“Ethics and Autonomy in Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Word for World is Forest*”

> There is no longer any excuse for acting on outdated orders; for ignorance; for irresponsible autonomy.
>
> Commander Yung to the human colonists of Athshe (Le Guin *Forest* 56-57)

Of all the works of science fiction published during the Vietnam War, Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Word for World is Forest* (1972) is perhaps the one that engages most overtly with the American war effort. From its depiction of the strange, otherworldly inhabitants of Athshe, to the “endless trees” (15) of the forest world and the poorly devised mission, the novel passes scathing comment on Vietnam and the rapacious conduct of American forces in East Asia. However, *The Word for World is Forest* has much more to offer than mere anti-war sentiment. As David L. Barnhill notes, the book’s critique includes the “long history of Western imperialism, from its ideological and psychological roots to its catastrophic effects” (488). Meanwhile Carol P. Hovanec situates it as a political response to American attitudes towards the environment (85); while Soren Baggesen argues it is a pessimistic novel directed towards future social change (34). More recently, it has also been read as a novel of resistance (Debita 66), a novel of feminist eco-criticism (Sperling 52), and even as a critique of the Anthropocene era (Savi 539).

And yet still modern criticism remains *relatively* lacking—especially when compared with Le Guin’s other works in the Hainish Cycle, such as *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) and *The Dispossessed* (1974). One reason for this may well be due to the novel’s polemic style, which Charlotte Spivack argues limits its impact as a work of literature (71). This style means that the main characters are defined by their dialectically opposed views, and as such lack the depth of many of Le Guin’s other famous protagonists. It may also be that Le Guin

herself has influenced the critical reception of her work, as she later admitted she had perhaps succumbed to the "lure of the pulpit" in writing it (Le Guin cited in Spivack 131).

But of course, this is not to say *The Word for World is Forest* is without value. While the environmental issues and anti-war sentiment are both well-trodden paths, there remain several other areas that are underdeveloped. Not least among these is Le Guin's critique of power, and the moral questions the novel poses in terms of autonomy and personal responsibility in a distant land. These issues play out in the behavior of Captain Don Davidson, a military officer who openly rapes and murders the native Athsheans in what would appear to be a breach of orders. Davidson's behavior represents a critical paradox that rests at the heart of the novel's moral and ethical concerns. On the one hand Davidson is an individual subject to (Terran) law; yet at the same time, in his role as *soldier*, he is also a direct extension of sovereign power—he is a prosthesis of the state. This begs the question: are Davidson's actions crimes of the individual, or rather crimes of the state?

To explore this question in more detail, this paper draws on the work of several key philosophers whose work examines themes of biopolitics, ethics, power, and control. In particular, I will look at Jacques Derrida and his treatise on responsibility: *The Gift of Death* (1992). In this book, Derrida explores ways in which our perception of the human is built on a certain understanding of what it means to live the *human* life, and so what it means to "die" and confront death as a responsible human subject (as opposed to animal). This is particularly relevant for *The Word for World is Forest*, as Le Guin's work challenges assumptions around who or what a human being really is. As with other novels in the Hainish Cycle, both the Athsheans and Terrans share a common ancestry (Cummins 67). The Athsheans themselves are even referred to as "native humans" (53). And yet despite their similarities, the Athsheans are cast into a zone of biopolitical indistinction where they are at once both human *and* non-

human in the eyes of the Terrans. Crucially, this classification can change at any time, depending on what the Terran colonists decide.

This zone of indistinction is a key focus in this article. By examining the ways in which the human is constructed as compared to the alien "other," so it will examine ways in which biopolitical power is exercised. In so doing, it examines the dilemmas that emerge through the process of including and excluding certain groups from the category of the human; especially on the field of battle. While the Vietnam War may now be long past, the issues that Le Guin exposes in *The Word for World is Forest* remain with us to this day, posing questions around what it means to be an ethical, responsible human in a world where our status as an "insider" or "outsider" can change at any time.

Athshe and Vietnam

Set on the world of Athshe, also known as New Tahiti (15), or World 41 (47), *The Word for World is Forest* splits its narrative between the perspective of Selver, an Athshean native, and two human colonists: the scientist Captain Dr. Raj Lyubov, and the military Captain Don Davidson—a man who represents the very worst of human endeavour on the alien world.

