

the sublime and the heterotopia

article one

framing of the sacred

The sublime as a philosophical notion is related to the heterotopias introduced by Foucault. Society is in need of such 'other places' as these places provide an unlimited space for the sublime within their borders



Introduction

In modern use 'That is a sublime idea!' merely states that something is a (very) good idea. The meaning of the sublime as something absolutely spectacular that strikes and overwhelms, awes the spectator or even as an idea that you can not grasp seems lost for the general public and seems only 'available' to boring philosophers.

Maybe this seems logical in an age where because of our blasé outlook, the overwhelming «!» input of information and everything advertised as being even better or absolutely great, the sublime is everywhere and ironically, therefore nowhere.

In his overview of the changes in the definition of the philosophical notion of 'The Sublime', Philip Shaw describes how the content and meaning of the term [within the discourse of philosophy] evolved from object oriented to mind or concept oriented towards the end of the 20th century.^[1]

In the following part I summarize the changes Shaw writes about using the translated original texts. After that I will discuss the *ergon*, its *parergon* and Foucault's *heterotopias* to get a better grasp of the final part where the sublime and the heterotopia are related and their relationship explained. As a conclusion the monastery will be used to illustrate the argument with an example.

Changes in the notion of 'the Sublime'

From Longinus towards the contemporary thinkers on the sublime like Gilbert-Rolfe, the meaning or definition of the philosophical term 'The Sublime' and the explanation of the *sublime experience*^[2] has changed back and forth, maybe evolved and has finally (?) reached a more 'post-modern' state

where everybody has a different opinion and no one states the same. Although this is odd for something generally considered as 'the experience of the absolute' before, there is now no absolute answer to the question: '*What is the sublime?*'.

However there is one tendency that is probably the most consistent... It slowly builds up starting with Burke's '*A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*' in which he describes the definition of the sublime experience as a state of mind resulting from a property of an object outside our mind:

'The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully, is astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it. Hence arises the great power of the sublime, that, far from being produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force.'^[3]

Already before him, in 1701, John Dennis an English dramatist defines the sublime as the result of an interaction between object and mind with the words:

'Yet nature itself could not be perceived as sublime without the operation of mental processes. 'Take the Cause and the effects together', he writes, 'and you have the Sublime'. [...] The sublime feeling of 'delightful Horror' and 'terrible Joy' was brought about therefore by the interaction of mind and

¹ Shaw, P., *The Sublime* (2008) Routledge

² as a mode of consciousness

³ Burke, E., Phillips, A., *A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1998) Oxford University Press, p. 53

object. The cause of sublimity could not be located solely in one or the other.'^[4]

Both Burke and Dennis in their definition were surpassed by Kant in his '*Kritik der Urteilskraft*' (Critique of Judgment), where the sublime is no longer a result of a property of the object but of our mind and the idea the mind connects to the object.

'But suppose we call something not only large, but large absolutely [schlechthin, absolut], in every respect (beyond all comparison), i.e., sublime. Clearly, in that case, we do not permit a standard adequate to it to be sought outside it, but only within it. It is a magnitude that is equal only to itself. It follows that the sublime must not be sought in things of nature, but must be sought solely in our ideas; but in which of these it resides [is a question that] must wait for deduction.'^[5]

The gradual change of definition from a property of an object to that of (an individual or social perception) of a concept or idea is not surprising for two reasons. First the enlightenment called for a raise of man to the pedestal where before only a supernatural power could stand. God was seen as the source of all sublime, so the sublime was found in nature: majestic mountainous landscapes, endless oceans, his creation (created by a word^[6] insofar it is a concept or conceptual), but now the seemingly infinite capability and capacity of the mind of man had overthrown this sublime creative power.

