CONSCRIPTS FROM BIRTH: WAR AND SOLDIERY IN THE GRIM DARKNESS OF THE FAR FUTURE

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"In the grim darkness of the far future, there is only war" (*Warhammer 40,000* 152).

Games Workshop's Warhammer 40,000 universe (hereafter referred to as 40k) is one of the biggest and most well-established Science Fiction universes in circulation today. While it has been critically underrepresented to date, this article seeks to assert the relevance and value of 40k for analysis within Science Fiction studies and Speculative Fiction studies more broadly.[1] From classical themes of treachery and betrayal, to modern-day questions around military ethics and the conduct of war, 40k is a deep and rich universe that engages with many complex issues around the relative 'value' of human life, and how it is used as a means of discursive control.

Indeed, the 40k universe is particularly interesting in the way it engages with issues of sovereignty and the law, with the byzantine statecraft and martial ethics of the Imperium serving as a fictionalised 'black mirror' to the "permanent state of emergency" that philosopher Giorgio Agamben claims, in *State of Exception* (2005), to be the essential practice of the modern-day state (2). In this way, the speculative nature of 40k can be used to interrogate and explore broader cultural practices concerning real-life militarised behaviour. It is not enough that 40k asks us 'what if?', but rather that it extrapolates upon existing real-world concepts – such as the super-soldier, the outcast, and the unending war – and takes them to their logical (and sometimes illogical) conclusion.

In the case of 40k, the galaxy-spanning Imperium is beset on all sides by ravenous alien foes including the insect-like Tyranids and the war-mongering Orks. It is also beset by the corrupting power of Chaos that threatens to destroy the Imperium from within. To counter these threats, Imperial armies are supported by genetically enhanced super-soldiers known as Space Marines, who stand as the last bastion of defence against the alien, the demon, and the heretic. While these Space Marines recall something of Robert A. Heinlein's *Starship Troopers* (1959), they are very much a contradiction in terms, as humanity's greatest warriors are so far removed from humanity they can barely be called human at all.

This juxtaposition makes Space Marines a fascinating area for further study. On the one hand, they stand at the pinnacle of human endeavour and are equipped with the best technology known to humankind. And yet, they are also steeped in dogma and live out a monk-like existence where they exist only to kill the enemies of the Imperium and defend humanity while never knowing

a 'normal' human life. While present-day soldiers have the possibility of returning home once the war is done, for the Space Marines there can be no respite, for as the 40k strapline reminds us: "In the grim darkness of the far future, there is only war" (*Warhammer 40,000* 152).

In this way, Space Marines stand as a paradigm for the sovereign exception. They are quite literally conscripts from birth, with their bodies altered, their memories scrubbed, and no possibility of returning to their former lives. Indeed, they are not so much an exception, but rather exception-as-the-new-norm, and as such cut to the heart of debates around sovereignty, exception, and the suspension of law. As I will argue, Space Marines are not so much a repetition of well-worn Science Fiction tropes, but rather stand as significant markers in our relationship with the modern-day biopolitical state. Not only do they expose the power structures at work in the heart of our society, but they also implicitly critique the politicisation of life itself – that which Agamben describes in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998) as "the decisive event of modernity" (4).

Background

Founded in 1975, Games Workshop manufactures and sells model miniatures for its tabletop wargames Warhammer: Age of Sigmar and Warhammer 40,000. While the quality of its products has helped establish Games Workshop as "the largest and most successful" tabletop games company in the world (*Games Workshop* 2019), its ongoing success rests on its rich evocative worlds that have evolved over several decades, with hundreds of books, novellas, and audio-dramas sitting alongside magazines, anthologies, codices, and video games, such as *Warhammer: Vermintide* (2015), *Space Marine* (2011), and the *Dawn of War* trilogy (2004-2017).[2]

Of the two core game systems, the futuristic Warhammer 40,000 is by far the most popular universe and is Games Workshop's best-selling product range.[3] With its 'grimdark' aesthetic and war-torn setting, the game provides an impressive backdrop for gamers and has proven fertile ground for the literary endeavours of numerous *New York Times*-bestselling authors, including Dan Abnett, Aaron Dembski-Bowden, and Graham McNeil.[4]

