

# Framing the Universe: Cosmography and the “Discourse on the Frame” in *Traiphum Phra Ruang*<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

In *The Truth in Painting* in 1987, Jacques Derrida describes a “discourse on the frame” as “a discourse on the limit between the inside and outside of the art object.” Although this definition primarily aims at the visual arts, it could be applied to a Buddhist cosmography and the interplay between the inside and the outside in the depiction of the universe. Focusing on *Traiphum Phra Ruang*, a Thai Theravada cosmological text, this paper attempts to demonstrate an intriguing design of this text in creating an image of a Buddhist universe. As illustrated in the *Traiphum*, the Buddhist universe is constructed as an enclosed system in which elements are clearly defined and framed. But since the *Traiphum* also mentions another hell called the Lokanta hell that is situated “outside” the universe, the image of a clearly defined unit of the universe becomes disrupted. With the presence of the Lokanta hell, the *traiphum* universe becomes a unit in which the notions of boundary and even the totality of the universe itself are all put in question.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is adapted from a section of my dissertation entitled *The Play of Undecidability: A Deconstructive Analysis of Traiphum Phra Ruang (Three Worlds According to King Ruang)* in 2003.

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## Introduction

Composed from over thirty Buddhist doctrines by Phaya Lithai in 1345 C.E., *Traiphum Phra Ruang* can be viewed as the most complex and the most influential text in Thai literary history. As suggested by its title, “*Traiphum*,” which literally means “three worlds”, the text mainly concerns the concept of the universe from the Theravada perspective. Although the image of the universe in the *Traiphum* seems to be clearly defined and framed, the presence of the Lokanta hell signifies that the *Traiphum* is actually a text which perplexingly plays with the concept of boundary. Thus, in this paper, by applying deconstructive notions, particularly the play of “alternation between the logic of exclusion and that of participation”,<sup>3</sup> I will demonstrate an intriguing design of this text in subverting the concepts of frame and the totality of the universe that it appears to delineate.

Generally speaking, the Theravada universe or “*cakkavala*” is composed of three worlds situated one world above the other,<sup>4</sup> starting from the World of Desire, which is the lowest World, upward to the World of Form, and finally to the World of Formlessness. Since the World of Form and the World of Formlessness are the aerial planes located above the heavens in the World of Desire, the only part of the universe that can be visualized is the World of Desire depicted in the form of the earth. Like many ancient cosmologies, the earth is conceived not as a sphere but rather as a disk of which the surface represents the land of human beings, whereas the space above it stands for Heaven and the thickness of the disk suggests the subterranean space of Hell.

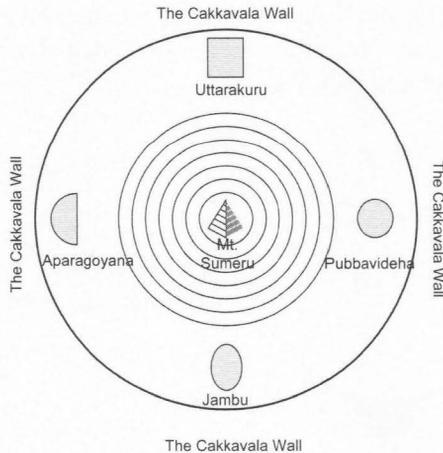
It should be noted here as well that although the Theravada believe in the existence of multiple universes, these universes are exactly in the same pattern. That is, each universe is in the shape of a circle and has a great mountain called Sumeru at its center. Being as the central point of

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<sup>3</sup> See Jacques Derrida, “*Khora*,” *On the Name*, ed. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995) 89-127.

<sup>4</sup> Perhaps it would be appropriate to remind the reader that the word “world” here is not meant to be visualized as a sphere but rather as a plane of existence.

