

Ingrid Terese Xara Brazil Fongen

Alienation in Space

Science Fiction as Contemporary Critique of the Vietnam War

Bachelor's project in Language Studies with Teacher Education
Supervisor: Yuri Cowan

June 2019

Ingrid Terese Xara Brazil Fongen

Alienation in Space

Science Fiction as Contemporary Critique of the
Vietnam War

Bachelor's project in Language Studies with Teacher Education
Supervisor: Yuri Cowan
June 2019

Norwegian University of Science and Technology
Faculty of Humanities
Department of Language and Literature

 **NTNU**
Norwegian University of
Science and Technology

Abstract

English:

This Bachelor's Project discusses Joe Haldeman's *The Forever War* and Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* as contemporary political critiques of the Vietnam War. The exploration centers around the theme of alienation in the science fiction novels, and how this literary technique carries a political message. There is evidence of alienation of the main character from his society, which alludes to soldiers' difficulties of rejoining society after the Vietnam War. Furthermore, alienation of the war being fought in each novel is evident through distances, proxy wars, and limiting physical contact with the war, which critiques the warfare of the Vietnam War. Alienation of the body is prominent in the sense of the human body resembling a machinery, and the juxtaposition of sex and horror; this is an allusion to the Vietnam War veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. Finally, the alienation of the reader raises awareness about the shortcomings of US society during the Vietnam War, and thus promotes reflection of one's own society. These four elements of alienation holds critique of the Vietnam War, and provides an insight into contemporary writers' attitude towards this proxy war.

Norwegian:

Denne bacheloroppgaven diskuterer Joe Haldemans *The Forever War* og Ursula Le Guins *The Dispossessed* som politiske samtidskritikker av Vietnamkrigen. Undersøkelsen omhandler fremmedgjøring som tema i disse science fiction-bøkene, og hvordan dette litterære virkemiddelet bærer et politisk budskap. Man finner belegg for fremmedgjøring av hovedpersonen fra samfunnet han er del av, som sikter til krigsveteraners vansker med å returnere til samfunnet etter Vietnamkrigen. Videre finner man fremmedgjøring av krigen som kjempes i begge romanene gjennom avstander, stedfortrederkriger og manglende fysisk kontakt med krigen, hvilket kritiserer Vietnamkrigens krigføring. Fremmedgjøring av kroppen er fremtredende ved at menneskekroppen ligner et maskineri, samt gjennom sammenstillingen av sex og skrekk. Dette peker på krigsveteranenes posttraumatiske stresslidelse i etterkant av Vietnamkrigen. Til slutt ser man fremmedgjøring av leseren, hvilket fremmer bevissthet rundt manglene til samfunnet i USA i løpet av Vietnamkrigen, og dermed oppmuntrer til refleksjon rundt ens eget samfunn. Disse fire tilfellene av

fremmedgjøring inneholder kritikk av Vietnamkrigen, og gir oss innsikt i samtidsforfatteres holdning til denne stedfortrederkrigen.

Acknowledgments

This Bachelor's Project would not have been what it is today if it were not for some extremely important people. I would therefore like to thank the following:

Yuri Cowan and Celina Annabell Stifjell for guidance and enthusiasm before and during my writing process. Answering questions, handling postponements, and assistance with understanding new forms of citation are only a few examples of the invaluable help I have received this semester. Thank you.

Aleksander Rasmussen Dreyer Skre for countless hours of encouragement, consoling in hours of despair, feeding a helpless fiancée, and enforcing workouts. And sushi.

Silje Nes Skrede for patience, problem solving, and postponements.

Esther Torsvik Gieselmann for karaoke, mojitos, Carcassonne, and Tyrkisk Pepper.

Trondheim for not providing sunny days in May, thus enabling me to stay indoors and write.

UKEkoret Pirum for removing a distracting fiancé every day at 3:00 pm for a month, ensuring productivity at a critical point in my writing process.