The influences of the universe are many and varied. In an interview originally conducted with *The Black Library* in 2009, Art Director John Blanche described the art style of 40k as "Games Workshop Gothic," drawing heavily on Northern European culture to develop a certain dark and grimy sensibility inspired by various gothic traditions, including the likes of Rembrandt, Durer, and Bosch (n.p.). Blanche, who was instrumental in establishing both the Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000 universes, describes them as being "much darker than American High Fantasy, certainly more violent, and more oppressive," filled with evocative, flawed characters inspired by historical figures and drawn very much in the Dickensian mould ("Interview" n.p.).

Another key feature of the Games Workshop style is the extent to which both universes are willing to engage with existing works of Science Fiction and Fantasy canon. In the case of 40k, this includes a direct engagement with militaristic works such as Heinlein's *Starship Troopers* and Joe

Haldeman's *The Forever War* (1974), stories of bodily transformation such as Frederik Pohl's *Man Plus* (1976), and the child-soldiers of Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game* (1984). The universe is also scattered with allusions to classical works and mythological tales, with the very betrayal that rests at the heart of the universe reminiscent of the fall of Satan from John Milton's epic poem, *Paradise Lost* (1667).

War in the Far Future

As its name suggests, Warhammer 40,000 is set in the 41st millennium, where humankind has spread across the stars, only to be beset on all sides by an array of deadly alien foe. From the enigmatic Aeldari to the barbaric Orks and soulless Necrons, the life of the Imperial citizen is one of hardship and toil in the daily struggle for survival. And yet, of all the many dangers posed to human life, the single greatest threat comes from within – the insidious lure of Chaos that sets the context for the never-ending war among the stars. The origins of the war with Chaos go back ten thousand years before the 'present day' of the 40k setting, to a time known as the Horus Heresy. During this time, the Emperor of humankind led a Great Crusade to reunite the fragmented human race and reconquer the stars. To do this, he created the Space Marine legions – vast armies of genetically enhanced super-soldiers, each led by a charismatic Primarch. As the Crusade neared its end, the Emperor returned to Terra (Earth), leaving his armies under the command of the Primarch Horus, whom the Emperor named Warmaster. However, bitterness and jealousy soon took hold of Horus and he fell to Chaos, taking many of his brother-Primarchs with him. This led to a galaxy-wide civil war between those loyal to the Emperor and those loyal to Horus. The war culminated in the Siege of Terra, and a single combat between the two god-like figures. At the end of the battle, Horus was slain, while the Emperor was left mortally wounded. On finding his body, the Emperor's loyal servants interred him within the Golden Throne, an ancient artefact that would preserve his body in exchange for the daily sacrifice of human blood.

Ten thousand years later and we come to the 'present day' of the 40k universe, where the Emperor remains cold and unmoving atop the Golden Throne, doing battle with Chaos in the psychic realm. Meanwhile, the human race stands on the brink of extinction at the hands of numerous deadly foes. It is only through the faith and fury of the Emperor's armies, and the Emperor's loyal Space Marines, that the Imperium is able to maintain its slender foothold in the galaxy, and humankind can live to fight another day.

Forging a Space Marine

Of all the many armies in the Imperium, the Space Marines stand at the pinnacle of human endeavour. They are the ultimate warriors: genetically enhanced super-humans who are bigger, stronger, and faster than normal human soldiers, and equipped with the best weapons and armour with which to wage war against the Emperor's foes.