Ergon and Parergon

Second the distinction between the *sublime* and the *beautiful* was a much discussed subject early on in aesthetic theory (and still is). Kant argues that the difference between the sublime and the

beautiful has to do with core and ornament, with *ergon* and *parergon*:

'Even what we call ornaments (parerga), i.e., what does not belong to the whole presentation of the object as an intrinsic constituent, but [is] only an extrinsic addition, does indeed increase our taste's liking, and yet it too does so only by its form, as in the case of picture frames, or drapery on statues, or colonnades around magnificent buildings. On the other hand, if the ornament itself does not consist in beautiful form but is merely attached, as a gold frame is to a painting so that its charm may commend the painting for our approval, then it impairs genuine beauty and is called finery. Emotion, a sensation where agreeableness is brought about only by means of a momentary inhibition of the vital force followed by a stronger outpouring of it, does not belong to beauty at all. But sublimity (with which the feeling of emotion is connected) requires a different standard of judging from the one that taste uses as a basis. Hence a pure judgment of taste has as its determining basis neither charm nor emotion, in other words, no sensation, which is [merely] the matter of an aesthetic judgment.'^[7]

The *ergon* is (the body of) the work (of man: the work of art or architecture) whereas the *parergon* is its supplement. Kant introduced the column as a *parergon* to the Greek temple (see above: the '*magnificent buildings*'), the *ergon*, as an analogous example to reason the working of the sublime. Before he elaborates on this and other examples, he acknowledges that there is (in the words of Derrida) no '*suitable*'^[8] example because the sublime is not one of the produces or effects of art, or architecture in that matter,^[9] nevertheless he continues his argument. The column is for the temple merely a framing, a supplement to that which resides inside, but because it belongs neither to the temple nor to the outside, it is half part of

⁴ Dennis, J., *The Advancement and Reformation of Poetry* quoted in: Shaw, P., *The Sublime* (2008) Routledge, p. 30 [shaw]

⁵ Kant, I., translated by Pluhar, W. S., *Critique of Judgment* (1987) 3rd Edition by Hackett Publishing, \$25 p. 105/250 [translator]

⁶ *The Bible*, King James (2000) Genesis 1:9-10
'And God said, Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together unto one place, and let the dry land appear: and it was so. And God called the dry land Earth; and the gathering together of the waters called he Seas: and God saw that it was good.'

⁷ Kant, I., translated by Pluhar, W. S., *Critique of Judgment* (1987) 3rd Edition by Hackett Publishing, \$14 p. 72/226 [translator]

⁸ Derrida, J., *The Truth in Painting* (1987) University of Chicago Press, p. 122

⁹ Although Libeskind for example is dealing with the impossibility of representation in the Berlin Jewish Museum.



fig. 01 | *parergon becoming ergon: temple of Poseidon, Greece*

Only the colonnade, the framing still stands and has now become the work itself, where thousands of tourists every year visit the remnants of the Temple of Poseidon in Sounion, Greece. Parergon becoming ergon.

the temple half part of the outside.

Derrida in *'The Truth in Painting'* concurs with Kant's argument, then uses it as a stepping stone for his own argument with more implications:

'What constitutes them as parerga is not simply their exteriority as a surplus, it is the internal structural link which rivets them to the lack in the interior of the ergon. ... Without this lack, the ergon would have no need of a parergon. The ergon's lack is the lack of a parergon.'^[10]

He elaborates, strides further, if *'this definition'* (which he derives from Kant's *Analytic of the Sublime*) *'of the beautiful as definable in its contour [is true] and of the sublime de-fined as indefinable for the understanding'*,^[11] an additional step to put his foot to shore: so *'If art gives form by limiting, or even by framing, there can be a parergon of the beautiful, parergon of the column or parergon as column. But there cannot, it seems, be a parergon for the sublime.'*^[12]

Mark Cheetham, Art professor at the University of Toronto, elaborates in his book *'Kant, Art, and Art History'* on the inadequacy of the presentation of the sublime by the mind, that Derrida brings about, by stating something seemingly opposite: that the

sublime is (merely) a limiting operation or framing action of the mind in order to deal with the ideas that we associate with an object:

'[The pleasure that arises from the sublime consists, therefore, precisely in the setting of, rather than the overcoming of, limits, for reason, unlike imagination,] 'can put such a border in place and take emotional pleasure from this accomplishment. The experience and pleasure of the sublime [...] stems from the activity of framing itself, from the parergon.'^[13]

¹⁰ Derrida, J., *The Truth in Painting* (1987) University of Chicago Press, p. 59

¹¹ Derrida, J., *The Truth in Painting* (1987) University of Chicago Press, p. 127 [me]

¹² Derrida, J., *The Truth in Painting* (1987) University of Chicago Press, p. 127