The novel opens with the perspective of Davidson as he strides through the main military encampment. The humans, we learn, are harvesting wood and sending it back to Earth. However, the native Athshean perspective is somewhat different, as they recall how "presently the yumens came and began to cut down the world" (30). The Athsheans, also known as "creechies" in army slang, are described as being "a metre tall and covered with green fur" (16). According to Davidson "the creechies are lazy, they're dumb, they're treacherous, and they don't feel pain" (18)—a comment that echoes how some American officials referred to the Viet Cong during the Vietnam War (Davis). Though the creechies share a common ancestry with humans, they are seen as less than human, or in Davidson's book, like women (18), and are thus abused and treated like slaves.

In this example, the human colonization of Athshe mirrors something of the patriarchal “colonization” of home, and in so doing also raises questions about the motives behind the war in Vietnam. Indeed, just like the US leaders in Vietnam, the humans from Earth are “possessed by fantasies of themselves as rational, civilized, self-controlled superior beings” (Franklin 352)—much like the colonists of old. This is fantasy as epitomized by Don Davidson who believes his purpose is to “tame” the planet Athshe in a similar way to Earth (11).

One of the major turning points in the text comes in the third chapter when a delegation of inter-planetary officials arrives, stopping off on their way to Prestno. They discover the world in disarray and ask the humans to give an account of the Athshean uprising. At this point, Lyubov observes, “We have killed, raped, dispersed, and enslaved the native humans. It wouldn’t be surprising if they’d decided that we are not human,” to which the Cetian delegate replies, “And therefore can be killed, like animals, yes yes” (53). It is clear that up to this point, the human colonists have not been treating the Athsheans as fellow humans, for the aged Colonel in charge says that they are “not human beings in my frame of reference!” (54). And yet, as the Cetian points out, the Earth humans had been having sex with them. So, here, the Athsheans are outcast enough to be considered non-human, but still human enough to rape. Were they raping non-humans (as some would describe the Athsheans) then the Earth humans would paradoxically be committing bestiality as well: they can’t have it both ways. Either the Athsheans are animals or humans, and yet in the colonists’ terms they are defined as both, depending on which depiction best suits their present needs.

From a biopolitical perspective, the Athsheans occupy the same space as the enemy within the friend-enemy dynamic, in that they are defined by their transient nature, and the ease with which they slip between the human and the non-human. They are non-human so far as that definition makes them easier to kill, and easier to hate, but they are also human in that

their very existence and position as "enemy" puts them in binary opposition with the "friend." Were the enemy non-human then they wouldn't be an "enemy" at all, but rather just another beast to kill, just like the other native creatures on the planet wantonly killed by the colonists. While Le Guin distinguishes the Athsheans from the Earth-born humans by depicting them as short, green, and covered in hair, they could just as easily be any other human enemy, such as, for example, the Viet Cong—the guerrilla fighters who supported the North Vietnamese Army in the war with the South.

It is significant here that the delegates' ship, the Shackleton, is transporting a version of the ansible device described in several other of Le Guin's Hainish Cycle novels—a device that allows for "the instantaneous transmission of a message over any distance" (55). While the vast distance between Athshe and Earth renders communication difficult, if not impossible, due to the time it takes for a message to reach its destination, with the ansible, the two planets can communicate in real time. The ansible brings the human colonists on Athshe back into the fold of external surveillance exercised by their rulers back on Earth. As the delegates put it, "There is no longer any excuse for acting on outdated orders; for ignorance; for irresponsible autonomy" (56–57). This is an important line, among the most important in the whole book, for the phrase "irresponsible autonomy" comes loaded with meaning. On the one hand, it is a direct criticism of the human military on Athshe, who are clearly working beyond the parameters of their mission and the assumed (uncodified) norms of behavior. But there is also a very clear implied criticism of American efforts in Vietnam—a war that Le Guin famously declared herself against in an advert posted in the June 1968 edition of *Galaxy* magazine.[1]