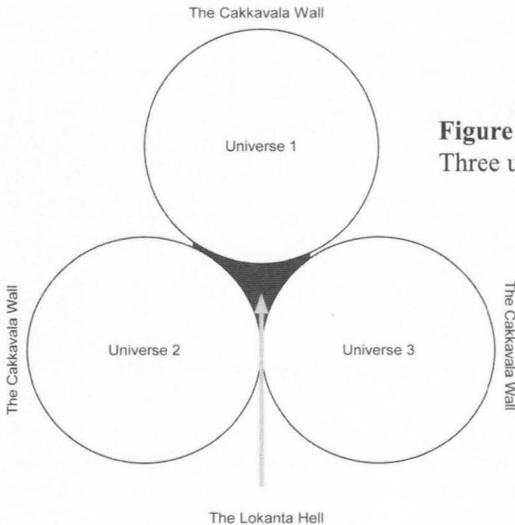
the universe, Mt. Sumeru is encircled by sixteen frames of water and mountain ranges. In the first round, Mt. Sumeru is encompassed by an expanse of water. Then, this water is encircled by a mountain range which is in turn surrounded by another expanse of water. The pattern of framing continues like this for the total of sixteen times creating a picture of the *traiphum* universe as the multiple circular frames sharing the same center (see Figure 1). In addition, since the universe has a flat surface, the outermost frame, which is a mountain range called the Cakkavala Wall, also functions as a barrier that prevents the water on the surface of the earth from falling out into the void outside the universe. Thus, if a frame functions to “[put] representation into a state of exclusive presence,”<sup>5</sup> the multiple circular frames of the *traiphum* cosmography not only highlight the role of the center in the image of Mt. Sumeru, but also feature the whole universe as an organized and contained unit of which the boundary between the inside and the outside is clearly defined.



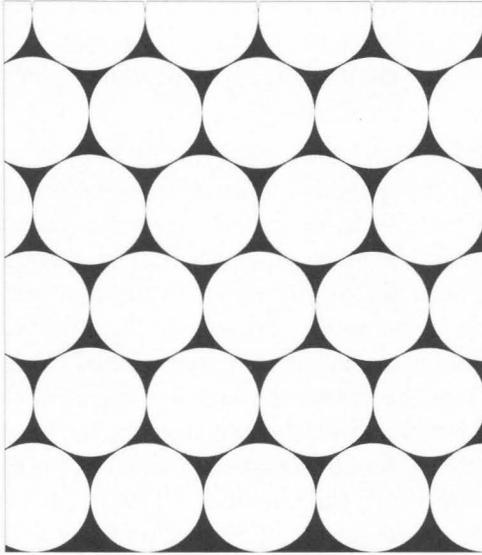
**Figure 1** The universe (*cakkavala*) and its concentric frames

<sup>5</sup> See Louis Marin, “The Frame of Representation and Some of its Figures,” *The Rhetoric of the Frame: Essays on the Boundaries of the Artwork*, ed. Paul Duro (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 82.

Nonetheless, apart from the image of a contained universe, the *Traiphum* also mentions a hell that is unexplainably situated outside the universe. As illustrated in the *Traiphum*, the realm of the hell beings is located underneath the Jambu continent and is divided into eight great hells situated one hell under the other. Each of these large hells is surrounded by sixteen auxiliary hells which are in turn surrounded by another forty smaller hells. Accordingly, there are 456 hells underneath the Jambu continent. Although the *Traiphum* describes only the size and the shape of the eight great hells, it can be assumed that all hells are in the same pattern of an enclosed quadrilateral space characterized by extreme heat and unceasing flames. Still, apart from these hells that are all underneath the earth, there is yet another kind of hell *uniquely situated outside the universe*. The *Traiphum* does not provide any explanation why this hell is separated from the rest of the hell system. Rather, it simply implies that since the Theravada believe in the system of multiple universes and since each universe (*cakkavala*) is in the shape of a circle, the interstice where every three universes meet is the void that turns out to be a three-sided abysmal penitentiary called the Lokanta hell (see Figures 2-3).



**Figure 2**  
Three universes and the Lokanta hell



**Figure 3** An image of multiple universes and Lokanta hells

Due to the premise that each universe has its own astronomical system, the sun, the moon, and the stars can shine only within the Cakkavala Wall of each universe. By being outside the Cakkavala Wall, the Lokanta hell is beyond the extent of the sun, the moon, and the stars, and, therefore, becomes the only hell that is completely dark and extremely cold. Thus, from the description that the *Traiphum* provides, the Lokanta hell appears basically as the reversal of the hells within the universe. While the hells within the universe are in the same pattern as an enclosed quadrilateral space filled with burning heat and blazing flame, the Lokanta hell is a completely dark and extremely cold abyss. Furthermore, since the hells within the universe are always radiant with fire, seeing the various instruments of torture that are inflicted upon one's self and others as well as witnessing others suffering excruciating pain seem to be parts of the punishment for the beings in these hells. But as for the beings in the Lokanta hell, the complete darkness of this hell prevents these beings from seeing their surroundings and one

another. Consequently, in contrast to the hells within the universe, the inability to see as well as the lack of contact with other beings are additional factors that increase the suffering of the beings in the Lokanta hell.