¹³ Cheetham, M., *Kant, Art, and Art History: Moments of Discipline* (2001) Cambridge University Press, p. ? quoted in: Shaw, P., *The Sublime* (2008) Routledge, p. 118 [shaw]

Heterotopias

Cheetham's expansion of Derrida is interesting because his explanation of how the mind deals with the sublime, is very similar to how the mind deals with certain spaces. These spaces are the *heterotopias* which Foucault describes in his essay 'Des espace autres'. From the Greek *hetero* meaning other, and *topos* meaning place, the heterotopia is thus an 'other place'. It is outside all places, but it has a real location, and it is therefore not a *utopia*^[14] (e.g. Heaven) or a *dystopia* (e.g. Orwell's 1984) but in the same way as the here before mentioned dystopia and utopia^[15], the heterotopia also reflects on, or mirrors, how society works or acts.^[16]

Set apart in the polis

Heterotopias are places with different properties than normal continuous places, with which they have a (sometimes invisible but nevertheless) perceptible boundary, because of their virtual place outside the ordinary. When De Cauter elaborates on these heterotopias and links them to how the Greek *polis* was build up, he first shows the clear outline between the different parts of the polis and the way they are related to each other. The polis had three subdivisions within the skin or wall of the city, the Emporium:

- **Idian** (private or economical space)
everyday use → *oikos*
- **Koinen** (public or political space)
everyday use → *agora*
- **Hieran** (holy or sacred space)
only holy-day → *heterotopia*

¹⁴ As used in English. Eutopia, which in Greek is a homophone; pronounced the same, but with a double meaning: both οὐ (*not*) translating to 'nonexistent place' and εὖ (*good or well*) meaning 'perfect place'. The latter has become the modern meaning.

¹⁵ An interesting third I could add here is the *atopia* (placelessness, unclassifiable, of high originality) meaning 'that which has no place', or 'that which cannot be placed'. This place also has, like we will see with the heterotopia, a close relation to the sublime.

¹⁶ Foucault, M., *Des espaces autres* (1967) in *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité*, n° 5, october 1984, p. 46-49. Translated by Miskowiec, J., <http://www.foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en.html> (visited 28-01-2009)

The Hieran is neither political nor economical and therefore a heterotopia. Within it there were two important sacred spaces, the Stèla (monument for the dead, place of the past) and a Templum (temple, place of the future and eternity).

De Cauter gives examples of how the intrusion of the three spaces into each other raises problems for society at large. The intrusion of the political in the cultural^[17] and vice versa, causes religion dictated by the state, state dictated by religion, etc.^[18] In order to prevent these intrusions from happening, there were social codes for and architectural indications of, the transition between the different spaces in the city.

Principles of the heterotopia

Foucault tries to give a constitution of what heterotopias are a heterotopology. He does this by giving six principles to recognize or determine a heterotopia:

1. All cultures constitute heterotopias, but there is no absolute universal form. There are two main types:

I. The heterotopia of crisis

the forbidden place that is made 'nowhere'.
(boarding school, retirement homes, honeymoon trip, menstrual hut, asylum, monastery, etc.)

II. The heterotopia of deviation

those in which deviant things can take place.
(dark rooms, monastery, etc.)

2. The precise function of a heterotopia can change over the course of history.
(the Christian cemetery before secularization and now, the garden, a monastery, etc.)
3. The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a real space several other places. (fig. 02)
(cinema, theatre, the traditional Persian garden, monastery, etc.)

¹⁷ De Cauter broadens *Hieran* to culture wherein religion (the sacred), sports, art, etc., lie, in order to accommodate his argument about **modern** society.

¹⁸ summarizing De Cauter, L. in a lecture '*Heterotopie*' (04-03-2005) <http://homepages.ulb.ac.be/~rgeerts/inlthewet/DeCauterheterotopie.html> (visited 28-01-2009)

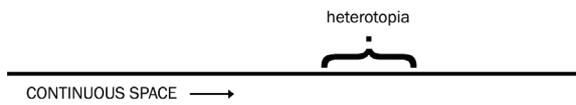


fig. 02 | principles of a heterotopia: space

The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a real space several other places.

