This year’s conference addresses the topic of “best business practices in global organizations.” As a genre of speculative fiction that is indeed globally represented, the prophetic dystopia, a word first coined by British philosopher and political economist John Stuart Mill (Roth 230), epitomizes the opposite of a utopia, a hypothetical “no place” with a world societal construct that is generally flawless in every way, including its global business practices. The dystopia, then, is a kind of utopia-gone-awry. In a dystopia, the general populace suffers discontent and is no longer pleased with its environment.

So what does this compartmentalized area of literature have to do with international business? Like other genres (such as science fiction, apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic narratives), multi-layered dystopian narratives tend to think and speak in the same vernacular of the period that produced them, and, consequently, critique various aspects of society, including, among many things, systems of governance and commerce. Since the end of World War II, dystopias are written in the climate of a perceptively globalized world and, typically focus on a current trend, extrapolating the results of that trend to its most catastrophic or horrific conclusion.

For example, if a writer of dystopian fiction anticipates a potential problem with, say, PayPal or credit card swipers, s/he might envision a world-to-come that, because of this technology, is effectively destroyed. Sometimes, the plot reveals a society changed to such a degree that the owners of the technology in question (or, in some cases, the opponents of such a
technology) have evolved into god-like overlords, ruling the now-enslaved populace with disturbing new institutions, practices, and regulations. Increasingly, it is “big business,” rather than “big government,” that is targeted by dystopian stories, both in print and cinema, and, depending on the writer’s political views, these works either critique or propagandize a possible future where the world of tomorrow lies in ruin because of either its acceptance of the concepts the industrial complex is hawking today or its rejection of it.

The results are usually the same; the difference is whether the corporation, as an entity, portrays the villainous shadow of the story or the rejected/unsung hero that could have prevented it all had its precepts been previously accepted/adopted. My intention for today’s roundtable discussion is to merely highlight some of the more notable dystopian examples on both sides of the proverbial coin, while asking the following critical, open-ended questions: “which parts of the conversation have been left out?,” and “what global business practices, in particular, could be addressed to help alleviate the undercurrent of distrust and fear experienced by both the producers and consumers of this genre?”

To begin, let’s clarify the nomenclature. The dystopian narrative is, typically, a subgenre of science fiction and well-represented in contemporary, pop-culture texts. In most cases, dystopian fiction is speculative, set in either a near or a distant future, relative to the time of writing. For example, although it is now thirty years beyond the year 1984, George Orwell’s famous dystopian novel was first published in 1949, a full thirty-five years before the date used as the title of Nineteen Eighty-Four. Just as in utopian fiction, the dystopian world is frequently an imagined and allegorical world of what may come. In other words, dystopias postulate a possible future that, unlike the philosophy of Professor Pangloss, the insufferable Leibnizian optimist in Voltaire’s Candide (1759), may well represent the worst of all possible worlds, at least, in the sphere of socio-political organization. While the Collins English Dictionary kindly
defines the dystopia as “an imaginary place where everything is as bad as it can be” (“Dystopia,” Collins), the Random House Dictionary bluntly describes the state as “a society characterized by human misery, as squalor, oppression, disease, and overcrowding” (“Dystopia,” Random).

It is an oft-repeated trope that the science fiction genre, in general, serves as a lens for which its audience can both “express [its] sense of wonder, marvel at the possibilities of new technologies, and engage in [its] wildest imaginings” and function “as a tool” that society can “use to explore and more fully understand” itself (“Fantastic). In their published manifesto for “New Science Fiction,” David Gill and Nathaniel K Miller, editors of Pravic Magazine, declare that in futuristic fiction, “‘the present’ becomes a kind of dividing line, which renders all fiction set on the far side a lens for magnifying what is within us” (Gill). In his article for The Ray Gun Chronicles, contributor Jim Hysell summarizes these sentiments for the topic at hand by arguing that when dystopian narrative is used as lens for collective self-reflection, we not only view and critique “ourselves as a society,” we also “examine our values” (Hysell).

