

# GRIMDARK-IAN MAN: THE SUBLIME AND GROTESQUE IN *WARHAMMER 40,000*

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## Abstract

The monstrous savior, a figure of beautiful soul and horrendous appearance, the demon that fights on the side of angels, is by no means a new character type. It is, in fact, a common trope across not only literature, but human society; seen in the gargoyles of Europe, the demonic figures and lion dogs in East Asia, or even the terrifying mask of indigenous shaman in Africa, Australia, and the Americas, all of which differ in socio-cultural context, but are united in being used to scare away evil spirits. Yet while Victor Hugo and Edgar Allan Poe recognized the sublime and grotesque as two parts of a greater whole, in modern times such horrifying marvels are more commonly relegated to mass-market media and other forms of popular literature. Given their aristocrat heritage, then, it is no surprise that creators of similar “low-brow” fiction seek to elevate their work through the inclusion of truly high-brow concepts. And in the grim darkness of the far future, where there is only war, the comingling of high- and low-literature has made such a combinatory, liminal figure as the Space Marines, the Emperor’s Angels of Death, truly rarified.

This paper asserts that the protagonists of the *Warhammer 40,000* (or simply “40K”) universe comprise a new and unique form of the grotesque. Starting from Istvan

Ciscery-Ronay’s discussion of the grotesque and sublime in science fiction as a theoretical framework, I will demonstrate that the Space Marines form a hybridized, liminal other made from disparate elements of what was once human, genetically and scientifically modified into something wholly alien. These subhuman grotesques represent the same danger to the reader’s conception of wholeness and stability as do more traditional cyborgs, while simultaneously acting as wish-fulfilling, sublime supermen, becoming at once sub- and super-human, and creating a new realm of the monstrous hybrid for fiction to explore. It is important to note that this phenomenon can be seen just as easily in certain incarnations of classic movie-monsters such as Frankenstein, vampires, werewolves, and especially in the work of China Miéville, which he terms “wyrd fiction.” Nevertheless, I will show that the immersive/interactive qualities inherent in the 40K universe—due to its origin and continued success as a miniatures and/or role-playing game—make the Space Marines, as well as the universe in general, the greatest extant example of the phenomenon, and thus the most impactful.

## Introduction

A figure of such beauty emerges that it stuns the viewer, while a horrible

monstrosity threatens the sanity of a man with a single glance. The sublime and the grotesque are common tools of Western literature, discussed by academics and writers such as Edgar Allen Poe, Victor Hugo, Emmanuel Kant, and Edmund Burke. The two psychological responses are held “in such close kinship that they are shadows of each other” (Csicsery-Ronay 79); the revolting and the overawing emotional responses are commonly treated as sides of the same coin, or separate ends of the same spectrum. Several aesthetes associated with Romanticism, Neo-Classicism, and movements from similar time periods insisted that the one could not exist without the other, or employed both in the service of greater “beauty.” More recently, however, literature and the arts have placed a greater focus on clear distinctions between the human, the celestial, and the infernal, as discussed in Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr’s analysis “On the Grotesque in Science Fiction.” This trend towards a clear delineation between the awe-inspiring and the terror-inducing makes it all the more interesting that the classic interplay between the elements has been revived in a popular, mass-market format. One of the few areas in which the sublime and the grotesque can be said to exist simultaneously is in the post-human Space Marines of the *Warhammer 40,000* franchise of games, models, and novels.<sup>1</sup> In the lore of

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that although there are many different species in the *Warhammer 40,000* universe, most are merely grotesquely inhuman monsters. The forces of the human empire may also be considered sublime in their trillions-strong magnitude,

*Warhammer 40K*, both the grotesque and the sublime exist in the persons of the super-powered warriors, making them both super- and sub-human.

### **Horror and Awe**

According to John Dennis, fear and terror form the basis of the sublime. He argues that the emotion is one of the most passionate, and hardest to resist, and therefore is the most liable to impress upon the reader/viewer. This terror is especially pleasant when one is reading or viewing a piece of art, and is not therefore in any real danger from the object (Dennis 361). Csicsery-Ronay agrees in essence with the importance of fear, but argues that the sublime in science fiction is especially the province of *existential* dread. The sublime, he asserts, constitutes a direct threat to the character facing it, through which the reader can also be affected. The SF sublime threatens the individual mind, confronting it with something unimaginably vast and overpowering, against which mere humanity cannot stand (Csicsery-Ronay 79). Through scientific creation or new techniques of travel and communication, the sublime object/creature/concept is confronted, and by its existence refutes the dominance of humanity in the cosmos.

The sublime threatens thought/perception with the infinite expansion of an idea that is so integral, so impossibly unified, that it not only contains, but annihilates all

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but only the Space Marines are both simultaneously.

multiplicity within it. The sublime stuns thought with the prospect of the inconceivable unity of the universe, within which only the very great is differentiated. (Csicsery-Ronay 83)

In the face of the overawing magnificence of the sublime, no individual achievement or sense of self-worth, no matter how great, can compare. Be it through sheer size, ultimate power, or simply the sense of greatly superior otherness which it instills in the observer, this force overwhelms all. When viewed, the weak human mind must recoil and attempt to breach the thing through alternate perspectives or routes of understanding. Regardless, the sublime remains “too great to be encompassed” (Csicsery-Ronay 71).

