Modern office tower.

Le Phare

Stills available at high resolution upon request



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Le Phare
Production stills

