

This paper represents a relatively early stage of my research on this particular topic, and this fact – along with the fact that I will have to paraphrase some fairly complex theoretical models – may make some of what I’m going to say seem slightly perfunctory. Or strange. If you find this is the case, I’d welcome the opportunity to clarify my points in questions afterward.

Now, as we’re all well aware, Kurt Vonnegut was an avowed humanist. He served as the honorary president of the American Humanist Association until his death. He used the term often, usually in self-description. The trouble is, ‘humanism’ or ‘humanist’ is a slippery term. Tony Davies identifies at least fifteen different definitions that do not necessarily correlate with one another. The sense in which Vonnegut used the term was, to the best of my knowledge, always essentially synonymous with agnosticism, or possibly atheism. But the term can easily carry other undertones; there is always the possibility that it is not simply used or interpreted oppositionally – in this case, as a disavowal of the supernatural – but in a positive sense, to emphasise the ‘human’ part of ‘humanism’, that part that decrees, like Protagoras, that ‘man is the measure of all things’. Contra to this, my current thesis is that Vonnegut might be better conceived as a kind of budding posthumanist. I hasten to add that ‘the posthuman’ is another slippery term, so I will quote Neil Badmington here, who provides a concise definition of the humanist/posthumanist debate:

*[Posthumanism] involves radically rethinking the dominant, familiar humanist account of who “we” are as human beings. According to the humanist model, the figure of the human has a natural and eternal place at the very center of things, where it is clearly distinguished from machines and animals, where it shares with all other human beings a unique and universal essence, where it is the origin of meaning and the sovereign subject of history, and where it acts according to something called “human nature.”...Posthumanism, by way of contrast, begins with the recognition that “Man” is not the privileged and protected center, because humans are no longer – and perhaps never were – utterly distinct from animals and machines...*

Before I continue, I will say that this is not to anachronistically imply Vonnegut identified as a posthumanist. Nor is it to say that posthumanist themes are always central to his work. Though inevitably eclipsed by the always imposing figure of the human, nevertheless, I believe a kind of flat ontology can be detected in its corona, at the margins of his work; a tendency to level humans, animals and things traditionally considered inanimate, to trouble the subject/object boundary and our intuitions regarding essentialist individuality and free will. Some of these elements of Vonnegut’s fiction – particularly the determinism – have, of course, been commented on by other critics, but I would argue that they are very often mentioned as something to be overcome, as threats to our human dignity and freedom that Vonnegut must symbolically work out and defeat. I would like to take a different tack, and explore what happens when we accept these posthuman features at face value, and *take them seriously*.

I’m going to be focusing on *The Sirens of Titan* here, because I think it’s a particularly good example of the tendencies I am talking about. We’re hopefully all familiar with Vonnegut’s kaleidoscopic, picaresque, solar system-spanning tale; the travels and travails of Malachi Constant as he is carried from planet to planet, propelled by forces not of his making, and the semi-antagonistic, chrono-synclastically infundibulated Winston Niles Rumfoord, old money adventurer cum at least locally omniscient ‘wave-form’, who has been spread across time and space. There’s plenty to talk about at the plot level – Constant’s constantly changing identity, for instance, speaks to the instability of the essential self. In the posthuman spirit of this paper, however, I want to instead draw attention to the significance of the material in the novel – a work in which people, planets, and stars are treated as ontologically equal, in which waveforms speak and humans are figured as particles, and agentic capability is spread across ever-widening systems, rather than remaining the sole domain of the traditional subject. We are, however, talking about a work of literature here, so, in so doing, I will deploy a theoretical approach that combines material and discursive practices; in this case, Karen Barad’s theory of agential realism. Barad is a cultural and feminist theorist with a doctorate in

quantum physics, and the imposing monograph in which she introduces her theory, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, has a length of 544 pages and a density far beyond its mass. Needless to say, the following should be considered a *very* brief summary.

Barad takes as central to her framework Niels Bohr's observation that 'we are a part of that nature that we seek to understand'. This statement shouldn't be taken simply as hippy-ish holism, but as a difficult and counterintuitive recognition that human practices, and even human *concepts*, are materially enacted. They are, in her words, '*component parts of nature... knowledge-making practices are social-material enactments that contribute to, and are a part of, the phenomena we describe*'. All interactions – and it is important to note that there is no fundamental difference between human and nonhuman interactions within this framework – are, in Barad's neologism, 'intra-actions'; they are not interventions from pre-existing agencies, but are produced within the preceding phenomena. This leads Barad to a far more counterintuitive and outlandish claim. For Barad, objects – or matter, material, substance, or any other concept based in the ontology of presence – are not the bedrock of reality. They do not precede relations, but are *produced* by them – as she notes, '*crucially, then, we should understand phenomena not as objects-in-themselves, or as perceived objects (in the Kantian or phenomenological sense), but as specific intra-actions. Because the basis of this ontology is a fundamental inseparability, it cuts across any Kantian noumena-phenomena distinction: there are no determinately bounded or propertied entities existing "behind" or as the causes of phenomena*'. Needless to say, the human mind is equally imbricated here; it is not behind or above phenomena, but iteratively produced (and producing) within them.