While each chapter has its own recruitment strategy, typically, aspirants are selected at an early age from the chapter's homeworld, or a local region of space. These worlds are often ideologically aligned with the philosophy of the particular chapter and its approach to citizenship and war. This close relationship between homeworld, society, and the people it produces echoes many ideological societies depicted in Science Fiction, including Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974). In the novel, Le Guin describes two opposed worlds of Urras and Anarres – one a capitalist patriarchy, and the other a so-called anarchic 'utopia' of sorts that turns out to be anything but. While Le Guin uses her novel to interrogate the links between society and the individual (as well as the problematic concept of 'utopia'), the Space Marine homeworlds are used in a similar way to explore the way in which certain legions and their Primarchs develop traits in response to the conditions of their existence. While some Primarchs, such as Corax of the Ravenguard, are able to overcome the difficulties of their early years, others, such as Angron of the World Eaters and Konrad Curze of the Night Lords, are unable to defeat their personal demons, and become prime targets for the lure of Chaos. This opens up the possibility that even superhuman Space Marines may be inherently flawed – as flawed as 'normal' human beings – or perhaps even more so, as their superhuman powers makes their flaws even more pronounced. While they may be created as the pinnacle of human endeavour, they are no more perfect than the flawed utopias Le Guin interrogates in *The Dispossessed*.

It is interesting then that no matter what world the Space Marines recruit from, they all operate in a similar way: scouring the land for individuals who have proven themselves in battle or fought against tremendous odds. These young warriors are then ushered aboard landing craft where they are taken away and submitted to intensive trials. Indeed, it is not unusual for many aspirants to die or suffer life-changing injuries long before they even start to undergo the transformation into a genetically enhanced super-human, a ritualistic process that echoes Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), and which is described in great detail in William King's novel, *Space Wolf* (1999). Both novels radically confront the moral foundation of posthuman embodiment and the relationship between body and mind. Though written many years apart, they both hark back to the question of what makes the human: is it who we *were*, who we *are*, or what we become?

This question is one that underpins much of the narrative surrounding Space Marines and how they are made. For those 'lucky' few who pass the tests and survive the torturous surgery, the next stage is training and indoctrination. During this stage, the new Marines must endure many long weeks of hypnosis and neuro-conditioning to educate them in the Imperial Creed and the rites of war. This leads to a complete psychological transformation in the new Space Marines, who by this point, will have mostly forgotten about their former lives completely. It is not enough that they give over their bodies to the Imperium, but that every waking moment be dedicated to the Emperor's cause – that they become perfect weapons both physically and mentally, ready to battle the Emperor's foes.

This slow erosion of the Space Marines' humanity is similar to the process described in Pohl's *Man Plus*, where the protagonist Roger Torraway undergoes surgery to become the 'man plus' of the novel's title. Though symbolically stripped of all aspects of outward human appearance,

Torraway is at once both the most human and the least human being alive. This is because his sacrifice is itself an incredibly 'human' act – he literally gives up everything in order to benefit the human race, much like the Space Marines in 40k. In one particularly pertinent moment, Torraway wakes from an operation to find that the surgeons have removed his penis without his consent. In this wholly symbolic act, not only does Torraway lose the "diagnostic signs of manhood," but with it, the final connection to his 'human' life (94). As the narrator reflects: "The tiny little operation was over, and what was left was nothing at all" – as if his penis is the final marker of his very humanity and the cultural power that comes with being a man (94).

Orders and Obedience

One of the most interesting and applicable elements of the 40k universe is the way it engages with questions around the role of orders and obedience in a military setting. During the Horus Heresy, half of the Space Marine legions 'fell' to Chaos and betrayed the Emperor in a quest for power. However, at the precise moment of treachery, it is unclear how many of the Space Marines were actually traitors, or just individuals caught up in events. When custom and convention require, they show unswerving loyalty to their Primarch, their Captains, and their fellow battle-brothers, making it a logical paradox to hold Space Marines to account for doing what they are trained to do.

This is an issue that comes up time and time again throughout the *Horus Heresy* series and is one that many authors engage with on a philosophical level. In Dembski-Bowden's *Betrayer* (2013), traitor Space Marine Argel Tal of the Word Bearers reflects on the weakness of the excuse "I was just following orders" (196). In doing so, he makes a clear reference to the work of philosopher Hannah Arendt, as well as Heinlein's *Starship Troopers* and Haldeman's *The Forever War*. Argel Tal argues that it is a weak excuse to claim one is just following orders – and that he himself is "weak" for using it (196). This leads him to conclude that "I know that when I die, I'll have lived my whole life shrouded by that same excuse" – to which Khârn of the World Eaters replies: "So will any Space Marine" (196).