Nonetheless, to view the Lokanta hell merely as an opposition to other hells within the universe is indeed an oversimplification of its complexity. As mentioned earlier, the Lokanta hell is the interstice constituting the void between universes. Given nature of the Lokanta hell, therefore, it can not be determined as to whether it is a place or a void. In addition, by being the part outside the universe that functions as a part of the hell system inside the universe, the Lokanta hell becomes an element that is neither inside nor outside; “neither absolutely separate nor simply inseparable” from the universe.<sup>6</sup> In this respect, instead of participating in the system of binary opposition as the reversal of other hells within the universe, the Lokanta hell turns out to be an element that subverts the system of binary opposition itself. One could never classify the Lokanta hell in the binary category of *either* inside *or* out-side. Rather, its presence is always a play of “alternation between the logic of exclusion and that of participation.”<sup>7</sup> In terms of deconstruction, this “alternation between the logic of exclusion and that of participation” is described not as an oscillation between two poles in the binary system, but rather as an oscillation “between two types of

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<sup>6</sup> This phrase is borrowed from Jacques Derrida’s discussion of “the double session” in Mallarmé’s writing. See Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) 177. Perhaps, it would be appropriate to emphasize again that the word “universe” here means “*cakkavala*” which is not equivalent to the term “universe” in Western or modern concepts. The distinction between inside and outside the universe might be hard to conceive in the Western thought. But in terms of Buddhist cosmology, it is clearly stated that each *cakkavala* is in the shape of a circle surrounded by the Cakkavala Wall, the mountain range that serves as the marker of the boundary between the space inside the *cakkavala* and the void outside. Thus, unlike the Western conception of the universe, the notion of inside and outside is intrinsically present in the Buddhist concept of *cakkavala*.

<sup>7</sup> See Footnote 6 above.

oscillation: the double exclusion (*neither/nor*) and the participation (*both this and that*).<sup>8</sup> It is this play that defies the “logic of non-contradiction” or “[the logic] of binarity, of the yes or no” by being “both/and” and “neither/nor” at once. As a result, “one cannot even say of it that it is *neither* this *nor* that or that it is *both* this *and* that.”<sup>9</sup>

To put it in another way, if *A* and *Not-A* represent a pair of opposition and *P* is an element involving these two opposing terms, *P* will represent a play of “alternation between the logic of exclusion and that of participation” when it assumes the positions of ‘*A*’ ‘*Not-A*’ ‘both *A* and *Not-A*’ and ‘neither *A* nor *Not-A*’ at once.<sup>10</sup> But since the element *P* can be all of these positions simultaneously, it inevitably produces “undecidability” or logical conflictuality that can never be resolved. That is to say, if *P* is *A*, it cannot be *Not-A* and vice versa. If *P* is both *A* and *Not-A*, it cannot be neither *A* nor *Not-A*. If *P* is neither *A* nor *Not-A*, it cannot be either *A* or *Not-A*. Any attempt to define *P* is in vain for the identity of *P* turns out to be entangled in a circularity that is logically irresolvable. The element *P* can be all of these four positions. But since it can be all of the four positions, it simultaneously represents none of these positions, for the validity of each position is nullified by the others. Each position of *A*; *Not-A*; both *A* and *Not-A*; neither *A* nor *Not-A*; in relation to *P* is both asserted and denied in this process. One cannot positively say that the element *P* represents each or all of these positions because each of these positions is in fact negated by the others. Yet at the same time, one can neither say that *P* does not represent any of these

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<sup>8</sup> Derrida, *On the Name*, 91.

<sup>9</sup> Derrida, *On the Name*, 89.