With regards to the Vietnam War, John L. Gaddis suggests that "once American forces were committed, Washington seemed to lose control, leaving the military with a degree of autonomy surprising in an administration that had prided itself on having reduced

military authority over the conduct of national security affairs" (250). He thus criticizes the "institutional interests" that were allowed to influence the war, which led to "an adaptation of ends to fit preferred means, rather than the other way around" (250–251). All of which he concludes, was "a remarkable departure from the injunctions to do just enough, but no more than was necessary" (252). In this case, there is a clear disjunction between the law as described by the sovereign (i.e., "win in Vietnam"), and the way that the instruction filters through to the practical operation of war. In this instance the American war machine arguably gained too much autonomy without political censure—aided by the distance of the war, and the lack of clear mechanisms for accountability and monitoring that meant commanders were effectively left to wage the war in whatever way they saw fit. And yet, as Paul N. Edwards observes, "Even [President] Johnson himself sometimes took part in targeting decisions" (5). This suggests that perhaps the military had too *little* freedom to function effectively, or rather if Johnson's decisions were all that significant at all—whether his targeting decisions were unnecessary and superficial, and designed rather to placate a President concerned that the military might be getting out of control.

Naturally, the American defeat cannot be attributed to a single cause, however Gaddis's argument certainly points to a breakdown in the fundamental structures of sovereign power and control—much as seems to be the case on the planet Athshe, where the mission breaks down on account of the "irresponsible autonomy" of the colonists who abuse the freedoms their distance from home affords.

However, the question of individual responsibility is not as clear cut as it may seem. As John Pimlott points out, during the Vietnam War, the notorious massacres in My Lai and Binh Tay were both officially covered up until news of the atrocities leaked and the Army was forced to order an investigation (137). This cover up suggests that the problem was not so much the autonomy of the soldiers, so much as the instruction or "programming" the

soldiers received. It is significant then that only a single soldier, Lt. Calley, stood trial for the massacre at My Lai, which Pimlott suggests, "[raised] criticisms that he was being used as a scapegoat and that the real culprits—his superior officers who were stressing the need for aggression and a large body count—escaped" (137). In this sense then it would seem that Lt. Calley stood trial on behalf of *all* of his fellow soldiers who took part in the engagements, and who were all following orders, or at the very least, the *spirit* of the orders that demanded aggression and high body counts.

In this respect, the case of Lt. Calley can be read as a sacrifice made *on behalf of* the state, held to account for mistakes far beyond his ability to control. While there may not have been direct orders to massacre the people of My Lai, this is not to say that the orders were not implied. The American leadership would certainly have been aware of this. The very nature of battle requires that soldiers "autonomously" apply their orders and the letter of the law to any battlefield situation. Yet given the nature of the conflict, and the prevailing approach adopted by US forces in Vietnam, it is easy to see how atrocities such as My Lai could have occurred, and why the American military would have been so eager to cover it up. All of which points to a serious problematic in the nature of the functional autonomy granted to troops, and the extent to which they should be held to account. Either the individual is completely free to act in any way they so choose—inn which case every single soldier at My Lai is guilty—or they are just a cog in a much larger machine.

Autonomy and Responsibility

Clearly, "autonomy" is a problematic concept, and it is tied very closely to what might be described as "responsibility," and the question of just what makes an autonomous subject, and at what point that autonomy begins and ends. This is a key concern in *The Word for World is Forest*, as for all Davidson's crimes, there is a sense that he is a part of a much wider problem that stems from the top.

In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida examines and deconstructs the concepts of ethics and responsibility in terms that can be applied to the paradox of autonomy as depicted in *The Word for World is Forest*. First published in French, *The Gift of Death* examines how life and death are tied to the philosophical concept of responsibility, and an awareness of our irreplaceable (human) nature. As Derrida describes:

> Death is very much that which nobody else can undergo or confront in my place. My irreplaceability is therefore conferred, delivered, "given," one can say, by death. It is the same gift, the same source, one could say the same goodness and the same law. It is from the site of death as the place of my irreplaceability, that is, of my singularity, that I feel called to responsibility. In this sense only a mortal can be responsible. (41)