There was a time when many dystopian narratives centered, primarily, on the government as the solitary source of everything that is wrong. This “traditional dystopia,” which is “concerned with the spectre of the over-bearing state,” is what writer Chris Berg refers to as “The Orwellian Dystopia” (Berg 39). Liberal writers who feared an impending regime of fascism imagined all varieties of dystopic mayhem; conservative writers, terrified of the so-called “Red Scare” or some other progressive nightmare, did the reverse. This divergence of perspective is known in the science fiction community, and sometimes satirized by comic writers of publications such as The Onion (Schlichtmann) or television series such as Matt Groening’s The Simpsons, where “the entire city of Springfield is an American dystopia [and] Springfield Elementary is a greater dystopia within dystopia,” (Denton) and Futurama, “where [both] Mom’s Mega Corp and the bloated Central Bureaucracy rule the roost” (Loughney). Both types
of dystopian writer shared one mutual anxiety: that is, totalitarianism, or a system ruled by extremists.

Dystopian scenarios devoted to conventional governmental issues, are not the variety with which this paper is concerned. However, for the sake of clarity, and to avoid confusion later in the argument, consider this short sampling of some better-known dystopian fictions that blame some form of totalitarian, centralized government as the cause of injustice and societal ills: *The Time Machine* (1895) and *When the Sleeper Awakes* (1899) by H. G. Wells, *We* (1921) by Yevgeny Zamyatin, *Brave New World* (1932) by Aldous Huxley, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) by George Orwell, *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) by Ray Bradbury, *Never Let Me Go* (2005) by Kazuo Ishiguro, and, most recently, *The Hunger Games* (2008) series by Suzanne Collins. In each of these fictional societies, the nature of the big, oppressive government is slightly different.

For instance, some dystopian visions in that category are theocracies, as exemplified in Margaret Atwood’s novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), a place and time where secularism is eradicated, personal liberties are extremely restricted, and any former separation between church and state no longer exists. Such stories critique the rise of religious fundamentalism, and the fear of such worlds certainly drive the plots.

Others in the government pigeonhole include hypothetically-pure socialist constructs, such as George Orwell’s fable *Animal Farm* (1945), and Ayn Rand’s novel *Atlas Shrugged* (1957), where the means of production own the state, and yet, still somehow manage to foul things up for the general public, especially for individualistic, entrepreneurial types. Such plots are often driven by either a skeptical, pessimistic expectations for the masses, or an underlying presentiment of panic over the consequences of collectivism and social welfare. They operate on the assumption that the so-called people (a lazy and selfish lot), when in control of the
kingdom’s proverbial keys, are doomed to act as cause of both their own and, consequently, everyone else’s downfall.

At some undetermined point after World War II, however, the representation of gross mistrust of the government in dystopia began to shift toward a general distrust of other socioeconomic structures (Hysell). Certainly, Americans in the 1970s still expressed misgivings about the administration and authority in general. However, with the rise of speculative fiction subgenres such as Cyberpunk, a sci-fi movement ushered in by writers such as William Gibson, et al., more writers began to envisage dystopias as either capitalist oligarchies or absolute plutocracies, such as in Ridley Scott’s cinematic adaption Blade Runner (1982), for example, where soulless megacorporate entities operate unrestricted, and the wealthy elite who profit from these enterprises control almost everything. These are the so-called “corporate-based” dystopias which differ from the societal/government dystopias in that the primary repression emanates not from the government but, rather, a small faction or private company that acts as a puppet-master. Where governmental dystopias may focus on the ruling body’s efforts to maintain or proliferate its authority as a principal motive, corporate-based dystopias usually add the desire for commercial profit into the mix (“List”).

![Figure 1: “We the Corporations” (Pohl)](image-url)
Figure 1 reproduces a public domain graphic found on the blog of the late, award-winning science fiction author Frederik Pohl, in a 2012 post where he remarked on both the international “Occupy” movement, once referred to, colloquially, as the 99%, of 2011-12 (inspired partly by the Arab Spring), and on a topic he wished that the U.S. branch would focus on, that being: corporate personhood (Pohl). The legal equation of the rights of a corporation with the rights of a human being is an ongoing issue of controversy brought back into public discussion with the Supreme Court’s 2010 Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission decision which ruled that “corporations are persons” (“We”), and, as USA Today’s Fredreka Schouten recently submitted, “paved the way for unlimited corporate and union spending in candidate elections” (Schouten). It is the radical concept that a once democratic society of “we the people” either has or will evolve into one composed of “we the corporations” suggested by the graphic that is relevant to today’s discussion.