Similar to the “enthusiastick terror” (Dennis 361) inspired by the sublime, the grotesque deals with fear and repulsion, albeit in a different form. Where the former is overwhelming in its majesty, the latter is overwhelming in its debased confusion. Reveling in its monstrousness, the grotesque is an inversion of its partner. China Miéville, speaking specifically of the monstrous aspect of the grotesque, argued that it was a physical form of the unknown and unknowable. The grotesque, whether a monster or a scientific impossibility, is the grandiose made fleshy and mundane. It takes something utterly inhuman and amazing, and casts it in the physical world where it simply does not belong. The grotesque is ultimately the “bad numinous...[the] somaticized sublime” (Miéville 2).

The grotesque is not only an inversion of the sublime, however. It is regularly presented as an excess of the physical. The grotesque is, more than anything, “the strange conflation of disparate elements not found in nature” (Csicsery-Ronay 71). This combination can come in a variety of forms. It can include hybrid people with red skin and insects for heads (Gordon 458), for instance, or a man with tentacles growing from his eyes. Even the blending of human and animal, as in the ancient centaurs and minotaurs, served “both to mark the fault-lines [between human, animal, and machine] but also, subversively, to signal the fragility of such boundaries” (Graham 12). The science-fiction grotesque focuses on such crossings of natural boundaries, the blending of evolutionary strains and ontological categories. “Its characteristic awe, the fascination of the anomalous and chaotic, comes from experiencing combinations of elements that cannot occur, or *should* not occur, according to the established categories of scientific reason or customary observation” (Csicsery-Ronay 79, emphasis in original). By corrupting the familiar into something incomprehensible, the grotesque not only directly threatens the bodily safety/surety of the diegetic character (as a “monstrous” figure), but also disrupts the observer’s understandings of a rational and ordered universe. Where the sublime is poised to overwhelm the human in its sheer grandiosity, the grotesque warps what it means to be human until it is dissolved. Yet, as discussed, the two are not diametric opposites. Rather, they can operate as facets of the same concept, such as in the post-human warriors known as Space

Marines.

## Tales of Old Terra

First published in 1987 by British company Games Workshop, the original *Warhammer 40,000* game was intended for roleplaying, with some minor wargame elements included. The background and setting were imagined as a distantly-futuristic science-fiction analogue of the fantasy game that had gained success in 1983, simply called *Warhammer*.<sup>2</sup> In each of the rulebooks, codices, and supplements for the game, background information was included detailing the lives and deeds of certain heroic individuals, explaining the origins of a particular custom, elaborating on the mythology and cosmology of a given race, and so on. Called “flavor text,” “lore,” or “fluff”<sup>3</sup> by the player community, this extraneous material did not alter how the game was played, but did enjoyably enrich the world in which the battles occurred. Heeding the call for more, Games Workshop began expanding on the background, eventually creating the Black

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<sup>2</sup> Elves became the space-pirate Eldar, for example, while Tolkien-inspired Orcs became lunatic gun-toting Orks, and the knights of humanity became the Imperial Space Marines, or Adeptus Astartes, created to defend humanity from all threats within and without.

<sup>3</sup> “Fluff” is a somewhat pejorative term denoting something light and attractive, with no real substance. “Lore” may be considered a more positive phrase, whereas “flavor text” is comparatively neutral.

Library<sup>4</sup> to publish novels from the Warhammer fantasy and science-fiction universes, inspired by and drawing heavily on the existing flavor text. Drawing on an overriding theme of “grimdark,”<sup>5</sup> over the course of several decades, dozens of authors, fans-cum-creators, and similar contributors created a hybridized, blended network of background-stories for the players and fans. Nevertheless, throughout this chaotic morass of lore, the exploits and origins of the Space Marines, or Adeptus Astartes, have remained the favorite subject of writers, both official and unofficial.

Before launching into a description of the Astartes in the universe of the grim and dark future, it is worth noting that what follows is perhaps overburdened with the aforementioned fluff. This is not simply because I, as a scholar and author, am a sincere fan of the *40K* universe and wish for a chance to proselytize a favored fandom. All of that is, of course, entirely true, but such is often the case with academics of all stripes and in all fields. More immediately, my decision is justified by the necessity of the reader becoming deeply immersed in the *Warhammer* universe in order to fully appreciate the terrible awe of the Space Marines, in much the same way that a role-player does. The *Warhammer* and *40K*

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<sup>4</sup> Named after the hidden, pseudo-mythic Eldar temple of the lore.