Table of Contents

Introduction	7
Main Body	8
Alienation of the main character	8
Alienation of the war	10
Alienation of the body	13
Alienation of the reader	16
Conclusion	18
Works Cited	20

Ingrid Terese Xara Brazil Fongen

Yuri Cowan

ENG2502

12 June 2019

Alienation in Space

Science Fiction as Contemporary Critique of the Vietnam War

Introduction

When both the science fiction novels *The Forever War* by Joe Haldeman and *The Dispossessed* by Ursula Le Guin were published in 1974's United States of America, the Vietnam War had marked the US society for almost twenty years (Palmer et al. 956). The '70s nourished the free spirited hippie movement, focusing on peace on Earth. The protests surrounding the United States' participation in the Vietnam War did not go unnoticed by American authors. This paper will examine *The Dispossessed* and *The Forever War* as critiques of the Vietnam War through the goggles of historical context. This will be done by looking at alienation as a theme in both novels, based on the following thesis: Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* and Joe Haldeman's *The Forever War* serve as political critiques of the Vietnam War in their exploration of the theme of alienation, focusing on the home front and the military front respectively. The paper will assess this thesis by looking at alienation of the main character, the war, the body, and the reader.

Main Body

When exploring the theme of alienation in *The Dispossessed* and *The Forever War* as a means of political critique of the Vietnam War, one must first define “alienation”. When this paper refers to alienation, it describes the process of creating a distance between two elements which leads to estrangement in their relation (Saleem 69-70). Science fiction with a political message is not uncommon as the topic of space exploration was popular in the height of science fiction, which took place during the space race of the Cold War (MacLeod 235). The political message in *The Dispossessed* and *The Forever War* concerning the Vietnam War will now be explored by looking at alienation as a theme.

Alienation of the main character

In their novels, Le Guin and Haldeman implement the theme of alienation in various ways, as a means to comment on the Vietnam War. Since the reader follows the main characters, Shevek in *The Dispossessed* and Mandella in *The Forever War*, I will begin assessing alienation as a theme by exploring the alienation of the main character first.

Shevek experiences alienation in a number of ways. He is alienated from his home planet, Annares, due to a lack of a forum in which to discuss his revolutionary ideas (Le Guin 158-159). This barrier between Shevek and his own people leads to loneliness, and a desire to look elsewhere for discussing these theories. Due to this, Shevek turns to the planet Urras to explore physics that no one else understands. However, while on Urras, Shevek does not find the inclusion in society which he covets. He is alienated from the Urras society, for example by being subject to a dehumanization process of name calling, such as “Moon Man” (Le Guin 227). By doing so, Shevek is branded as an alien in Urrasti eyes (Hull 72). This

dehumanization process is closely related to the Vietnam War as the United States dehumanized the Vietnamese enemy in order for the soldiers to be able to do their job and for the public to support the war (Loo 638). The name calling is therefore highly significant in order to understand the critique of the Vietnam War that is implemented in *The Dispossessed*.

The issue of Shevek's alienation from both Annares and Urras may be understood as an allegory for the US soldiers who were unable to connect with society when they returned from the Vietnam War. These soldiers were not in their element at the military front, and found it difficult to return to the society at the home front afterwards due to the horrors they had been exposed to. Shevek's loneliness on both Annares and Urras is therefore highly similar to the loneliness the US soldiers experienced in both Vietnam and in the US after their return.

In *The Forever War*, the main character is also alienated from society, creating a distance between the individual and the rest of society. However, due to the fact that this novel focuses on the military front rather than the home front, the main issue with the struggle between the individual soldier and the collective military is that the importance of the soldier is nothing compared to that of the military as a whole. Due to the Earth being at war, it is the survival and persistence of the human race that is prioritized, not saving an individual or a fleet. This is exemplified through the escape maneuver taken that risks the life of Mandella's lover after being injured, as the information aboard the ship is more important than the individual soldier or losing a new battle: "[S]ometimes you have to throw away a battle in order to help win the war" (Haldeman 106). This quote emphasizes the importance of the war as a whole, and the soldiers as only small pieces on a large chess board. The soldier is therefore alienated from society as each soldier does not hold value in themselves, but only as part of a larger machinery.