<sup>10</sup> It should be pointed out here as well that Derrida’s “alternation between the logic of exclusion and that of participation”, which implies all of these four positions at once, is also similar to *catuskoti* (*tetralemma* or “a four-branched dilemma”) in Buddhist logic. Since the focus of this study is less on investigating the similarity between Derrida’s thought and Buddhist philosophy than on applying deconstruction to the study of *Traiphum Phra Ruang*, I will not pursue the discussion on the similarity between Derrida’s thought and *catuskoti* in Buddhist logic here but leave it for future studies.

positions because it indeed represents all of them. Any inference regarding the element *P* and its relations to *A* and *Not-A* becomes suspended for *P is* and *is not* each position at once.

In the case of the Lokanta hell, by being the part outside the universe that functions as a part of the hell system inside the universe, the Lokanta hell represents an element that becomes, at one and the same time, both inside and outside *and* neither inside nor outside. Since it is located outside the Cakkavala Wall, the marker of the boundary of each universe, the Lokanta hell, by this way, is “outside” the system of the universe. But since it is a part of the hell system, the Lokanta hell is also “inside” the system of the universe. The presence of the Lokanta hell, therefore, includes four contradicting positions within itself, i.e. inside, outside, both inside and outside, and neither inside nor outside. But since the Lokanta hell can be each and all of these positions at once, it simultaneously becomes none of these positions. We cannot say that the Lokanta hell is inside the universe because it is in fact situated outside the universe. Yet we cannot say that it is outside the universe either because the Lokanta hell is indeed a part of the hell system within the universe. Neither can we say that it is both inside and outside the universe, for logically both positions cannot be true at the same time. Nor can we say that it is neither inside nor outside, since the Lokanta hell is really both. The reasoning in terms of the principle of non-contradiction, the principle of excluded middle, and the principle of bivalence, therefore, cannot be applied to the presence of the Lokanta hell for the Lokanta hell represents “[an] unceasing inversion of poles” that is not only “alien to the order of the ‘paradigm,’” but also troubles the very logic of polarity.<sup>11</sup> The identity of the Lokanta hell in relation to the universe is completely confounded, and what is left for us to grasp is only a movement in the “alternation between the logic of exclusion and that of participation.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Derrida, *On the Name*, 90-92.

<sup>12</sup> Derrida, *On the Name*, 91.

Besides producing “an essential indecision”<sup>13</sup> regarding its own nature, the “structure of logical irresolvability”<sup>14</sup> of the Lokanta hell has great impact on the overall structure of the *traiphum* universe, particularly in terms of its cosmographical image, the notion of totality, and the decision on the boundary of the universe. As mentioned earlier, the *traiphum* universe or *cakkavala* is depicted as having the shape of a circle surrounded by the Cakkavala Wall, the mountain range that serves as the frame of the universe. But to perceive the image of the *traiphum* universe as a circle is the perception that does not include the Lokanta hell as a part of the universe. It can be *either* the universe in the shape of a circle and the Lokanta hell is an outside part that does not belong to the universe, *or* the universe is *not* in the shape of a circle and the Lokanta hell is a part of the universe. But since the Lokanta hell has a “double, contradictory, undecidable value”<sup>15</sup> such that it cannot be determined whether it is inside or outside the system of the universe, the image of the whole universe becomes undecidable as well.

Furthermore, as the image of a circle implies, the notion of the *traiphum* universe or *cakkavala* is commonly perceived as a self-contained and clearly defined unit in which the difference between the space inside the universe and the void outside it is distinctively marked. The thirty-one realms, which of course include the realm of hell beings, which constitutes the *traiphum* universe, and all the elements that comprise these realms, are supposed to be all contained within the boundary of the universe. To have the Lokanta hell, a part of the hell system, outside the universe, accordingly, not only subverts the circular image of the universe but also undermines the notion of its totality. With the presence of the Lokanta hell outside the universe, the circuit of wholeness of the universe is disrupted and the universe

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<sup>13</sup> Derrida, *Dissemination*, 177.

<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982) 202.

<sup>15</sup> Derrida, *Dissemination*, 221.

can no longer be said to be a complete unit that contains all the elements within itself. In fact, instead of being a self-contained unit as it is supposed to be, each universe becomes neither complete nor fully independent for it not only has another part outside of itself, but this part is also the part that needs to be comprised by other universes. From the premise that the Lokanta hell is the interstice where every three universes meet, it needs three universes to constitute one Lokanta hell. As a result, the Lokanta hell is the space that does not belong exclusively to any single universe but becomes an area where three universes overlap. Since three universes share one Lokanta hell, none of these universes is ever complete in itself or fully independent. Rather, each universe exists only in relation to other universes.