The aforestated term “megacorporation,” a word first seen in print in 1971 (Vance 269), and later popularized by William Gibson, denotes not only an “extremely large and powerful corporation (“Megacorporation,” Merriam-Webster), but also, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, “a conglomerate formed by mergers” (“Megacorporation,” OED). In the world of comic books, graphic novels, and the multitude of big-budget, Hollywood films based on them, the megacorporation is a staple concept; whether the megacorporation is benevolent or malevolent partly depends on which super-hero or super-villain it is connected to. Although these fictional worlds do not qualify, necessarily as dystopias, they are science fiction. On the virtuous side, DC Comics gives readers Wayne Enterprises (connected to the character Batman), and Queen Industries (connected to the character Green Arrow), while Marvel Comics provides Stark Industries (connected to the character Iron Man). On the malicious side, DC has LexCorp
(connected to the villain Lex Luthor), among others, and Marvel uses, quite frequently, Oscorp Industries (connected to the villains Green Goblin, Dr. Octopus, et al.).

In other forms of fiction, and, perhaps the real world, the concept of “megacorporation” usually has negative connotations; such companies, as depicted in dystopian sci-fi, are commonly characterized as evil entities, operated by directors with selfish motives and questionable ethics (“Future”). Thus, the “manifestation of the evil capitalist” (Hysell) as the problem source in dystopian societies is ushered into the popular imagination, as an alternative to the evil government.

The following section delineates just a few fictional narratives—of many—with worlds where corporations “have become so powerful and monolithic that they have [attained] complete control over the government” in which they exist (Hysell). Recently, such entities are sometimes referred to as “corporatocracies,” a phrase popularized by economist Jeffrey Sachs in his 2011 book *The Price of Civilization* (Sachs 105), and history has already seen the existence of such economic-political systems in commercial enterprises such as the East India Companies of Great Britain, France, the Netherlands, and Denmark. To illustrate the significance of a corporatocracy, at one point, the British East India company, of which the government owned no shares, “came to control half the world’s trade and, as a political entity, it administered an embryonic empire” (Farrington), in its rule of huge regions of India with private armies, that both exercised military power and assumed administrative functions (Landow; Robins 2). Such is the legacy echoed in fictional dystopias dating back to the late 1970s, where governments corrupted by wealthy, unregulated megacorporations, give rise to corporatocracies fully capable of engaging “in all sorts of amoral and unscrupulous behavior” (Hysell).
The multimedia *Alien* franchise, inaugurated by director Ridley Scott, over several film, novel, graphic novel, and video game sequel and spin-off installments from 1979-2012, reveals a disturbing profile of the Weyland-Yutani Corporation, a multinational conglomerate with “a controlling stake in a vast number of diverse corporations” (“Weyland”) that owns “pretty much everything” (Lebon 50) and—echoing the historical British East India Company—retains “or controls the United States Colonial Marine Corps” (Bogenn 40). Weyland-Yutani is so self-aware of its own status as a prehensile utopia that its official, ironic slogan is “Building Better Worlds” (Figure 2). Often referred to as “the company” by the storyline’s characters, Weyland-Yutani wants to acquire the Xenomorph alien for its weapons division. Even at the risk of exterminating humanity with this highly aggressive species, Weyland-Yutani uses its influence to order the Colonial Marines into life-threatening situations in order to retrieve them.

In the *Aliens* scenarios, it’s not the government that sits in the driver’s seat; in this dystopian setting, it’s the Weyland-Yutani Corporation (Hysell). Disagreement with the company could result in termination, ineligibility for employment with any of its affiliated companies, loss of livelihood, or worse, since some people’s bodies were used, experimentally, as involuntary hosts for the alien species. So, in the pseudo-democratic world of the Weyland-Yutani regime, there is no pretense of equality; some citizens have no rights to their own bodies,
are, in fact, the de facto property of the company, and expendable when no further worth can be assessed.