The question of weakness is an interesting one, as much of the lore in 40k emphasises the fact that Space Marines are 'made,' much like the futuristic soldiers of Heinlein, Haldeman, and Pohl. And yet, while Argel Tal believes that he should still be held accountable for allowing himself to follow the orders that brought him to Chaos, there is never any single clear decisive moment at which Argel Tal was offered a decisive 'yes/no' decision. Rather, it is more the case that a long series of orders over time create a gradual culture in which he and his fellow Space Marines have been shaped and moulded to behave in a certain way. This includes the strong but subtle influence of peer pressure exercised through comradeship and loyalty to his fellow battle-brothers that would have made the shift to Chaos seem perfectly normal and 'natural' over time.

This observation makes the question of loyalty and orders far from clear-cut, as there is no single moment at which Argel Tal can be said to definitively choose his fate. Rather, he is caught up in a series of complex interactions and power structures that make it almost impossible to distinguish

a single origin or point of departure from the rule of Imperial law. This issue of power structures is examined by philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987), in their discussion around bureaucracy. According to the philosophers:

It is not sufficient to define bureaucracy by a rigid segmentarity with compartmentalization of contiguous offices, an officer manager in each segment, and the corresponding centralization at the end of the hall or on top of the tower. For at the same time there is a whole bureaucratic segmentation, a suppleness of and communication between offices, a bureaucratic perversion, a permanent inventiveness or creativity practiced even against administrative regulations. (250)

In this case, the very system within which Argel Tal operates is designed such that any decision is bound up in a complex assemblage that makes it deliberately difficult to distinguish responsibility for any given act. Things then become even more complex when we consider the power flows between individuals, and the impact of macrofascistic power structures that shape desire and compel individuals to behave in a certain way (Deleuze and Guattari 251).

This points to another paradox in real-world military ethics and the way we hold individual soldiers to account for crimes they may have had little say in committing. A good example would be the infamous My Lai massacre (1968) of the Vietnam War. The massacre was major news at the time, however, only one soldier, Lt. Calley, was ever tried for the crime. What is particularly interesting about this case is that, as John Pimlott notes in *Vietnam: The Decisive Battles* (1990), both the My Lai and Binh Tay massacres were officially covered up until news of the atrocities was leaked, and the Army was forced to order an investigation (137). There is a sense then that Lt. Calley stood trial not as an individual, but rather on behalf of *all* of the military personnel who took part in the engagement, and who were all following orders, or at the very least, the *spirit* of the orders laid down by US officials "who were stressing the need for aggression and a large body count" (Pimlott 137). In this way, he stands as a form in 'inclusive exclusion,' in that his exclusion from the bounds of normal behaviour, also roots him back in the military machine through which he was able to behave in the way that he did. While he and his fellow soldiers may have pulled the trigger on the helpless civilians at My Lai, Lt. Calley and his colleagues were also part of a much wider scale systematic failing on the part of the US war machine.

The ethical conundrums exposed by My Lai are also explored in the fictional massacres depicted in the *Horus Heresy* book series, in which Space Marines are expected to follow orders without question, and may even be executed for failing to do so. And yet, of course, they may also suffer similar consequences if they do follow orders and those orders are later deemed to be unlawful. This has consequences for biopolitical thinking as it exposes the tension between national and international law, and the ethical dilemma surrounding soldierly loyalty. Former US Secretary of Defense, Robert S. McNamara, makes this point in the documentary film *Fog of War* (2004). During the Second World War, McNamara worked in the Office of Statistical Control, where his job was to calculate ways to improve the efficiency of US bombing raids in East Asia. Ultimately, his work led to the fire-bombing of Tokyo and the murder of hundreds of thousands of Japanese civilians. As

McNamara points out, he and Curtis LeMay would have been declared war criminals had the Allies lost the war.[5] Indeed, had the Allies lost, then the bomber pilots would likely have been tried in much the same way as the Nazis were at Nuremberg.