Furthermore, *The Forever War* also includes name calling as a means of alienating the main character, by calling Mandella and other veterans from the beginning of the war “old-timers”. Loo states that name calling was a way of dehumanizing the enemy during the Vietnam War, and made Asian-American war veterans vulnerable to mental illnesses, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after the war ended (639). Degrading name calling is therefore a negative result of the Vietnam War, resulting in mental illness among allies, not just enemies. Even though the term “old-timers” in *The Forever War* is not degrading in itself, it underlines the distance between the “old-timers” and the rest of society that is already evident in differences in pronunciation, sexual orientation, and birth planet. This distance between the main character and society is, like in *The Dispossessed*, a reference to the alienation of the Vietnam veterans that struggled with returning to society after the war.

Alienation of the war

One cannot ignore the fact that in both novels the war is also the subject of alienation, which holds criticism of the Vietnam War. Imagined future wars are often based on conflicts of past wars, and should therefore be understood as allegorical (Luckhurst 729). In *The Forever War*, the war is not only alienated from humanity by the enormous distance an interstellar war holds, but also the generation span it brings together. The war lasts for 1143 years, and due to time dilation, some of the soldiers, including Mandella, experience both the beginning and the end of the war. This distances the war from the civilians that never experience the front, as well as the soldiers from each other as there are generations between them. Finding a uniting element is therefore difficult, which Mandella experiences when met with different linguistic pronunciations, a norm of homosexuality, as well as the fact that few soldiers and civilians have been to Earth a few centuries into the war. This eliminates a fellow sense of a

home, and instead promotes a fellow place of origin. The war is therefore distanced from the home planet, which reduces the number of people encountering it. This is a clear criticism of the Vietnam War as it was a war fought far away from one's home country. People with no objections to an alienated war are condemned in *The Forever War*, as it shows that even a war fought a long way from home has severe consequences for both the soldiers and one's society. The will of the people is thus emphasized as decisive for a war, which makes it interesting to discover the false pretenses under which the Forever War started due to lack of communication. This is underlined when the war's origin is finally discussed between the species: "[O]nce they could talk, the first question asked was 'Why did you start this thing?' and the answer was 'Me?'" (Haldeman 261). Communication between military instances and the civilians, as well as between military instances from other races, are therefore seen as elementary for solving the problem of the war. The military has taken control of the war, which has eliminated the aspect of questioning the war itself, even with the enemy. A sense of politics is therefore detected in this aspect, and a critique of opposing ideologies unable to communicate is present.

The interstellar war in *The Forever War* is further alienated through the chosen warfare. The human soldiers fight in suits that are accustomed to foreign pressure and temperature, as well as being weaponized and strength enhanced. This suit leads to an alienation of the soldier from the battle itself as the suit forms a shield from one's surroundings, giving an "inhuman quality [to] the electronic battlefield" (Blackmore 131). The soldiers thus become dehumanized pieces in a large machinery, and the human value of the soldiers decreases. By this choice of warfare, the war is further alienated, and emphasizes the machinery and lack of humanity in the war machine of the Vietnam War, which will be elaborated on later.

The Dispossessed does not include a distance between the soldier and the war, but there is a strong sense of alienation of the war. Le Guin's novel includes a war between the two neighboring nations, Io and Thu, that is fought in the nation Benbili by assisting opposing sides in this civil war. This proxy war is perhaps the strongest critique of the Vietnam War found in *The Dispossessed* as it attacks this notion of war when Shevek questions a Urrasti scientist called Pae:

“So your army and Thu's army will fight in Benbili. But not here?”

“No, no. It would be utter folly for them to invade us, or us them. We've outgrown the kind of barbarism that used to bring war into the heart of the high civilizations!

The balance of power is kept by this kind of police action. However, we are officially at war” (Le Guin 275).

Shevek questions the concept of a proxy war on the other side of the planet between two neighboring nations, and Pae answers with ludicrous explanations about the hierarchy of different nations where wars should not touch the civilized nations. This invites the reader to contemplate on the ridiculousness of the concept of proxy wars. The passage is heavy critique of the Vietnam War by Le Guin as the US and USSR were neighboring countries through the Bering Strait, while fighting in a foreign country far away (Palmer et al. 967). The quote also suggests a condemnation of superiority by so-called “superpowers” over lesser nations. The notion of equal value between two differing societies is underlined in Le Guin's concept of the two worlds of Annares and Urras also being each other's moons. This equality supports the notion of the US author being sympathetic towards the ideology opposing the US in the Vietnam War: communism. There is therefore a critique of the politics involved in the Vietnam War present in *The Dispossessed*, and one may observe Shevek seeking answers about the will of the people when concerning the war between Io and Thu. The capitalist

society of Urras is condemned, and a sharing community, one that may resemble ideal communism, is promoted through the world of Annares.