For my purposes here, the long and involved reasoning behind this stance cannot be fully explicated. It must suffice to say that in Barad's strange, topsy-turvy universe, 'apparatuses' precede the material-discursive enactments and conditions that produce phenomena, determinate meanings and material beings – humans included. Agency and causality thus become at once diffuse and iteratively concentrated, determinate in certain ways within certain phenomena, and *relata* are produced by their relations. This is all pretty esoteric and counterintuitive, so for clarity I will use Barad's position on posthumanism as a touchstone for the current argument:

*Posthumanism, as I intend it here, is not calibrated to the human; on the contrary, it is about taking issue with human exceptionalism while being accountable for the role we play in the differential constitution and differential positioning of the human among other creatures [and entities]... Matter is produced and productive, generated and generative. Matter is agentive, not a fixed essence or property of things.*

*The Sirens of Titan*, the novel of Objects In Space, is also a novel of matter *par excellence*; just as in Barad's theory, it blurs the boundaries between the traditional subject and object throughout.

Since we've not a lot of time, I would like to point out a few relevant passages here from one particular strand of my argument. The opening chapter is as good a place to start as any, and Rumfoord's grounds are the first of many examples in the novel of how the material and discursive intra-act. As the 'punctual' Constant, who exists as a 'point', approaches the mansion on a path that splits around a fountain of nested bowls – and I can't help but point out the similarity here with the classic two-slit experiment – we are told that the house is '*an hilariously impressive expression of the concept: People of substance*', an '*essay on density [and] permanence*'. We might be tempted to take this as exclusively metaphorical – a representation of the solidity of the class to which Rumfoord once belonged – but Vonnegut goes one further. After Constant's meeting with Rumfoord, he stands at the foot of the staircase of the mansion. As Lawrence Broer points out, this is one of many examples of nested spirals in the novel – but where Broer argues that these spirals are a kind of representation of malign outside influences, or the paranoid fear of such, a closer look complicates this inside/outside relationship. As Beatrice Rumfoord descends, we are told that

*She wore a long white dressing gown whose soft folds formed a counter-clockwise spiral in harmony with the white staircase. The train of the gown cascaded down the top riser, making Beatrice Continuous with the architecture of the mansion.*

Notice here how Beatrice is figured as literally *part* of the house, subject and object momentarily entangled; she is imbricated in its structure, matter and meaning merging. There is not a class, a house, and a person, but, if only briefly, a kind of class/house/person hybrid; an apparatus. Similar examples are rife throughout the novel, but the same particular effect is even more dramatically demonstrated at the end of the novel, when it is revealed that the various architectural monuments of humanity – Stonehenge, the Great Wall of China, the Kremlin – have acted as Tralfamadorian messages for Salo. It is easy, perhaps, to read this as belittling, as a deflation of human achievement in light of what these structures ‘really’ mean. But surely the more interesting tack is to recognise that they carry *different meanings depending on who is looking at them*. They carry both and neither. The medium is here the message, but only within differing material-discursive apparatuses; as in a chrono-synclastic infundibulum, they can both be right at the same time. And of course, speaking once again on the personal level, Beatrice’s *The True Purpose of Life in the Solar System* notes that

*I would be the last to deny that the forces of Tralfamadore have had something to do with the affairs of Earth. However, those persons who have served the interests of Tralfamadore have served them in such highly personalized ways that Tralfamadore can be said to have had practically nothing to do with the case.*

I wouldn’t go quite as far as Beatrice, but she is right in one thing; just because human practices have been differentially produced by an interstellar apparatus, that doesn’t mean that they aren’t *theirs*. It is simply that the way the universe works, and the way we, as part of it, work, is far stranger than we have anticipated. Here’s Barad with a very lucid explanation of just what happens to traditional agency when we recognise the entangled material-discursivity of what we do:

*Agency is a matter of intra-acting; it is an enactment, not something that someone or something has...Strict determinism is stopped in its tracks, but the quantum does not leave us with free will either. Rather, it reworks the entire set of possibilities made available. Agency and causality are not on-off affairs...Space, time, and matter are intra-actively produced in the ongoing differential articulation of the world.*

This isn’t a threat to human happiness or dignity; it is simply a threat to *liberal humanism*. It doesn’t denigrate humans or what they do; it *integrates* them. *Sirens* is a remarkable novel because it seems to implicitly understand something like this insight, and express it across its oft-overlooked margins. We may lose our illusions about free will and the special dignity of man, but Vonnegut’s posthuman solar system may represent a means to consider something very new, very weird, but perhaps very liberating.