<sup>5</sup> A term originating with the standard introduction to *40K* material, which ends “in the grim darkness of the far future, there is only war.” The term “grimdark” is employed for similarly bleak universes, where the only hope for victory is some form of continued survival, no matter how horrific this may be.

universes are massive, and have produced appropriately massive amounts of background material. Although Games Workshop has since expanded product lines into board- and video-games, novels, audio-dramas, and so on, the role-playing aspect of the original *Rogue Trader* RPG has always remained a central facet of the property. As such, a diegetic, or role-player, perspective greatly enhances my reader's comprehension of the figures and the arguments related to them. If I go too far, then, and offer an overabundance of background, please understand that it only stems from a desire for the greatest immersion possible on the part of an unfamiliar reader, so that it is made apparent that these characters, while enthralling, are not solely power-fantasies.

The Adeptus Astartes of *Warhammer 40K* occupy an unusual place in regards to their aesthetics. It is largely because they are cyborgs that the Space Marines become grotesque, but this same liminal re-creation is what turns the cyborgs into supermen. Thus they are, at one and the same time, both sublime and grotesque, made powerful and superior by the innate grotesqueness of their hybrid natures. They are incredibly powerful and physically imposing, both of which can suggest the heights of human potential or the wrongness of bodies and powers that should not be associated with humanity. Throughout, the Space Marines remain at once both sublime and grotesque, both sub- and super-human.

As stated above, however, this combination is not a new one. Indeed, the comingling of the sublime and the grotesque is almost as old as the aesthetic concepts

themselves. Yet in the modern world, the two are kept at arm's length. This may in part be due to a desire for greater ontological purity in the classifications and divisions of society in the changing, modernist world of the late nineteenth through mid-twentieth centuries. Regardless of the reason for this shift, however, it is certain that the bulk of aesthetic works in the last several decades has eschewed the comingling of the principles. It is interesting, therefore, that the intersection of grotesque and sublime should reappear not in the rarified aesthetic realms, but in the bang-bang, action-oriented, mass-market game paratext of *Warhammer 40,000*. More importantly, however, the Space Marines do not merely replicate earlier conceptions of artistic terror and awe, they take them to an even greater extreme, and one into which the reader can immerse him or herself through role-playing. As Csicsery-Ronay notes, "in romantic and modernist sensibilities, contrasts between ideal forms and anomalous deviations were considered to be monstrous. For the postmodern they are norms" (71-72). But the warriors of the Adeptus Astartes are not merely normal in their grotesqueness. Instead, they are both completely and utterly monstrous in their abhuman, heterogenous nature, while simultaneously being utterly heroic and super-human, to the point where their mere presence cowers allies and enemies alike.

The writers and creators of *Warhammer 40K* do not only normalize the crossing of boundaries and ontological states, they revel in such liminality, and players and fans alike revel with them. Space Marines not only meld the distinct evolutionary tracks of

human, animal, machine, and alien (and possibly even mundane and diegetic realities through the role-players), even the very organs that begin this transformation are themselves unnatural, created objects of unclear provenance. At every level, the world of *40K* crosses and intermingles boundaries, blending myriad traditions and biological categorizations in order to present an entertaining world that can be read not only as postmodern, but even post-post-modern, as it takes the trans-liminal ethos of the postmodern and extends it to the nth degree. And, as stated, this comingling and extrapolating of the formerly rarified aesthetic traditions currently occurs not in the pages of high-brow literature, but in the realms of mass-market popular entertainment. It is on the periphery of the literary world that the aesthetics of grotesque and sublime are not only reemerging and recombining, but are being reinterpreted for a wider, more diverse audience. And because of the *Warhammer* universe's status as an interactive, immersive world of role-play, its potential for aesthetic impact becomes all the greater.

### **Angels of Death**

The thirtieth millennium was a time of darkness. Humanity, which had spread throughout the stars 5,000 years before, had lost the power to communicate with the world of its birth, becoming isolated and weak. As alien species and monsters from the trans-dimensional realm called the Immaterium, or Warp, preyed on the millions of human worlds, the figure known only as the Emperor of Mankind emerged.

Quickly he united a barbaric Terra under his rule, and then the rest of the solar system. The perfect man, an example of what humans might become through eons of evolution, the Emperor was entirely superhuman. Using his own genetic sequence, he engineered twenty sons to serve as generals and lead his armies across the stars to unite all of humanity. These were his Primarchs, “and from these were created the Space Marines—the Angels of Death” (Ward 6). After the Emperor and his armies reunited humanity and then split into civil war, ten millenia would elapse with the Space Marines, or Adeptus Astartes, forming the elite bulwark of the Imperium of Man, defending it against alien menace, daemon predation from the Warp, or the attacks of the traitorous Chaos Marines who betrayed humanity in the thirtieth millennium (Ward 6-9).

Every unit, or chapter, has its own particular legends and traditions and, although all bear certain similarities in training, equipment, and combat doctrine, there is still much diversity in terms of organization, mores, and philosophy. Nevertheless, both the means by which an individual Astartes is created, and the reaction of other humans to him, remains constant throughout most of the *Warhammer* lore. And it is in their very creation that the true nature of the Adeptus Astartes can be seen. Moreover, the full details of the creation of a Space Marine is especially indicative of their monstrous nature. Here the super-human men can be seen to be also inhuman.