This exposes a fundamental paradox in the relationship between the citizen, the state, and the wider international community. While citizens are expected to follow orders laid down by the state (especially in a military context), they are also subject to international law, should the orders of the state be deemed unlawful. Following the logic of the Nuremberg trials, the Allied pilots *should* have refused the mission to fire-bomb Tokyo, even though the mission itself arguably contributed to the Allied victory.[6] The problem here is that, with complex value judgements, the outcome is often not known before the decision is made. Had the Allies lost the war, then the belligerent act of burning Tokyo to the ground would have been deemed excessive (as would the use of nuclear bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki); however, as the Allies won, the actions are arguably justified. A similar case could equally be made about the treachery of the Horus Heresy: had Horus won, then the Emperor and his forces would have been the ones acting out of line, and Horus's actions would have been deemed legitimate.

Devotion and Service

This question of loyalty is an important one in 40k, and none more so than for the Emperor's Space Marines. Given the context of the Horus Heresy and the great betrayal that threatened to destroy the human race, the Space Marines of the 41st millennium are particularly vigilant about all aspects of their lives that may be perceived as being in any way lax in terms of loyalty and devotion to the Imperial creed. This leads them to adopt a wholly monastic lifestyle dedicated to perfecting the art of killing, while warding off the dangers of corruption.

The Space Marines' approach to duty and warfare raises several important questions about how modern-day soldiers think and behave on the field of battle. On the one hand, soldiers are educated, trained, and indoctrinated by the nation state of which they are a part, and sent into battle to fight wars under the orders of their superior officers. And yet, as mentioned, the state itself is also subject to international law (or the Imperial law in the case of 40k). This raises the question: to whom, or what, do individual soldiers owe their loyalty, and to what extent can they, or *should* they, be expected to think for themselves? If military training compels soldiers to fight in a standardised, robotic fashion, then how can they think for themselves when their training compels them not to? While the 40k universe as a whole does not take a direct political stance on either of these questions, what it does do is present a series of test cases, with each of the Space Marine legions and their Primarchs used to explore the extent of loyalty between battle-brothers, and to a wider ideological cause.

These 'test cases' engage with many of the same issues that military theorists and Science Fiction writers have been grappling with for many years. In Heinlein's classic work of military Science Fiction, *Starship Troopers*, protagonist Johnny Rico decides to sign up to join the Mobile Infantry.

However, despite his apparent 'choice' in the matter, there is an underlying sense that he is a character without agency, who is swept along by events around him. Indeed, when he comes to enlist, he is prompted to sign-up when he learns that his classmate Carmen Ibañez also intends to enlist. As he goes on to note: "No, I hadn't made any decision; my mouth was leading its own life" (28). These ethical dilemmas then become even more pronounced when he goes through training and encounters the inimitable Instructor Sergeant Zim. Zim tells the recruits, "*We* supply the violence; other people... supply the control" – as if the role of the trooper is to follow orders to the letter and obey without question (56, original emphasis).

Meanwhile, in Haldeman's *The Forever War*, protagonist William Mandella is faced with a similar ethical conundrum when he realises:

> Back in the twentieth century, they had established to everybody's satisfaction that "I was just following orders" was an inadequate excuse for inhuman conduct... but what can you do when the orders come from deep down in that puppet master of the unconscious? (73).

This problem becomes even more pronounced later in the novel when the medic Estelle notes that "If they could condition us to kill on cue, they can condition us to do almost anything. Re-enlist" (103). In this way, Mandella and his companions discover that they never really leave the Force, as even when they think they have left, they are only ever on "inactive status," suggesting that their role as soldiers is not just a formal marker, but a psychological state of mind (150). Once they are turned into super-soldiers clad in advanced fighting suits, there can be no going back.

This tension between what-was, what-is, and what-may-be, is absolutely critical in the 40k setting, where the context for the never-ending war is based upon an ancient treachery where many Primarchs turned to Chaos and took their *loyal* soldiers with them.[7] In this case, the Space Marines of the traitor legions were faced with an almost impossible choice. On the one hand, each Marine is supposed to owe his primary allegiance to the Emperor of humankind. However, the Space Marines are also required to show loyalty to their Primarch – the charismatic figure *created by the Emperor* to lead the Space Marines into battle. This tension is made even more problematic given that the Space Marines are not encouraged to think for themselves and are often treated as weapons or tools of the Imperium, rather than free-thinking individuals.