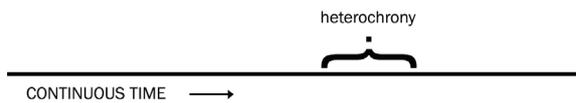


fig. 03 | principles of a heterotopia: time

Heterotopias open up to time, the heterochrony places itself out of time in order to accumulate indefinite time or definite time.

4. Heterotopias open up to time, the heterochrony places itself out of time in order to accumulate indefinite time or definite time. (fig. 03)
(museum, library, archive, monastery / festival, fairgrounds, theme park, etc.)
5. Heterotopias have a certain system of opening and closing, for example rites, initiation, ceremony and purification, etc.
(Hammam, sauna, monastery, etc.)
6. Heterotopias have a function in relation to all the space that remains; they reflect, compensate, expose, hide, etc.
(monastery, certain Jesuit colonies, Las Vegas, etc.)^[19]

Most principles deal with the filling of some emptiness or lack in society. At the very least they expose this lack without filling it. Society could not do without these heterotopias, but they themselves could also not do without society. If heterotopias would comprise society, if they would exist without boundary or limitation, problems would arise. The theater that always stages, exists. The perpetual festival or life in a theme park, are things real or

¹⁹ Foucault, M., *Des espaces autres* (1967) in *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité*, n° 5, october 1984, p. 46-49. Translated by Miskowiec, J., <http://www.foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en.html> (visited 28-01-2009)

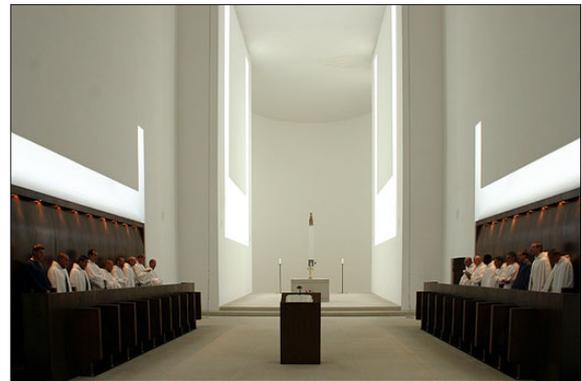


fig. 04 | Nový Dvůr Cistercian monastery, architect: John Pawson

In The Cistercian Monastery in Nový Dvůr, Czech the minimalist hand of architect John Pawson is visible in every detail. A monastery is a perfect example of a heterotopia.

staged, the crisis that manifests in the flight for the ordinary.

The unusual becomes ordinary, the extreme is not enough. In the wealthier parts of South-East Asia, like South Korea there is a Second World forming, where the socially accepted 'standard deviation' is smaller, and therefore people identify with and spend more time as their online (game) character than they are spending as themselves.

Virtual reality has quickly become one of the newest heterotopias^[20] but responds to a need that is man-old: escape from the normal. By its virtual character, virtual reality in it self is a heterotopia and by its properties the majority of the activities taking place there are of a heterotopic disposition. The influence, and consequently the intrusion and interference, of a government relative to the individual, is small as yet, as a result of which the heterotopia of **deviation** is the common ground of the activities that take place in the unlimited space the virtual provides.

The virtual 'other places' don't have an actual location like those we know exist for the traditional heterotopia, therefore the difference between utopia and heterotopia becomes smaller, for only the datacenter is left as a real place.

Partly due to this, time and place are not connected

²⁰ Or found a new, altered, form for existing heterotopias. Think of digital libraries, archives and also chatrooms, fora and other anonymous 'places'.

anymore. There is no longer a here and now, only a there and then. Or maybe even that is not longer there and only an everywhere and anytime is what we constitute as our (virtual) life schema. The present or what is left of it is being passed (made past) by the 'network'. Where no longer time and place are relevant but information and access. However information is no longer connected to space as it is accessible from everywhere. It only matters where you are when you do not have access.

The Cistercian monastery

This introductory side step or deviation kept me from a more old-fashioned heterotopia, the monastery. I will use it as an example to illustrate the sublimity of the heterotopia – although Foucault did not use the monastery as an example of a heterotopia it adheres to every principle, which I will show below – and the need of framing of a heterotopia in order to prevent intrusions from the different parts of society into each other.

The first Cistercian monasteries were started around the turn of the first millennium in France on swampy barren land or within remote inaccessible woods, as far from society as possible, as not to be burdened with its influences (Principle.1,II). The monks wanted to devote their life to worship, so a system of working monks (lay monks), providing the necessities of life and an income, soon came into being. The lay monks worked the land to enable the worshipping monks (choir monks) to spend the day in devote service.