Specifically designed to be able to engage in hand-to-hand combat with the

strongest alien monsters,<sup>6</sup> the post-human soldiers are power incarnate. “A Space Marine is a towering warrior, his brute strength tempered by inhuman skill” (Barnes, et al. *Deathwatch* 11). Having succeeded in the trials of initiation,<sup>7</sup> a young man is tested for genetic and spiritual purity before being allowed to begin the transformation into an Adeptus Astartes. When the process is complete, he will emerge many times larger, stronger, and more powerful than a human, even one as mighty as the initiates had been. Reflexes pushed beyond the human limit, his natural strength and toughness are also at least twice that of a normal man, his reflexes are beyond human (Barnes, et al. *Deathwatch* 363, 376), and his form is larger and broader to compensate. While the height of an Astartes, which is well over two meters (6’7”) at the shortest, their bulk is anywhere between 500 and 1000 kg (1102-2204 lbs.). To say that such a man is “large” does not do the idea justice. And that is before he is ensconced in gigantic power-armor, which further enhances his strength and physical stature (Barnes, et al. *Deathwatch* 28). Standing a full head over most normal humans, a Space Marine in standard array is

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<sup>6</sup> In some versions of the lore, the Marines were specifically engineered in order to be a match for a standard Ork.

<sup>7</sup> A harrowing, often lethal process, in which the strongest young men of a planet are tested in battles against the elements, deadly creatures, and one another. Even competing in these trials is a high honor on most worlds, and aspirants, through their own might and proximity to the Space Marines who conduct the tests, border on the sublime even before their initiation.

an intimidating presence by himself. It is no wonder then that most people are immediately cowed upon seeing one of the Emperor’s Chosen, whose ferocious majesty is so overpowering that it is a diagnosable condition among the human allies of the Space Marines known as “transhuman dread.”

The sight of an Adeptus Astartes was one thing: taller and broader than a man could ever be, armoured like a demigod. The singularity of purpose was self-evident. An Adeptus Astartes was designed to fight and kill anything that didn’t annihilate it first. If you saw an Adeptus Astartes, you knew you were in trouble. The appearance alone cowed you with fear. But to see one move. Apparently that was the real thing. Nothing human-shaped should be so fast, so lithe, so powerful, especially not anything in excess of two metres tall and carrying more armour than four normal men could lift. The sight of an Adeptus Astartes was one thing, but the moving fact of one was quite another. The psychologists called it transhuman dread. It froze a man, stuck him to the ground, caused his mind to lock up, made him lose control of bladder and bowel. Something huge and warlike gave pause: something huge and warlike and moving with the speed of a striking snake, that was when you knew that gods moved amongst men, and that there existed a scale of strength and speed beyond anything

mortal, and that you were about to die. (Abnett 163).

The Astartes are literal giants among men, towering over them in ancient, intentionally intimidating power armor bedecked with skulls and religious iconography. By physical presence alone, a Space Marine is a direct threat to the physical wellbeing of any humans nearby, regardless of their allegiance, and thus separating him from their number. But as a champion of humanity, the Marine must perforce be human, which he paradoxically cannot be. Instead he represents a potential peak of human evolution and development, raised from mortal man into demigod through the skill of other people. As such, the Adeptus Astartes is innately hostile to the basic value of humanity: what can a single, normal person be worth in comparison to one of these warriors? Their existence attacks unmodified humans “with the infinite expansion of an idea that is so integral, so impossibly unified, that it not only contains, but annihilates all multiplicity within it. The sublime stuns thought with the prospect of the inconceivable unity of the universe, within which only the very great is differentiated” (Csicsery-Ronay 83). The integral idea here is the concept of humanity. If both Space Marines and normal persons are to be considered human, despite their vast differences, then only the largest of divergences could possibly matter. A normal man or woman is dwarfed by one of the Angels of Death, both literally and figuratively; indeed, the very concept of “normalcy” is rendered moot. If they do not quite become sublime through sheer

physical presence, however, it is clear that the Space Marines are awe-full in the eyes of their own species.

This awesome dread is not limited to the abstract, however. If the Space Marines were the only protagonists in the world of *Warhammer 40K*, their overwhelming presence might indeed be accused of simply being cool, but the lore and games of the universe feature a wide array of perspectives. Playable classes (among humans alone) range from Space Marines and their Chaotic counterparts to unmodified but power-armored Sisters of Battle or even standard human soldiers, called Imperial Guardsmen. In one private campaign, published online as “The All Guardsmen Party,” the characters explicitly deal with the discomfort caused by the Adeptus Astartes. After an daunting mission-briefing by the warriors, the narrator notes that “the Marines had left us feeling like children...it wasn’t just that we felt incredibly outclassed by the three meter tall killing machines... [they] were physical manifestations of the Emperor's divine wrath...[meaning] we couldn't compensate for our discomfort by trying to kill them” (Peterson “Tyranid Acquisition Experts”). This unease permeates the interactions between the human soldiers and the godlike super-soldiers, not only in the narrative of the party’s adventures, but to an extent also at the level of the players who are used to being the grand heroes of their own narrative, only to be overshadowed by the clear superiority of the Emperor’s Angels of Death.