This issue is exposed throughout many of the novels in the *Horus Heresy* series. In James Swallow's *Fear to Tread* (2012), the Space Marine warrior Kano debates with brother Annellus over just how much about a mission he should be allowed to know. Kano argues that as Space Marines they are not "automata" and that any warrior going to war should be told the reason why (135). To this argument, Annellus responds that "You are weapons [...] We all are. Blades in the hand of the Angel, sworn to his commands" (135). If they are merely weapons (as Annellus argues), then the Space Marines do not need to know anything about their missions, or the causes for which they are

fighting. This suggests that they should not be held culpable for the actions of their commanders as they are not given enough information to make a reasoned rational choice.

This same logic is interrogated in the audio drama "Raven's Flight" (2010) by Gav Thorpe, in which the loyalist human Commander Valerius wishes to break his standing orders in order to support allies who may be in trouble. This leads to a confrontation with Space Marine Commander Branne who threatens to shoot down Valerius' spaceships should he break orders. On the one hand, Branne is only following his own orders, and yet Valerius argues that it would be unfair for Branne to condemn so many innocent lives to death based on the decision of their Commander. As Valerius argues: "They're just following *my* orders [...] To do otherwise would be mutinous" (260, original emphasis). To which Branne replies: "Yet you choose to commit that crime on their behalf. I say it again – this is your doing, not mine" (260).

Both of these examples demonstrate the tension at the heart of military power structures that create an arbitrary division between commanders and soldiers in order for the war machine to function as an efficient fighting unit. After all, if each soldier were given access to the totality of all information and expected to act independently, then it would be very hard to fight a coherent battle. And yet clearly there is a paradox here in the way that soldiers are expected to obey orders without question (often through fear of execution), while at the same time being expected to *disobey* orders should those orders be perceived to go beyond the bounds of international law. To overcome this tension, the military war machine seeks to control through means of training and indoctrination, and by limiting the amount of information that any individual soldier may be exposed to at a given time.

This is the same point Mandella makes in *The Forever War*, and one that suggests that many traitor Marines had very little choice in their fall to Chaos. With the Emperor such a distant, almost unknowable entity, the battle-brothers of the Space Marine legions have no clear point of reference to which they can compare the behaviour of those around them. This leads to a sort of 'group think' taking over where the Marines' trust in the bureaucracy of war overtakes their own individual sense of right and wrong. This is akin to what Arendt notes in the case of Nazi bureaucrat Adolf Eichmann, who was tried for war crimes in the 1960s. In her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), Arendt argues that Eichmann was not so much motivated by fanaticism or sociopathic tendencies, but that his actions were "connected with an inability to *think*, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else" (49, original emphasis). And yet while Eichmann's guilt is beyond doubt, the trial does raise some disturbing questions about whether any single soldier on the ground can ever be truly *responsible* in light of orders from higher up the chain of command.[8] Certainly, in the case of the Space Marine legions, no single Space Marine would have had sufficient information to make an informed choice, even if they did have the freedom to think for themselves.

Further Implications

As fictional depictions of futuristic 'super-soldiers,' Space Marines both expose and interrogate a key tension in the relationship between the citizen, the soldier, and the state – in particular, the way

in which they operate outside the normal rules of war, and can at times even create spaces that Agamben describes as states of exception.[9] While some scholars, such as Derek Gregory in "Spaces of exception and enemies" (2016), make the mistake of assuming that war itself is an exceptional space, the exception is rather to be found in the particular suspensions of law that Space Marines have the power to impose upon the conduct of war on account of their 'special' outsider status within the military hierarchy. When Space Marines join an engagement, other commanders will defer to the Space Marine plan of action, even if the plan goes against assumed norms of behaviour. In this case, the mere physical presence of super-human soldiers forces ordinary human officers to bow to their demands, and in the higher echelons of military commands, all normal operations often grind to a halt when the Space Marines make their presence known.