This system became so successful that the monasteries in time accumulated so much financial wealth that they could invest in more products and services, which they first put to use to increase their independence. The mills and quarries they built were then used to benefit the tenants of the estates and the farmers, of the lands they acquired by benefaction. Through their financial position and the way they conducted as employers and landowners they became a regulating and (by means of the general influence of the Roman Catholic church) a governing power. Their original position away from society became one where

they made their growing influence felt within society (Pr.2). The intrusion of religion into state, as far as they were still distinguishable, was a fact. The counter reaction, which in the course of the centuries arose several times, was one of reversion to the core of monastic life (Pr.1,I&II).^[21] The most famous monks were those who went to the extreme with this reclusion like Francis of Assisi or Benedict of Nursia who was seen as the founder of Western Christian monasticism. Though probably the most extreme was St. Simeon Stylites the Elder^[22] who spent thirty-seven years sitting on... a column.

Although this seems hardly temporal, serving 'the Eternal' and to reflect the eternal life in this temporal state on earth is a main principal of monasticism. In that sense a monastery is a heterochrony, it treats time differently, it gathers the eternal within the temporal (Pr.4). The same applies to the transcendence of earth to paradise, a heavenly place outside of continue space, not anymore a utopia but a real space (Pr.3).

Once leaders, innovators and centres of knowledge (Pr.3,4,6), nowadays monasteries as a result of secularization and the marginalization of the collective existence as known in a monastery,^[23] perform a role in the margin of society or in fact outside the margin (Pr.6).

To enter a convent^[24] is therefore to place yourself outside (Pr.5). Because this transition from within to without society takes a serious 'step' it requires a certain system of opening and closing; passage, in this case a ritual or ceremony to guide you from your past life to the new.

The Sublime Heterotopia is a semantic pleonasm

The lack in society is apparent because of its need of parerga (p.4 Derrida: *the ergon's lack is the lack*

²¹ Saint Bernard of Clairvaux (1090 - 1153) was the founder of what would later be known as the Cistercian Order.

The conventuals had to withdraw themselves from society again and follow the rule of Saint Benedict in a more strict way. Nowadays the Cistercian Order is divided in two main branches the 'Cistercian Order' and the 'Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance' (better known as the Trappists).

²² the Greek word style meaning pillar or column.

²³ compared to the tendency of a more individualistic approach to coexistence in modern communities.

²⁴ a monastery with a commune with a secluded and closed character.

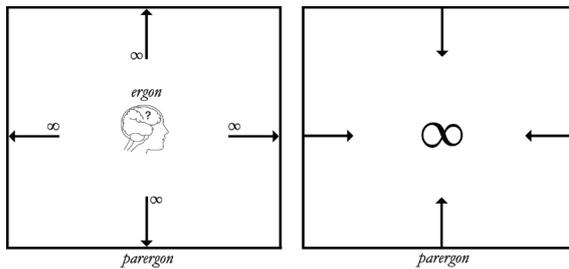


fig. 05 | operation of the mind when encountering the sublime

Derrida The sublime lies in the unbounded, that which has no boundary.

Cheetham The sublime lies not in the unbounded, but in the setting of the limits, the activity of framing.

of a *parergon*), of supplements, of heterotopias. Heterotopias function as *parerga* but they reflect the lack in the *ergon* in that way. As Derrida stated, the *ergon* can be the *parergon* and the vice versa holds up too; the heterotopia as a world in itself that lacks the *parergon* of the real world which it needs in order to be a heterotopia.

If we return to the Latin *sublimis* 'a combination of *sub* (up to) and *limen* (*lintel*, literally the top piece of the door)' [25] the word itself implicates that: 'there is no sense of the unbounded that does not make reference to the placing of a limit or a threshold. [...] there is no limit which does not assume the existence of the unlimited.' [26] The two diagrams in figure 05 depict these statement.

The observation of and the thinking about the origin and the expanding of the universe is a good example to visualize the ideas of both Derrida and Cheetham.