## Abhor the Mutant

Chosen from the strongest human stock, trained and conditioned by humans, altered and enhanced by human science performed by human hands, a Space Marine is still not technically human. Instead, he is post-human, a more advanced example of what his original race may yet become, one augmented and altered in an attempt to overcome the physical limitations and degradations of the human form to more as it becomes a fully (bio-)technologized successor to *homo sapiens* (Graham 8-9). Given the recurrent theme of cross boundaries, then, it comes as no surprise that the Adeptus Astartes can move from the realm of the terrifying abstract to that of the terrifyingly concrete. As with the sublime, the grotesqueries of the Space Marines can be seen in the power they wield and in their physical bodies. More than simply physical presence, however, the biology and creation of an Astartes bears special investigation, as it is here that the grotesque truly reaches its highest levels.

Though a chapter of the Adeptus Astartes may only contain about one thousand warriors, it is still a self-contained organization; each one “is a self-sufficient army, equipped with its own spacecraft and capable of responding at a moment’s notice to any threat to the security of the Imperium” (Barnes, et al. *Deathwatch* 11). The abilities of any given Space Marine have been previously discussed, and are only more overawing when the warrior is accompanied by his brothers in arms. But on those occasions when even the full might of a chapter of Astartes is not enough to quell a

foe, one option remains to the Imperial forces: Exterminatus, by which the Marine navy destroys an entire planet with devastating, planet-cracking force.<sup>8</sup>

It is true that the Space Marines are not the only group capable of ordering an Exterminatus on a planet, but they are unique within the Imperial hierarchy. Regardless of the level of an Imperial official, he or she will always have supervisors, masters, or peers to whom they are answerable. Each is a cog in the machine of the Imperium and acts as an extension of governmental will, in an exaggerated version of modern bureaucracy. The Adeptus Astartes, on the other hand, do not exist within the Imperial hierarchy. “Lords Militant [of the Imperial armies] must negotiate the Space Marines’ aid, drawing on ancient debts of honour [*sic*] and invoking the great victories of the past” (Barnes, et al. *Deathwatch* 302). The Space Marines operate approximately a thousand

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<sup>8</sup> When an entire planet is deemed beyond salvation, or the risk of it spreading corruption to the rest of the galaxy becomes too great, it is declared Exterminatus and destroyed outright, including every man, woman, and child on the planet, whether innocent or guilty. Billions of lives are destroyed in a matter of minutes (Barnes, et al. *Deathwatch* 286). With an “unrelenting barrage of [laser] lance strikes, mass drivers [firing large projectiles at extreme speeds] and cyclone torpedoes, [a naval flotilla can reduce a] once green world to a primeval, molten state” (Goto 71). Not only are every alien, demon, and rebellious human destroyed, but so too is every single form of life on the orb, down to the microscopic level, and only a molten rock is left, if the world is not directly rent asunder.

individual armies, each with its own goals and ideologies. None is beholden to the dictates of the Imperial military or bureaucracy, and any commanding officer is fully capable of ordering and enacting an Exterminatus without recourse to any external authority (Goto 72). This is the sublimity of the Astartes' power pushed beyond the bounds of reason and into the realm of the grotesque. The ability to wipe out a biosphere with a whim “*should* not occur” (Csicsery-Ronay) within a rational universe, where human power to destroy is limited. What does a human being represent if they are able to eliminate every speck of life, including billions of humans, likely trillions of animals, and untold numbers of insects, vermin, and microscopic life with apparent ease? Indeed, how can one who kills planets still be considered mortal? These questions plague the mind of any normal human observer. They undermine the meaning of humanity by juxtaposing it with divine power, placed in one individual which cannot rationally contain both aspects. This magnitude of power, while sublimely terrifying on its own, becomes grotesque when placed in the hands of a single human, even one as mighty as a Space Marine.

When not wielding the word of death for an entire biosphere, the Space Marines are still physically imposing. They tower over their human progenitors, especially when encased in their power armor. Enhanced to be exemplars of might and strength, Marines may yet go further beyond their established norms and become distressingly physical. The intra-textual explanation is that sometimes the genetic legacy which gives a

Space Marine his true power is corrupted by the ravages of time or environmental contaminants. This alters the Space Marines of a given chapter or lineage, and transforms them into the monstrous. The Blood Angels chapter, for example, are the sons of the winged Primarch Sanguinius. Somehow their gene-seeds, the specialized organs from which a Primarch's genetic material is implanted into a Marine, became corrupted and exposed the Blood Angels to a kind of berserker vampirism (Ward 11, Barnes, et al. *Deathwatch* 41). This thirst for blood is not purely metaphorical, however. The Space Marine in question literally thirsts for the plasma of his foes, destroying them and then drinking their life-juices, from which he gains increased power, at the expense of a loss of control (Barnes, et al. *Deathwatch* 43).