Thus, besides being the void that separates universes, the Lokanta hell functions as a bridge connecting all universes. When the Lokanta hell is viewed as a part of the universe, the picture of the universes will become interconnected leaving no space to be considered as outside, for all void between universes turns out to be a part of these universes (see Figure 3 above). But if the picture of the universes becomes interconnected, the decision on the boundary of each universe will be inevitably put in question. How can we define the frame of each universe if we cannot make a distinction between the inside and the void outside the universe nor a distinction between one universe and the others, since each universe has certain parts overlapping with other universes?

Generally, a frame is an essential element for the totality of a structure. By limiting the play of elements inside a total form, “the frame is what gives us an object that can have an intrinsic content or structure.”<sup>16</sup> The major function of frames, therefore, is to demarcate “a point of differentiation, a point where outside becomes differentiated from inside.”<sup>17</sup> In the *traiphum* cosmography, it is stated that each

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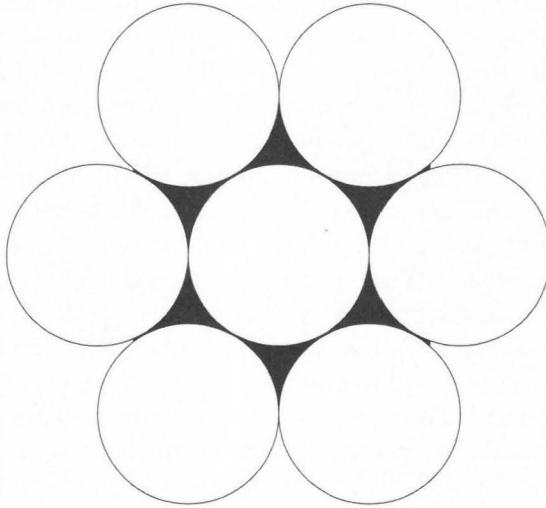
<sup>16</sup> Culler 195.

<sup>17</sup> Culler 107.

universe is surrounded by the Cakkavala Wall, the mountain range that serves as the outermost frame delineating the circumference of each universe. But to view the Cakkavala Wall as the frame of the universe is a perception based on the notion that the universe is in the shape of a circle, the notion that does not include the presence of the Lokanta hell as a part of the universe. Since the Lokanta hell, in effect, has a double undecidable characteristic such that it cannot be determined whether it is inside or outside the universe, the decision whether the Cakkavala Wall is the frame of the universe becomes undecidable as well. If the Lokanta hell is merely an outside part of the universe, the universe would have the Cakkavala Wall as its frame. But if the Lokanta hell is considered as a part of the universe, the Cakkavala Wall would no longer be the frame of the universe, and it would be difficult to determine where the frame of the universe stands for the Lokanta hell is the part overlapping with other universes. In addition, since the Lokanta hell is the interstice where the Cakkavala Wall of three universes meet, the Cakkavala Wall, which is supposed to mark the boundary of the space inside the circular shape of universe, conversely becomes an element that delineates the void outside and turns it into a space inside.

The presence of the Lokanta hell, thus, confounds the decision regarding the border of the universe. In fact, the problems with the boundaries here are even more complicated for, by surrounding each universe, the Lokanta hell itself can also be viewed as the frame of the universe (see Figure 4). But if a frame is essentially defined by its function of demarcating a point of differentiation between the inside and the outside, the Lokanta hell would obviously be a frame that fails to function as frame. For by being a part inside the universe, the void outside the universe, and the space overlapping with other universes all at once, the Lokanta hell is the area where the demarcation between the inside and the outside collapses. This problem of frame, a frame that cannot be determined as to whether it is a part of the inside or a part of the outside, as represented in the image of the Lokanta hell, is similar to the problem of frame that Derrida discusses in terms of “*parergon*.”

In *The Truth in Painting*, the “discourse on the frame” or “a discourse on the limit between the inside and outside of the art



**Figure 4** The Lokanta hell as the frame of the universe

object”<sup>18</sup> is a focus of Derrida’s discussion. Since “aesthetic judgment *must* properly bear upon intrinsic beauty, not on finery and surrounds,” to determine “the intrinsic—what is framed—and know what one is excluding as frame *and* outside-the-frame” is required as one of its fundamental presuppositions.<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, as Derrida points out, sometimes distinguishing the inside from the outside or even defining the frame itself can be problematic. In the case of the frame of a painting, for example, the frame, on the one hand, is an external part of the painting while, on the other hand, enhances the internal beauty of the picture. Yet the fact that the frame can enhance the beauty of the painting means

<sup>18</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Paregon,” *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) 45.