Responsibility, as thought by Derrida, is tied to singularity, and "irreplaceable singularity" is bound up with death. According to Derrida this is because "responsibility demands irreplaceable singularity. Yet only death or rather the apprehension of death can give this irreplaceability, and it is only on the basis of it that one can speak of a responsible subject, of the soul as conscience of self" (51). Irreplaceability then can be read as a fundamental part of the working of power. Without an appreciation of the "value" of the human (as compared to animal), and the fact that each of our lives will at some point come to an end, so we are compelled to responsibility. However, "responsibility" is only ever a construct as we can never be responsible to all other humans at all other times. In part, this construct is due to the problem of language. According to Derrida:

> The first effect or first destination of language therefore involves depriving me of, or delivering me from, my singularity. By suspending my absolute singularity in speaking, I renounce at the same time my liberty and my responsibility. Once I speak I am never and no longer myself, alone and unique. It is a very strange contract—both

> paradoxical and terrifying—that binds infinite responsibility to silence and secrecy. (60)

For Derrida, language itself strips us of our absolute singularity, and in so doing also strips us of liberty and responsibility, for through language we are no longer completely singular, irreplaceable, unique. Or to quote Derrida, "I am never and no longer myself" (60).

But while Derrida says infinite responsibility is bound to silence and secrecy, it is also bound to the ultimate silence, death. Complete responsibility then, while never wholly achievable as such, requires a "conscience of self" as Derrida puts it, and an *awareness* of our irreplaceability. Yet the paradox comes in the fact that this awareness can only be made apparent through language and interaction with others. Thus, we are bound by chains of power right from the very start, bound to a paradox from which we cannot escape. Derrida describes this paradox in his discussion of human ethics, in which he argues, "far from ensuring responsibility, the generality of ethics incites to irresponsibility. It impels me to speak, to reply, to account for something, and thus to dissolve my singularity in the medium of the concept" (61). From this line of reasoning, language (in contrast to silence) is therefore also tied to *irresponsibility*, for we can never give a full account. Yet, not to speak is not to give an account at all. Here, language equates to dissolved singularity, hinting at the impact of discursive structures.

Looking beyond Derrida, there is also a link here to the Deleuzian notion of bureaucracy, for the more enmeshed you are in the system, the less responsible you are, or ever can ever be due to the nature of power flows within the social milieu.[2] In these terms, language can be read not only as Derridean "dissolved singularity", but also as the ultimate form of bureaucracy, in which we are each of us moving ever further away from responsibility as our singularity becomes dissolved, and we can never fully be held to account except in death.

The Problem of Autonomy

Given the sheer complexity of the situation on Athshe, and the way Davidson is at once both "responsible" and "irresponsible," Le Guin's treatment of autonomy is remarkably prescient. At the heart of the matter in the 21st century is the question of whether soldiers are *human* actors with clear definable agency, or rather *weapon systems* programmed to act in an autonomous manner that fits with the objectives of the military commanders.

On one side of the debate, there are writers such as Geoffrey S. Corn, who argues, "[human operatives] have always been, 'autonomous' weapons systems, because all soldiers must exercise cognitive reasoning in execution of their battlefield tasks" (212). Here, Corn links autonomy directly with training, which is designed such that soldiers' "autonomous judgment will be exercised in a manner that contributes to the overall tactical, operational and strategic objectives of his or her command" (212). However, as Corn notes, "it is impossible to have absolute 'compliance confidence' for even this 'weapon system'" (212), meaning that despite training (or "programming") a soldier can never be fully compliant with the wishes of command. From Corn's perspective then, the definition of autonomy is very much tied to training or programming, in that soldiers are expected to adhere to a set of codes and behave in a certain way when faced with any given battlefield situation—their autonomy is not independent thought as such, but rather the autonomous application of the law.

Corn's argument differs somewhat from the definition used by the US Department of Defense (DoD), which in 2012 outlined how "there exist no fully autonomous systems, just as there are no fully autonomous soldiers, sailors, airmen or Marines" (23). In this context the DoD implies autonomy in a sense of complete individual freedom of decision making. Of particular significance here is the use of the word *fully* in its conditional sense, leaving a distinct grey area of indeterminate responsibility when it comes to autonomy. While Corn says soldiers are autonomous, and the DoD says they aren't, both sides are effectively

arguing the same thing: that individual judgement is located within a framework of both formalized or "codified" structures (e.g. training and military law) and non-formalized, non-codified discursive fields.