Alienation of the body

Both novels in question include an alienation of the human body. Numbing the senses or having a distance between mind and body are classic symptoms of PTSD (Loo 651), which is highly relevant for soldiers who have experienced the horrors of war. PTSD was added to the official diagnostic manual of the American Psychiatric Association in 1980 as an extension and generalization of combat stress, as those who had worked with Vietnam veterans had fought to recognize it as a compensable mental illness (Luckhurst 725). Alienation of the body therefore indicates a link to the war fought at the time of the novels' release, the Vietnam War.

This alienation of the body is evident in the allusions to the body being artificial. In *The Dispossessed*, Shevek is faced with Urras' norms concerning bodily care, which differ from the norms from his home planet. Women on Urras shave off all hair on their bodies, dust their scalps with glittering talc, wear strong perfumes to cover their natural scent, and insert a small magnet under the skin in the hollow of the throat in order to attach a magnetized jewel there as an accessory (Le Guin 213-214). This prominence of artificial elements to the body is met with disgust from Shevek as it reduces a person to an object (Burns 143), and reveals a view of artificiality being negative when it comes to the human body. An unnatural relationship to one's body points to a distance in the relationship between body and mind, which is an allusion to the PTSD of the war veteran. Shevek's point of view that such an abnormality of the body is wrong, indicates that the consequences of the Vietnam War are wrong.

This criticism of the Vietnam War and the horrors it provided is further exemplified in the juxtaposition of sex and horror. Shevek is horrified by the female clothing for formal occasions on Urras, which leaves the breasts bare. This negative response to being confronted with a sexual part of the human body may point to unease with the human body, which is natural for soldiers who have seen the extreme violence the body can be subject to. This is further underlined with Shevek's sexual desire for the Urrasti woman, Veä, in which "her resistance excited him further" (Le Guin 230) until he ejaculates on her clothes. The incident of resistance and violence being connected with sexual arousal is a prominent case of the juxtaposition of sex and horror, which is evidence of the dissociation between mind and body. By alienating the body and its functions, Le Guin exemplifies the horrors of the Vietnam War on the minds of the soldiers, which, according to Blackmore (138), prevent the soldiers from being comfortable with the body, a classic sign of PTSD (Loo 642-643).

The juxtaposition of sex and horror is also found in *The Forever War* when Mandella witnesses his lover's accident:

it started as an angry welt up by her collarbone and was just a welt as it traveled between her breasts until it passed the sternum's support... and opened up into a cut that got deeper as it ran down over her belly where it stopped... a few centimeters above the pubis a membraned loop of gut was protruding (Haldeman 96).

In this passage, Mandella observes his lover's injuries amongst the sexual elements of the collarbones, breasts, belly, and pubis. Blackmore argues that this is an "unhappy combination of sex and disemboweling" (138), which is a glaring juxtaposition of sex and horror. Due to Mandella being a soldier, it is easy to spot the parallel between his unease with the human body and the Vietnam veterans as he mixes the strong feelings of sexual pleasure and

extreme violence. This is another element to the criticism by Haldeman of the Vietnam War and its effects on the war's participants.

The dissociation of mind and body in *The Forever War*, and the alienation of the body that it leads to, is also linked to an artificiality, as is the case with *The Dispossessed*. Mandella, in his alienating fighting suit, is haunted by a lack of connection with his body to the extent of having a hauntingly symbolic nightmare. In the nightmare, Mandella is a machine that mimics the functions of life, and "the little man who sat inside [Mandella's] head pulling the levers and clutches and watching the dials, he was hopelessly mad and was storing up hurts for the day" (Haldeman 60). This stream of consciousness elaborates on the alienation between the soldier and the war due to the suit, as there is a sense of machinery behind this way of conducting a war. The soldiers become pieces in a large machinery, manipulated by the politicians and tacticians lightyears away, and the human value of the soldiers decreases.