<sup>19</sup> Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, 63.

that the painting itself is incomplete. That is, it lacks something, and this lack can be compensated only by the presence of the frame. The frame, by this way, becomes an element that is “no longer merely around the work.” Rather, it is a kind of *parergon*, a Greek term which means “by-work.” To Derrida, *parergon* can be classified neither as “work (*ergon*) nor outside the work (*hors d’oeuvre*), neither inside nor outside, neither above nor below, it disconcerts any opposition but does not remain indeterminate and it *gives rise* to the work.”<sup>20</sup> To put it in another way, *parergon* is an “*hors-d’oeuvre*” that “does not stand simply outside the work (*hors d’oeuvre*).”<sup>21</sup> Instead, this *hors-d’oeuvre* “touches and cooperates within the operation, from a certain outside,” and places itself in the space that is “[n]either simply outside nor simply inside.”<sup>22</sup> Since it is added to the work (*ergon*) in order to complete it, *parergon* becomes neither an integral part nor a completely detachable part of the *ergon*.

In this way, by being an extrinsic part that helps enhance the intrinsic beauty of the picture, the frame of painting is also a kind of *parergon* such that it cannot be determined whether it is internal or external to the painting. But if the frame itself cannot be determined whether it belongs to inside or outside, where would the demarcation between the inside and the outside stand? Furthermore, if the frame does not function as the point of differentiation between the inside and the outside, would the frame still remain as frame? Thus, as Derrida remarks, “this frame is problematical. ... Where does the frame take place. Does it take place. Where does it begin. Where does it end. What is its internal limit. Its external limit. And its surface between the two limits.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, 9. (Original emphasis)

<sup>21</sup> Please note the pun between “*hors-d’oeuvre*” and “*hors d’oeuvre*” here.

<sup>22</sup> Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, 54.

<sup>23</sup> Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, 63. (The question marks are omitted as appear in the original)

These problems in the notion of frame that Derrida discusses here are quite similar to the problems that the presence of the Lokanta hell raises when being viewed as the frame of the *Traiphum's* universe. By surrounding each universe and setting one universe apart from the others, the Lokanta hell can be considered as the frame of the universe. But since the Lokanta hell is the area that can be a part of the universe, a part of the void outside the universe, and a part overlapping with other universes all at once, the Lokanta hell is the frame that fails to function as the marker of the boundary of each universe and as the point of differentiation between the inside and the outside. In this respect, similar to what Derrida once said, “*there is* frame, but the frame *does not exist*,”<sup>24</sup> the notion of frame as represented by the presence of the Lokanta hell is both asserted and denied simultaneously leaving the *Traiphum's* universe to be a unit of which the frame is both present and absent at once.

Thus, in relation to the universe, the Lokanta hell is “the outside” that “bears with the inside a relationship that is... anything but simple exteriority.”<sup>25</sup> The problems of the boundary line between the inside and the outside raised by the presence of the Lokanta hell has effect not only on the notion of frame itself, but also on the totality of the universe. How can we define the *traiphum* universe if we do not know where the circumference of its totality stands? In this sense, instead of being simply a unit that is haphazardly situated outside the universe, the Lokanta hell represents a deconstructive “rupture” that “propagate[s] its effects throughout the entire chain of discourse,” making the whole structure of the *traiphum* universe slide.<sup>26</sup> With the presence of the Lokanta hell,

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<sup>24</sup> Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, 81. (Original emphasis)

<sup>25</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976) 35.

<sup>26</sup> Jacques Derrida, “From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve,” *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978) 264-72.

the *traiphum* universe becomes a unit in which the notions of boundary and even the totality of the universe itself are all put in question, producing a “play of the structure” that transforms the *traiphum* universe to be “a structure that is open and closed *at the same time*.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> This sentence is borrowed from Derrida’s discussion of “the Double Session” in Mallarmé’s writing. See Derrida, *Dissemination*, 202.