The problem then, arises when soldiers are required to make decisions in combat—especially when faced with the complexity of battle and the infinity of singular cases against which they must apply a particular generalized rule. In this case, autonomous judgement does not just mean adhering to a set of codes or programs as laid down by the rule of law (or command), but also then inferring, or "self-programming" codes at short notice based on what they might expect their command to be. This then leads to the further problem of individual judgement and the logical impossibility of inference and making snap value-judgements based on situations which may not have yet been accounted for in law. This makes the case of retrospective action with the use of body cameras and other tracking technologies even more chilling given that soldiers are expected to know what the law might be before an action is taken, even if the law is unclear. Without complete telepathic understanding, or indeed a *robotic* fighting force, human "error" (if it can even be called that) will always find its way into the heat of battle. Certainly, this recalls something of German Field Marshall Helmuth von Moltke's assertion that no plan can survive contact with the enemy (45–47).

Le Guin explores this problem in *The Word for World is Forest* in which it is suggested that the Colonial Code may have changed without the colonists' knowledge, as messages from Earth take many years to arrive on Athshe (58). There is then some debate between Lyubov and Gosse over whether the problems on Athshe have been caused by poor instructions drawn up on Earth, or by the colonists themselves failing to adhere to their directions in a scrupulous manner (59). While the two characters disagree on the root cause of the issue, the debate highlights the problem of *interpretation* when it comes to any given set

of rules. Either the colonists did not interpret their instructions correctly, or they were not given proper instructions to start with. The answer is not as clear-cut as it first seems.

Further paradoxes then emerge in terms of actions which may or may not be against the law (or the assumed law) at the time. What may initially be a legitimate action may be rendered illegitimate, or even a war crime given a different context. While on the one hand military superpowers are faced with the ever-present drive to "robotize" armed forces—to make soldiers behave more like robots in order to make them more efficient at killing, and increase legal compliance—there is also then an assumed element of human application that paradoxically renders these "robot killers" open to responsibility, even in light of what might have been an accepted behavior at the time.

A good example is the case of the US forces fire-bombing Japan during the Second World War. In an interview with film director Errol Morris, former US Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara admits that he and General Curtis Le May would have been declared war criminals for their strategic bombing campaigns in the Pacific had the allies lost the Second World War. This claim then begs the question of whether the pilots themselves would have been held similarly responsible for war crimes, for the assumption here (based on the Nuremburg trials) is that they *should* have refused the order to firebomb Japan. But to refuse an order in a military context is to risk court-martial and even execution. So, either soldiers (and here, pilots) are robots that are required to follow a programmatic "code," or they are individuals free to act with complete individual autonomy and agency at all times. At which point the grey zone recedes and we are left with a single crystallized choice between innocence and guilt; even though this legal crystallization is but an illusion framed by the relative position of the judge.

While Michel Foucault has famously inverted Clausewitz and claimed that politics is a continuation of war by other means (15), it therefore also follows that *law* is the

continuation of *war* by other means, as legal guilt is assigned as much by military might and battlefield outcomes as it is by any non-military process. A good example is the use of drone strikes by the US and its allies to kill terrorist suspects in the likes of Syria and Afghanistan. This has led to widespread debate within the international community with the US, UK, and Australia all claiming the "unwilling or unable" doctrine in order to justify the use of lethal force in states that are unwilling or unable to bring the accused to justice (Egan; Wright; Brandis). This would seem to be yet another example of "might equals right," in which actors exercise their military powers to set a precedent in international law. Thus, the law itself becomes a weapon of sorts for use on the international battleground, put to use by those with the legal, political and military might to exercise such powers in the first place.

In light of this discussion, is it significant that Captain Davidson in *The Word for World is Forest* is accused of "*irresponsible* autonomy" (57; my emphasis). This phrase suggests that he should have acted differently; and yet without codified rules to address *each specific situation* he finds himself in, and without sufficient surveillance and monitoring from above, he is able to interpret his orders as he sees fit. This implies that either he is deficient as an individual, or he was not adequately trained or indoctrinated in the first place—whether by the army, or the wider sovereign state. The problem here lies in fact he is required to *infer* a specific rule that does not exist, and without any previous example to work with, should not in theory be held to account for his actions, especially given his commander's failure to pass judgement and to effectively monitor and discipline his subordinates.