Beyond the Space Marines, only Inquisitors have similar powers to create exceptional spaces, wherein they can take command of any forces they see fit and put them to use. They even have the power to declare *exterminatus* and destroy an entire planet and its people should the threat be deemed too great. Though the normal rule of law might suggest aerial bombardment and military intervention, if the Inquisitors deem a planet beyond saving, all normal protocols are suspended, and a planet can be virus bombed to destruction, despite the countless lives that will be lost as a result.

Given the consequences of *exterminatus* and other similar atrocities carried out in the name of the 'greater good,' it is significant then that these interventions are often posed as difficult decisions, or at least, decisions that are being made in exceptional times. However, they also reflect a sense in which the exception can become the new normal. This ethical dilemma is played out time and time again in the 40k universe and is exemplified in the argument between commanders in "Raven's Flight" (described previously). When faced with standing orders to destroy any ships that leave the system, the Space Marine Commander Branne is accused of being inhuman, as he is willing to kill innocent passengers despite the fact they have no say on their ship's course. In response to this argument, Branne simply replies: "These are inhuman times" (260).

It is quite pertinent then that this is the exact argument used by the United States to justify the War on Terror, and the operation of Guantanamo Bay, where the normal rule of law is suspended and prisoners are interred without trial and submitted to torture. Guantanamo Bay is perhaps the example *par excellence* of the state of exception to which Agamben refers. However, his theory can also be applied more widely to cases where necessity and the 'state of emergency' are used to justify non-lawful actions. In a more recent example, the US and its allies have drawn upon the "unwilling or unable" doctrine to justify drone strikes in countries deemed "unwilling or unable" to deal with terror suspects in their own lands (Egan 2016, Wright 2017). While the US and its allies argue that they are acting lawfully, within the bounds of international legal precedent, they are arguably acting in a non-legal manner, suspending the normal rule of law (where suspects would receive a trial), by transforming legal *criminals* into military *enemies*, and thus changing the whole debate, applying the logic of war to what would ordinarily be a matter for the courts.

To justify these actions, the US and its allies argue that their actions are *necessary* in order to avoid potential catastrophe and even greater loss of life. However, this claim in itself creates a distinction between different categories of life, in which Western lives are seen as being of greater value than those of outsiders operating in distant lands. This power to suspend law out of 'necessity' is akin to the power wielded by the Space Marines and Inquisitors in 40k, who enact the "permanent state of emergency" (that Agamben describes) in order to suspend the normal operation of law and kill 'heretics' without censure, all in the name of protecting society at large.[10]

Clearly, there are many parallels between 40k's 'heretics' and our present-day 'terrorists,' whom the US has argued it can kill without recourse should they present an imminent threat (Egan 2016). Of course, the issue here is that, often, each individual 'heretic' does not pose much of a threat on a case-by-case basis, and often will not have committed any crime at all. Rather, the danger of the heretic often lies in the *potential* threat that they may pose at some point in the future. While the concept of 'heretics' in 40k long pre-dates 9/11 and the US government's 'War on Terror,' the parallels between the two settings mean it can be quite difficult to tell the two apart. While one is a grimdark dystopia of perpetual war where heretics are killed for something they might never do, so the US and its allies use drones to execute terror suspects in distant lands without trial, based solely on the possibility that they may one day become a threat.

A Modern-Day Dystopia

As the novels of the Horus Heresy series demonstrate, there are rarely ever any simple choices, and the distinction between good and evil is never clear cut. Without complete oversight and total understanding of every aspect of the situation, it is difficult, if not impossible, to decide whether Horus was right, and if victory for Chaos would indeed have proven a better outcome for the human race.