While the curse of the Blood Angels remains hidden most of the time, the same is not true of other chapters. The Salamanders, for example, come from a planet of deserts and harsh sunlight. The radioactive nature of some of the planet's minerals interacted with the chapter to alter them radically, turning their skin the color and texture of coal, and leaving their eyes glowing red (Barnes, et al. *First Founding* 20-22). The Salamanders appear to be utterly demonic, and even though “this terrifying appearance is entirely superficial...[it] has intimidated more than one rebellion into submission without a shot” (Ward 26). Although they are regularly noted for their close relationship with unaltered humanity, the Salamanders Space Marines are so unnatural-looking that they can intimidate whole armies. They terrify the opposing forces into submission

with a look that is a combination of a humanoid male and something akin to living fire. Like a volcano, the green-clad warriors are coal black with eyes apparently lit by some internal fire, suggesting that despite their human features they are something unnatural and dangerous. These warriors appear to be the godlike Space Marines made devilish through some infernal process. They are the godhead turned baleful and made monstrous (Miéville 2).

Whereas the Salamanders Space Marines merely *look* demonic, and the Blood Angels hide their nature beneath a normal facade, the Space Wolves chapter's appearance shows hints of the true monster lurking beneath the surface. In addition to their gene-seed organs, the Space Wolves have a unique implantation called the Canis Helix, which makes the aspirant into one of the most powerful Space Marines, but in the process may kill him or worse. The Helix contains many genes which cannot be incorporated by a human system, and thus it has a dramatic effect on the hopeful youth. "The gene works its hideous changes upon the warrior's mind and body; he reverts to a primal state where his bones split and buckle, hair sprouts across his body, and his only desire is to gorge on fresh meat and blood" (Barnes, et al. *Deathwatch* 47-48). The Space Wolf comes to resemble his namesake in physical form. If he is strong and fortunate, his body only becomes extremely hirsute, his canines grow into fangs that lengthen as he ages, and his sense of smell and hearing become almost canine. And during times of great stress or exertion, a brother of the Space Wolves may still succumb to his heritage and "revert to the

hulking, bloodthirsty state that haunts [his] genetic structure" (Barnes, et al. *Deathwatch* 48), losing himself to the wolf inside.

Whether vampire, demon, or werewolf, many Space Marines chapters are grotesque figures at first sight. A combination of two distinct evolutionary lines, such as human and wolf, or human and demon, constitutes a merging "of elements that cannot occur, or *should* not occur, according to the established categories of scientific reason or customary observation" (Csicsery-Ronay 79). The werewolf, the vampire, and the demon are objects that cannot exist in the natural world according even to the fantastic science of the *Warhammer* universe, and thus are things outside of reason, that argue against the underlying rationality of the cosmos. It is impossible to tell where the Marine stops being a human and becomes wolfish, or vampiric, and this incongruous sense of metamorphosis is the very basis of the grotesque. If a human, especially one meant to be the greatest of champions, is simultaneously so overtly monstrous in form, then the universe must be a horrifying place indeed, and the notion of "humanity" becomes tenuous at best.

Just as they border on the supernatural horrors of old, so too are the Space Marines of *Warhammer 40K* similar to more modern menaces, as they too are not born, but built out of baser material. For the Astartes, this base stuff is comprised of a standard, unaltered human male. Once chosen for initiation, a young man begins the process of becoming one of the Emperor's Angels of Death. Over the course of months and years, he is implanted with up to 19 specialized organs, grown from the genetic material of

the Primarchs, themselves created in a lab from the genes of the Emperor of Mankind, and enhanced with nanoscopic machines. While “this organ implantation goes hand in hand with a harsh routine of physical and spiritual training...hypnotic suggestion, prolonged meditation, vigorous spiritual tests, and gradual initiation into the cult rites of the Chapter” (Ward 10), it is the physical organs themselves and their effect on the former human that most exemplify the grotesque. The various organs implanted into the Space Marine are all pseudo-mystic bio-mechanical creations which act on his genetic structure, turning him from a human into something else. One of the main aspects of humanity is physical makeup: although a person who has lost a lung to accident remains human, there remains an implicit maximum of two. To have an extra lung, heart, and stomach makes the Astartes into something that is, by definition, inhuman. It is instead an abhorrent combination of wholes, part human and part genetic chimera. This concern over identity is only exacerbated by the more exotic features of Astartes biology.

To illustrate, over the course of his transformation, a Neophyte Space Marine will receive a second, smaller heart to help power his newly enlarged frame, as well as a third lung enabling him to breathe in poisonous atmospheres and underwater, a second stomach which draws nutrients out of inedible material and neutralizes poisons, and a gland in his brain that stimulates bone growth, causing his ribcage to fuse into a solid protective plate (Ward 10-11). In addition, he will receive a Larraman’s Organ, which creates special blood cells to

assist with healing. When wounded, the Organ will release Larraman cells which:

[L]atch onto leucocytes in the blood and are transported to the site of the wound. Once outside the body, the Larraman cells form a skin substitute of instant scar tissue, staunching the flow of blood and protecting any exposed wound area. This process is almost instantaneous, and it can appear to the onlooker as if the blood is frozen solid even before it hits the ground (Barnes, et al. *Deathwatch* 17).