It is useful at this stage to read the concept of responsibility alongside another equally loaded term: duty. According to Derrida:

> Absolute duty demands that one behave in an irresponsible manner (by means of treachery or betrayal), while still recognizing, confirming, and reaffirming the very thing one sacrifices, namely, the order of human ethics and responsibility. In a word,

> ethics must be sacrificed in the name of duty. It is a duty not to respect, out of duty, ethical duty. (66–67)

Here, duty trumps ethics, but survival also trumps ethics. Although we might find his attitude repugnant, Davidson perceives his duty as being firstly to himself, and then to whichever fellow soldiers help him meet this duty. In an alien world with strange creatures that look more alien than human, Davidson's "duty"—however distorted or perverted it may be—will always surpass his sense of ethics. Even the Athshean sympathizer Lyubov is unable to reconcile this conflict, for his duty to his fellow colonists must always surpass his ethical views on the Athshean people, something he openly acknowledges when he considers himself a traitor (87).

Clearly, both "duty" and "ethics" in *The Word for World is Forest* are transient, amorphous concepts. Duty is tied up irrevocably in the community (in this case the colonist army) and as a concept it can alter as the situation and prevailing sense of opinion changes. Ethics is easy when there are no demands made on an individual's sense of duty; however, in a foreign land a soldier's duty will nearly always be to his or her comrades and nation first, before any other concerns take place. It is only Lyubov (an army advisor who only holds a nominal rank) who tries to act ethically, but in so doing is generally ostracized for his outsider status.[3]

The problem of duty and ethics is compounded by the nature of the human bureaucracy on Athshe, and the segmentary power structures that make the system susceptible to transgression by those who are not subject to normal checks and balances. Davidson himself is an excellent example of an individual operating beyond what most would consider the bounds of reasonable behavior, and yet his rank for the most part protects him from recrimination. This factor, together with his working knowledge of the army bureaucracy, allows him to exploit the system to his own ends. In one respect, he plays the

game and accepts that he has to be disciplined for the sake of appearances: “All right, rules of the game” (62). Yet he also uses that same game for his own personal gain. Major Muhamed, for example, has everything “done by the book” (67), and Davidson describes him as the “self-righteous type: knew he was right. That was his big fault” (67). However, Davidson is able to manipulate this situation to his advantage because “his [Muhamed’s] running N.J. camp on such rigid lines was an advantage. A tight organization, used to obeying orders, was easier to take over than a loose one full of independent characters” (68).

In this example, the rules work against themselves, and Davidson exploits them for his own ends. This manipulation has echoes of what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have called “bureaucratic perversion”—that being the strange perversity built into the bureaucratic system (250). In Deleuze and Guattari’s reading, perversity arises from the application of power on a granular level. While power centres provide a general sense of direction and govern assemblages within the system, the actual application of mass and flow to the “segments of the rigid line,” by its nature, necessitates adaptation, as the general universal rule must come into inevitable conflict with an infinite number of singular cases (Deleuze and Guattari 264). This function of power therefore requires adaptations in order for the law to continue to function and to be recognized as workable.

In this respect, transgressions—or what I shall call “micro-transgressions”—are a fundamental part of the working of any general rule. Not only do they serve to create the rule in the first place (a law does not exist until it is broken), but they also provide a semblance of freedom to the individual who may take comfort in the superficial freedoms that micro-transgressions produce. This may be what Deleuze and Guattari mean when they say “perversion,” for in believing they are able to “break” the system, so the individual is in the same movement rendered further entrenched within the system that they seek to undermine.

Thus, to return to the case of Don Davidson in *The Word for World is Forest*, following the letter of the law in robotic fashion can actually run *counter* to the spirit of the rule. Again, this shows how language (and the law) is only ever an *approximation* and can never account for the infinity of singular cases. This is particularly relevant in a modern-day context in which politicians, military leaders and legal experts are forced to confront the question of autonomy in autonomous weapons systems (AWS) such as drones and guided missiles. According to drone theorist Grégoire Chamayou, it is a matter of making a "*decision about the decision*—the choice of a single value that fixes the parameters of all future automatic decisions in a particular sequence" (216). Whereas previously a soldier might have been expected to make a decision based on a combination of individual "programming" (training) and personal decision-making, with a robot, the decision about who lives and who dies is made right at the very start, by a programmer or military strategist. This then leads to the disturbing scenario that Chamayou recounts in which "contrary to what is suggested by science-fiction scenarios, the danger is not that robots begin to disobey. Quite the reverse: it is that they never disobey" (216-217). This is, according to Chamayou, "the equivalent of signing a single but infinitely repeatable death sentence"—one in which responsibility rests not with the robot, but with the controller, the pseudo-sovereign overseer who makes the decision of when and where to apply lethal force (216).