The lack of human value is heavily underlined when Mandella experiences that the fighting suit is constructed to cut off injured body parts, and to later grow replacement body parts in the hospital. The human body becomes no more than a machine with parts that can be replaced, which corroborates Blackmore's argument of Haldeman confronting the physical frailty of humans (137). The haunting reality Mandella experiences is a reflection of the inhuman way of warfare the Vietnam War consisted of, and how inconsiderate the war was to the value of human life. The alienation of the body is not only an expression of the PTSD that the war veterans experienced, but also the lack of valuing human life in the war. Haldeman's personal experience as a Vietnam veteran (Luckhurst 730) makes this particularly gripping. The individuality of the soldier is completely stripped away, and one is left with a large war machine with replaceable parts. Both Haldeman and Le Guin strongly argue against this form

of warfare through their novels by alienating the body, and the reader is invited to contemplate the value of human life, and the lack of humanity in the Vietnam War.

Alienation of the reader

Another player involved in a text's potential is the reader, which makes the reader central to understanding the full potential of the text. In both *The Dispossessed* and *The Forever War*, the text makes sure to alienate the reader. As science fiction taking place on different planets, it is not a surprise that this creates an estrangement with the reader. However, through an alienation of the reader extending beyond an unfamiliar setting, Le Guin and Haldeman make their arguments against their society in the '70s that is centered around the Vietnam War.

As mentioned, *The Forever War* alienates the human body by metaphorically transforming it into a machine. The artificiality of the body does not only create a distance between the body and the main character, but also between the text and the reader. One of the main points on which the reader can relate to a novel with a setting far from the reality humans know, is the humanity of the characters involved. By exploring humanity in a new setting, or humanity's response to a significant change, the reader is able to connect with the text. Science fiction as a genre has undertaken the task of defining humanity (Hull 66) as it deals with grey areas and possible futures. When the human body, which is a large part of one's identification as a human, is alienated in the text, the reader loses one of the holding points to the novel, and therefore becomes alienated from the text. Mandella's nightmare of being a machine portrays an artificiality to the main character's humanity in a time of war. This unfamiliarity with perceiving the body as a mechanical instrument makes the reader take extra notice of this element in the text. Alienation is thus used as a literary technique to make the reader aware of the significance of the consequences of war that dehumanizes the human

body. Hence, the reader is invited to contemplate the argument of the Vietnam War being a powerhouse for inhumanity. This corroborates Hull's argument that science fiction's most important literary contribution is its comments on humanity (67).

Furthermore, the interstellar war in *The Forever War* leads to the collapse of society on Earth as we know it. The crowded and dusty environment full of guns and the need of a bodyguard is a nod to a dystopian society. When the home planet of humans evolves to become a dystopia, the reader is alienated from the text as the common ground of a shared home planet is removed. This is another argument against the Vietnam War and its impact on society as it tells a grimming tale of the impacts of war on a shared home.

Le Guin also uses elements of dystopia in *The Dispossessed* to alienate the reader, but in a rather different way. The dystopia presented is the capitalistic Urras that is fairly similar to the world we know on Earth. Instead of alienating the reader from the world we know, Le Guin alienates the reader from the utopian counterpart to Urras, Annares. On Annares the main sin is to "egoize" (Le Guin 30), which is placing one's individual needs or wants before the collective society's. Every possession is therefore not personal, but collective. The general criticism of utopias relying on totalitarianism (James 220) is debunked in Le Guin's blueprint for a future society as possessions are collectively owned. The unfamiliar mindset of collective possessions is brought to the reader's attention at several points, but seems particularly strange in the family scene when Shevek is reunited with his partner and daughter, in which his daughter offers her handkerchief to Shevek: "You can share the handkerchief I use" (Le Guin 316). By not using the genitive case, in which Sadik would describe the handkerchief as hers, the reader is once again reminded of the utopian value of no possessions. By using estranging language in a natural family setting that the reader would

be able to relate to, the reader is alienated from the family setting and the utopian society described.