Made impervious to most wounds, the Space Marine is also given special offensive capabilities. The Betcher’s Glands are placed in the mouth, near the salivary glands. These twin organs allow a Marine to spit a blinding poison that works on contact, and is acidic enough to eat through strong iron bars over the course of a few hours. Finally, one of the most unique organs to be inserted into the aspiring Astartes is the Omophagea. Placed in the spinal cord, where it effectively becomes a part of the Marine’s brain, the small organ is designed to “absorb genetic material generated in animal tissue as a function of memory. This endows the Space Marine with an unusual survival trait...If a Space Marine eats part of a creature, he will absorb some of the memories of that creature” (Barnes, et al. *Deathwatch* 17).

With the inclusion of the Larriman’s Organ, a Space Marine loses many of the normal concerns of mortality, as he is immune to wounds that would kill a normal

woman or man. The innate otherness of a creature that can heal from nearly any injury, and is thus in and of itself unnatural, has been inserted into the body of a human being, forever combining the two in ways that cannot exist according to a rational, ordered universe. Even the Betcher's Glands combine humanity with otherness, specifically that of a serpent. The operations of the organ are compared to those of "the poison gland of venomous reptiles" (Barnes, et al. *Deathwatch* 18). Yet snake venom is not corrosive, so even the serpentine other meant to transcend the boundaries of the human body is not itself a natural thing, but is also individually hybridized and grotesque, making it exponentially other.

And the Omophagea turns the nominally human Space Marine into a zombie-like monster. This thing cannibalizes the flesh of sentient creatures, be they Orks, Eldar, other Space Marines, or regular humans, in order to gain information. This is such a gross violation of natural laws that the resultant creation does not even resemble a hybridized creature or a semi-divine power, but is the hybrid of a human being and a fictional, flesh-eating fiend. The Space Marines are made grotesque by the incursion of unnatural, irrational organs into their very bodies, making them an example of the grotesque as "life set free of law" (Csicsery-Ronay 82). While there is an intended order to the implantation of the foreign objects into the Astartes, and so they are not chaotic, they instead violate the laws and boundaries of a rational, ordered, natural world. If a human is a creature defined in common with the majority of humanity, then it cannot encompass the hybrid creature that

emerges from the Astartes initiation process.

Additionally, the organs and zygotes which are implanted into the would-be Space Marine are in themselves wholly unnatural. Created in a lab by the Emperor, these objects are man-made, and have no basis in the natural world. As such, even though they are primarily organic, the completed Astartes becomes a cyborg. Space Marines can only be considered somewhat cybernetic by the traditional definition, however. In their power armor,<sup>9</sup> a fully armed and armored Marine can be said to be part machine, as the armor contributes significantly to his might. But in the main, most Space Marines are not truly cybernetic. Rather, "they are hybrid forms in the way that Donna Haraway's cyborgs are hybrid, metaphorically another step away from the biological model" (Gordon 359). While not visibly plated with metal, barring injuries and augmetics, the Astartes is combined with non-human, biologically unnatural organs, and thereby made into something that transcends the boundaries between human, animal, and machine.

The dearth of humanity in these war-machines is readily apparent in their near-immunity to mortality, as mentioned above. But the manner of abuse which these figures regularly take once again provides concrete examples of abstract principles. In the *Deathwatch* RPG, for example, in which all players are members of a Space Marines Deathwatch team, some of the effects on the damage table are quite descriptive. At nine points of energy damage to the head, for

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<sup>9</sup> Space Marines are bonded to their armor through their subdermal Black Carapace, the last organ to be inserted.

example, the table states: “Superheated by the attack, the target’s brain explodes, tearing apart his skull and sending flaming chunks of meat flying at those nearby,” while at ten points it states: “As above, except the target’s entire body catches fire and runs off headless...in a random direction” (Barnes, et al. *Deathwatch* 253). Similar outcomes include the loss of limbs, in varying proportions, having eyes scooped out or melted, and impalement with a wide array of foreign objects (Barnes, et al. *Deathwatch* 252-259). Similarly, one of the Marines encountered by the All Guardsmen Party ends up cut in half, only to be stored improperly (to the point that lungs occasionally slide out of his torso, and his legs are misplaced during a supply run), poisoned by a deadly alien toxin, regularly lit on fire by said toxin, and end up subjected to a continuous stream of medical malpractice and psychic attack by a demonic alien abomination (Peterson “Tyranid Transportation Expert,” “Tyranid Delivery Experts”). No living creature of any stripe, let alone a mere human, should be able to survive the sort of abuse described by the player-characters witnesses, yet the Marine does. This creature, which is clearly more than human, is able to be reduced to a mostly hollowed-out lump of toxic, battered, flesh, and still retain much of its terrible might, if only through its sheer, horrendous survival. In a cosmos with clear delineations of life and death, this figure, and those like him, should not exist.