A Question of Accountability

Clearly, *The Word for World is Forest* poses many questions that are still relevant to this day. While on one level the novel passes scathing comment on US conduct in Vietnam, a deeper reading reveals a much more nuanced, much more incisive piece that interrogates power relationships within a military setting. Though we are naturally compelled to reject Davidson and his actions as out-of-hand, we can at least understand something of how he came to behave in such a way. When a military (and *social*) framework casts the human as superior to

the non-human, and the "friend" as superior to the foe, it is no wonder that Davidson finds himself caught in grey zone of ethical indeterminacy, where he is forced to rely on his core "programming" in the absence of rules and with no precedent to work from. It is only when the ansible is left on Athshe and the colonists are reconnected to the rulers back on Earth that Davidson's activities start to be held in check, though by this point it is already too late.

The question of Davidson's role and responsibilities within the military framework reflects something of the same ethical conundrum facing us today with the modern-day soldier and the military drone. With the advent of kill-cams, and an ever-increasing level of soldierly surveillance, there is a clear line of travel towards a fully "robotized" fighting force, in which soldiers are no longer "human" as such, but mere biological robots following a pre-programmed code. But if soldiers are to be transformed into battlefield robots, why bother sending humans at all?

Just as Le Guin herself has suggested, there is no easy answer to this question, and it is one that we continue to grapple with.[4] On the one hand, the soldier is an extension of the state's will; and yet if the soldier is a prosthesis of the state, then they are not responsible, and should not be held accountable for their actions. Their equipment, training, and indoctrination are all provided by the state, and therefore any misdemeanor or action that falls outside of the bounds of normal law is the responsibility of the state and not the individual. Yet, on the other hand, there remains the issue that the "state" as such can never be held to account; it is an amorphous, shifting entity that can never be located to a single point. As such, there remains a constant need to create sacrificial victims on behalf of the state such that it is absolved of guilt in the public imaginary. This then would seem to be the role of Davidson, Lt. Calley, and many others like them: they are made and shaped to follow orders and serve as human sacrifices and human alibis for the *inhuman* actions of the sovereign state machine.

Endnotes

1. The June 1968 edition of *Galaxy* magazine featured two adverts side by side, paid for by science fiction authors, editors and producers on either side of the Vietnam War debate. The adverts appeared as two lists of signatories, the left-hand advert featuring those for the war, and the right-hand side featuring those against ("We the undersigned"; "We oppose").

2. Deleuze and Guattari make this case with the example of the compartmentalized office (250).

3. It is useful to consider James Cameron's *Avatar* (2010)—a faux-Vietnam film in which the protagonist Jake Sully "goes native" when he discovers that his superiors are planning to destroy the Na'vi tribe indigenous to Pandora. While it might be expected that Jake Sully show deference to his own people, he is not in a "normal" situation, for he takes a step away from humanity through his symbiosis with the Na'vi body—the "Avatar"—which the colonizers from Earth fail to control. In this example, Sully quite literally "goes native," integrating fully with the Na'vi by the end of the film when he undergoes a ritual to completely transfer himself into his Avatar body and so give up his weak human flesh.

Following the release of *Avatar*, Le Guin commented on the many similarities between her book and the high-budget film. In a new Introduction (2017) to a re-release of her Hainish Cycle novels, she says of *Avatar*: "Since the film completely reverses the book's moral premise, presenting the central and unsolved problem of the book, mass violence, as a solution, I'm glad I had nothing at all to do with it."

4. In the essay "Escape Routes" (1974–1975), Le Guin expressed her concern about stories that suggest there is a simple answer to the many Problems (with a capital P) addressed in American science fiction (207).

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