If you would be on a planet in an arbitrary galaxy somewhere in the universe then all other galaxies will be observed as 'flying away' from that galaxy. The idea, of our planet as the middle of the universe is thus probably more universal than we think; the idea wouldn't be alien to extraterrestrial beings. In physical cosmology Hubble's Law states that the velocity with which these other galaxies recede ('are flying further away') - observed trough the

25 Shaw, P., *The Sublime* (2008) Routledge, p. 1

26 Shaw, P., *The Sublime* (2008) Routledge, p. 119 [author]

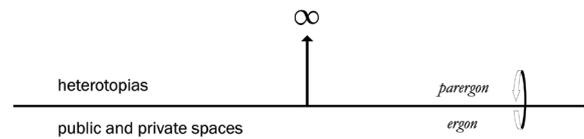


fig. 06 | Last principle of the heterotopia: sublimity

A heterotopia is 'an other place' outside normal places, where a sublime idea, activity or program because of its enclosure can take an unlimited form. But towards the normal it needs a boundary. This boundary is the axis around which the heterotopia reflects on the normal.

red shift in the light spectrum of the transmitted light caused by the Doppler effect - is proportional to their distance from the earth.

Only objects receding from the earth with a velocity lesser than the speed of light, can be seen on earth as the transmitted light had 'enough time' to reach the earth. If the universe is expanding with a velocity greater than that of light - and according to recent theories it has: if not recently, it certainly has at the genesis of the universe - we cannot observe the limits of it. There are presumably objects with a velocity that is greater than that of light, which we will never see, and are therefore beyond the visible horizon of the universe. [27] And thus the universe is infinite or at least not known to be finite. (Derrida, the sublime lies in the unbounded, that which has no boundary) [28]

After Einstein the infinity of the [29] universe is not seen as an insolvable problem anymore. Within the discussion on the configuration of the part of the universe from beyond the visible horizon to its

27 The accuracy of the Hubble telescope with its scope (or observation limit) of twelve billion light-years defines the current definition of that visible horizon.

28 Although, according to current theories, the age of the universe hints on a finite one. The problem is that we determine the age of the universe via the same data.

29 Or our universe, as some scientists hypothesize a multiverse, an unlimited amount of universes.

outer rim^[30] (if existent) there is the same problem of distance both in time and space to observe the earth. The ever expanding limits of the universe that are beyond the visible horizon therefore are only reachable by a propulsion which exceeds the speed of light or travels back in time.^[31] The only propulsion we now have is our mind, and it is fueled by our imagination. (Cheetham) With that imagination we can both 'see' distant past and 'foresee' future, although these two particular notions have an uncertainty attached to their definition within the discourse of cosmology.

When compared with the way Derrida and Cheetham comprise the sublime experience it is clear that Cheetham's argument is closer to the original Latin compound of the word sublime. To Derrida the sublime is only found in the unbound, the unlimited and it can not be framed by reason nor any other framing procedure. Whereas Cheetham states that the pleasure that since Burke is accompanied with the sublime lies in the making of the boundary, the conquering of the unbounded by reason, *the placing of the threshold* in heterotopic terms.

So for a heterotopia, 'an other place' outside normal places, where a sublime idea, activity or program (freedom, the self, deity, crisis) which for society beholds a certain threat (**terror**), but because of its enclosure is not threatening (virtual distance and therefore **pleasure**) can take an unlimited form (noted that the sublime is found in formlessness according to Derrida). But towards the normal i.e. the continuum, it needs a boundary. This boundary – or threshold because through certain disclosure procedures it can be traversed – is the axis (fig. 06) around which the heterotopia (the enclosure of the sublime) reflects on the normal. Within the heterotopia, as in virtual reality, the sublime can happen, nowhere.

³⁰ Which if the speed of light is the greatest velocity in the universe is estimated to be around fourteen billion light-years of age

³¹ If we would be able to build such a propulsion for a 'timecraft' it would have paradoxical or parallel problems of its own. Just check <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/time-travel-phys/> and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/time_travel for the possibilities and problems of time travel

Credits

- **Photograph front**
Lovers Stone
St Kilda, Scotland (1975)
Hamish Macmillan Brown
- **Figure 01**
Temple of Poseidon
Sounion, Greece (2007)
Gregory Varano
- **Figure 04**
Church of the monastery
Nový Dvůr, Czech (2004)
Unknown photographer

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