This liminal condition of the warriors is a large part of what makes them grotesque. The cyborg, either as the Terminator or Robocop, in the form of Frankenstein’s

monster, or a man with a transplanted hand, is a common feature of the grotesque in science fiction. A creature created without natural origins and thus freed of natural constraints, it suggests the usurpation of humanity’s dominance. As the potential next step in sentient evolution, these hodge-podge monsters are a threat not only to the physical human body, but to the understanding of the universe as one governed by comprehensible natural laws. It is understandable, then, that an observer should recoil in horror and repugnance at what the cyborg/Astartes represents. This reaction to the cyborg is a direct mirror of a viewer’s reaction to the grotesque, and given that, “in romantic and modernist sensibilities, contrasts between ideal forms and anomalous deviations were considered to be monstrous” (Csicsery-Ronay 71-72), it is only natural that the Astartes should conform with a staple symbol of the grotesque. And, like the classical cyborg, the Space Marine requires an embracing of the liminal blending of human, animal, and machine in order to achieve power, casting the human norm in its true frailty.

### **As Above, So Below**

The Adeptus Astartes, though the primary heroes of the *40K* stories and setting, are far from the only examples of the mixture of sublime and grotesque in the lore. Indeed, the arguments made above in relation to the Space Marines, though most obvious with said figures, can be applied with little alteration to almost any of the playable races. Perhaps the most entertaining for fans and players of any

Games Workshop property would be the Orks.<sup>10</sup> If the Space Marines are the sublime made grotesque, then the Greenskins are the mirror-opposite. They are a hulking, thuggish, vile species that lives only to fight and conquer. They have been and continue to be one of the galaxy's biggest threats, outnumbering as they do even the quintillions-strong humanity, with each member being approximately equal in strength and power to a Space Marine. And they are universally beloved by players and fans, because they are so adorably stupid. Orks believe, universally, that a red vehicle will be able to reach greater speeds than any other, and because their collective willpower (or pig-headed idiocy) is so strong, the laws of physics are made to bend such that "Red ones go faster." They charge into battle with a cry of WAAAGH! (misspelled without at least 3 A's and an exclamation mark, and said at top volume), blasting away with their poorly made "shootas" not in an attempt to hit anyone, but rather to generate as much pleasing light and noise, or "dakka," as possible (Buind "Da Orks"). The Greenskins are so hooliganish, stupid, and violent that they manage to come out the other side and end up as sublime in their sheer power and thick-headed might. In fact, in a universe

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<sup>10</sup> NB. The species is referred to as Orks and Gretchin in the science-fiction setting, and as Orcs and Goblins in the fantastic analogues. Aside from the technological differences, and some independence on the part of the Goblins, there is no appreciable difference between the fantasy and science fiction versions of the Orks, which spelling will be used for thematic purposes.

that is consistently "grimdark," the Orks are the only species that can be said to be winning, because they are simply too dumb to recognize what a loss is, and somehow that forces the universe to oblige them.

The Orks are worth understanding not only for sheer entertainment value, but also because they point to the underlying usage of these liminal, meta-human figures. The universe of *Warhammer 40K* regularly plays with the notions of super- and sub-human, joining them in numerous combinations. The question, then, is why. The answer is suggested by the Orks. The characters are clear parody of British football hooligans, down to the written accents and slang. Most gamers, or fans of the type of science fiction on offer by Black Library, would not be readily found in hooligan circles, and may even have been persecuted by similar types as schoolyard bullies. Yet when this sort of person is used as a template for the objectively distasteful, dangerous, and dull Orks, gamers and role-players adore them because every aspect of their personalities, both negative and positive, are amplified to the most extreme point imaginable, thus allowing for a sense of fondness (possibly mixed with intellectual superiority) for those with whom the average gamer may not have much in common.

I would argue that, intentional or not, much of the appeal of the Space Marines comes from a similar principle. In this instance, the Adeptus Astartes are very much the fulfillment of a male power-fantasy, striding as they do through warzones like literal gods of battle. Not only are they super-human, they are so incredibly superior that, in combination with their

hybridized origins, they become grotesquely overawing. Yet to assert that the Space Marines are simultaneously super- and sub-human may be to overlook exactly what sort of humanity it is that they threaten. Outside of the diegetic terror of such warriors, it may seem that a reader/viewer would only find the Marines enjoyable, as they are admittedly incredibly cool. By role-playing as the characters, however, a fan is exposed to the liminal, inhuman otherness of the figures, be it in the terror of their underlying creation or the horror of their everyday lives. To play a Space Marine is to recognize that, as cool and awesome as the Astartes may be, there is no real appeal in living in their universe and having to deal with the ridiculous levels of abuse, restraint, and existential dread that permeates the forty-first millennium. Just as the threat of physically aggressive hooligans is mitigated through the Orks' endearing idiocy, so too is the fantasy of ultimate martial power allayed by the grotesquely immersive elements of the Space Marines.

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