This highlights Le Guin's trademark of inviting the reader to an ethical discussion about society (Burns 145), and relates to the Vietnam War in the debate about right and wrong. Le Guin therefore uses alienation from the utopian society in order for the reader to become aware of the flaws in one's own society. This differs from Haldeman's use of alienation of the reader as he alienates the reader from the shared elements of humanity and Earth as a home rather than from the unshared elements. Both authors' techniques are still effective, and the reader becomes aware of one's own flawed society, which in the '70s was dominated by the Vietnam War. The authors therefore argue for a change in this war-focused society through their alienation of the reader.

Conclusion

When assessing whether *The Dispossessed* and *The Forever War* may be interpreted as political critiques of the Vietnam War through the use of alienation as a theme, it is clear that the answer is positive. There is a distinct connection between the alienation explored in the novels and the Vietnam War. This is evident in the alienation of the main character by incidents of name calling in order to create an estrangement between the main character and the society he is a part of. The alienation of the war also provides evidence for critique of the Vietnam War as far off wars are being fought in both novels, and *The Dispossessed* brings up the ridiculousness of the concept of proxy wars. Furthermore, Haldeman and Le Guin critique the consequences of the Vietnam War by alienating the body to the extent of it becoming artificial and resembling a machinery. The juxtaposition of sex and horror is central in understanding the war's consequences on the soldiers suffering from PTSD. Finally, the

authors alienate the reader in order to raise awareness about the flaws in the US society in the '70s that encourage the Vietnam War. The reader is invited to contemplate one's own surroundings and perceive the negative consequences of the world he or she lives in.

The evidence of alienation that has been presented, support the thesis of the two novels being political critiques of the Vietnam War in their exploration of alienation as a theme. These findings may be especially interesting for people who do not regard science fiction as a genre that holds much literary value. By looking at *The Dispossessed* and *The Forever War* in a historical context, one will be able to perceive the depths of science fiction as a genre of voicing displeasement about contemporary political and social issues. Not only are these findings fascinating for the literary interested, but also for historians, as the novels provide an insight into contemporary writers' attitude towards the world event of the Vietnam War. A historian can see writers' attempts of influencing society, and even politicians, through their literary expression.

Further investigation could therefore be a comparison of science fiction novels commenting on war that were released during and after the Vietnam War, in order to see whether the need for change was still evident amongst writers. One would then get an insight in the impact contemporary writers of the Vietnam War, like Haldeman and Le Guin actually had on society.

Works Cited

- Blackmore, Tim. "Warring Stories: Fighting for Truth in the Science Fiction of Joe Haldeman." *Extrapolation*, vol. 34, no. 2, 1993, pp. 131–146, doi:10.3828/extr.1993.34.2.131.
- Burns, Tony. "Marxism and Science Fiction: A Celebration of the Work of Ursula K. Le Guin." *Capital & Class*, vol. 28, no. 3, 2004, pp. 139–148, doi:10.1177/030981680408400111.
- Haldeman, Joe. *The Forever War*. Thomas Dunne Books, 2009.
- Hull, Keith N. "What Is Human? Ursula LeGuin and Science Fiction's Great Theme." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 32, no. 1, 1986, pp. 65–74, doi:10.1353/mfs.0.1118.
- James, Edward. "Utopias and Anti-Utopias." *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 219–229.
- Le Guin, Ursula K. *The Dispossessed*. Harper Voyager, 1994.
- Loo, Chalsa M. "Race-related PTSD: The Asian American Vietnam Veteran." *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, vol. 7, no. 4, 1994, pp. 637–656, doi:10.1002/jts.2490070410.
- Luckhurst, Roger. "In War Times: Fictionalizing Iraq." *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 53, no. 4, 2012, pp. 713–737, doi:10.1353/cli.2012.0040.
- MacLeod, Ken. "Politics and Science Fiction." *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 230–240.
- Palmer, Robert R., et al. *A History of Europe in the Modern World*. 11th ed., McGraw-Hill Education, 2014.
- Saleem, Abdul. "Theme of Alienation in Modern Literature." *European Journal of English*

Language and Literature Studies, vol. 2, no. 3, 2014, pp. 67-76,

[www.eajournals.org/wp-content/uploads/Theme-of-Alienation-in-Modern-Literature.](http://www.eajournals.org/wp-content/uploads/Theme-of-Alienation-in-Modern-Literature.pdf)

pdf. Accessed 8 June 2019.