This central question of species existence and species survival cuts to the very core of biopolitical theory and the concepts raised by Michel Foucault in his lecture series "Society Must be Defended," "Security, Territory Population," and "The Birth of Biopolitics" from the mid to late-1970s. While the very term 'biopolitics' itself is open to contestation, the questions that it raises are most pertinent, and born out in the interplay between humans and super-soldiers in the 40k setting, and its future-present history, the Horus Heresy. Indeed, these works also serve as a critique for the use and abuse of bodies that are fundamentally changed by their experience in war. While the Space Marines may serve as a paradigm for futuristic warfare, they also suggest a dark vision for where the human race might end up. In a world of black ops, drone strikes, and the never-ending 'war on terror,' the 40k universe has never been so relevant. To adjust a well-worn phrase: "In the grim darkness of the *future-present*, there is only war."[11]

NOTES

1. There are currently very few academic works published on Games Workshop and the universes of Warhammer and Warhammer 40k. Typically, most publications explore Games Workshop products as tabletop games – such as Ian Sturrock and James Wallis' "Total Global Domination: Games Workshop and *Warhammer 40,000*" published in *Zones of Control: Perspectives on Wargaming* (2016). Meanwhile, in the world of art and popular culture, there have been a few minor forays into the intellectual worlds of Games Workshop. These include an article on gender norms and 40k fanfiction by J. Walliss in *Popular Culture Review* (2010) and a forthcoming monograph, *Grimdark: A Very British Hell* by Timothy Linward, set for release in 2021.

2. According to the *Financial Times* (9 April 2019), Games Workshop Group PLC is currently valued in excess of £1 billion, and sells its products in over 5,000 stores worldwide. On its Investor Relations website, Games Workshop describes itself as "the largest and the most successful hobby miniatures company in the world."

3. These figures are published in Games Workshop's Annual Report for 2019.

4. The term 'grimdark' has long been synonymous with 40k and comes from the famous tagline, "In the grim darkness of the far future." It refers to a literary or artistic style that is particularly dystopian, disturbing, violent, or bleak. Such has been the impact of 40k on popular culture that the term is now used more broadly to refer to any form of Speculative Fiction that adopts a similar aesthetic. Best-selling Fantasy author Joe Abercrombie even uses the term as part of his Twitter handle: '@ LordGrimdark'.

5. See items 4 and 5 in: *The Fog of War* (Morris 2004). McNamara argues the human race still has not sufficiently addressed the question of what is acceptable in warfare.

6. According to "The Nuremberg Principles" (1946), published in the wake of the war-crimes trials following the Second World War, Principle IV says "The fact that a person acted pursuant to order of his Government or of a superior does not relieve him from responsibility under international law, *provided a moral choice was in fact possible to him*" (107, my emphasis).

7. Not all Space Marines in the traitor legions turned to Chaos. Indeed, some of the most notable loyalists, such as Nathaniel Garro, quit their legion as the Heresy unfolded to become some of the greatest heroes on the Imperial side. Garro's tale is first described in James Swallow's *The Flight of the Eisenstein* (2007), and opens up the possibility that in some cases, one's own moral judgement could (and perhaps should) supersede any other given loyalties. However, as suggested elsewhere in this article, one's own moral judgement is not necessarily free from outside influence and microfascistic desire. Indeed, in the case of Garro it could perhaps be argued that his failure to follow orders is a *flaw* in his training and indoctrination – even if it does lead him to join the forces of 'good.'

8. Arendt alludes to this possibility in her postscript to *Eichmann* where she comments on modern bureaucracy and responsibility (290). Arendt even suggests that "Israeli law [...] like the jurisdiction of other countries cannot but admit that the fact of 'superior orders,' even when their unlawfulness is 'manifest,' can severely disturb the normal working of a man's conscience"; this is but one example, according to Arendt, of "the inadequacy of the prevailing legal system and of current juridical concepts" (294).

9. Agamben explores these concepts in two of his most important works, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998) and *State of Exception* (2005).

10. According to Agamben in *State of Exception*, a key component of the state of exception is the "voluntary creation of a permanent state of emergency" that is used to justify the suspension of the normal rule of law (2).

11. The original line, quoted at the start of this article is: "In the grim darkness of the far future, there is only war." Different versions of this line (with and without the comma) appear across many different 40k publications, including the front cover of the latest 40k rulebook. See: *Warhammer 40,000* (152).

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BIONOTE

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