In print, Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) of which the aforementioned film *Blade Runner* (1982) was based, concerns itself with beings manufactured by the Rosen Association megacorporation called “Nexus-6 Androids.” These androids, used primarily as slaves to colonize other worlds, are so human-like, only special tests can determine if they are, in fact, robots. The “andys,” as they are called, are possibly sentient, but definitely non-human, yet still function for readers as an allegory for human workers who have been dehumanized, allowing for an ample critique of capitalism via Karl Marx’s theory of alienation (Marx 110). This is “the contention that in modern industrial production under capitalist conditions workers will inevitably lose control of their lives by losing control over their work. Workers thus cease to be autonomous beings in any significant sense” (Bramann). So, the fictional andy workers, as the proletariat of this dystopian society, are indeed alienated, as the historical Marx might have been inclined to suggest, had he lived to read the novel. However,
Dick goes a step further than Marx, insinuating that the capitalist system can also alienate, or dehumanize, those “at the top of [the] class pyramid” (“Head”) who are, in this case, the Rosens. In one key scene, protagonist Rick Deckard’s expresses a key epiphany:

Experts, he realized. Mammoth corporation like this—it embodies too much experience. It possesses in fact a sort of group mind. And Eldon and Rachael Rosen consisted as spokesmen for that corporate entity. His mistake, evidently, had been in viewing them as individuals. It was a mistake he would not make again. (Dick 53)

So, in this capitalist dystopia, where both worker bees and queen bees sacrifice themselves for the good of the company, the sense of individuality is lost for all. Typically, this type of hyper-patriotic “everything for the state” scenario is reserved for socialist dystopias, such as Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four. Dick, however, postulates the same end game for dystopias where megacorporations are the economic model. In Blade Runner, the cinematic adaption of the novel, the andys are referred to as replicants, and the name of the high-tech biocorp known as the Rosen Association is changed to the Tyrell Corporation with the company motto: “More human than human” (Douglas). In light of the Supreme Court’s 2010 Citizens United decision, where corporation personhood is firmly established (“We”), this particular byline stacks a completely different layer of meaning on top of what might have been intended in 1982.
Director James Cameron’s *Terminator* franchise, much like its *Alien* counterpart, is an ongoing, multi-genre project that spans from 1985 to the present. The *Terminator* series allows for time travel technology, so the settings of the individual installments alternate from past to present to future, often introducing alternate timelines as beings from the future change history by interfering with the past. In most cases, the future is a bleak, post-apocalyptic dystopia where artificial intelligence is the dominant species and humans are a pest, slated for total extermination by robotic soldiers called “Terminators.” In some very overt ways, this collection of narratives present a bleak commentary on “the increasingly symbiotic relationship between the military and the corporations that [have] become dependent upon military contracts,” referred to in a warning by former U. S. President Dwight Eisenhower as a “military-industrial complex” that was, even in 1961, growing in power (Hinshaw 316).

In the horrifying dystopia of the *Terminator* series, a travesty of a civilization begun by Cyberdine Systems (Figure 4), humankind has absolutely no voice or purpose for the administration. In the *Terminator* universe, Cyberdyne Systems is “initially a benign manufacturing corporation” located in California, that grows in significance when it when it discovers and then reverse engineers the remaining fragments of a Terminator machine sent from the future, that was accidently crushed in its factory’s hydraulic press after a battle it lost (“Cyberdyne”). From the Terminator’s sole surviving arm and CPU, Cyberdine “creates a powerful new microprocessor for weapons systems, becoming a major contractor for the US military” and evolves into the very enterprise behind the creation of Skynet,” a “network of supercomputers that employ artificial intelligence in order to replace human beings as commercial and military aircraft pilots, and for the control of other military systems, including nuclear missiles” (RSI). Since this occurred in 1997, a date now passed in actual history,
technology-gurus Elon Musk and Bill Gates weren’t available or ready to warn the world about the potential dangers of A.I. Gates’s relevance to this narrative becomes clear in *T2 3-D: Battle Across Time* which was, as of 2012, an attraction at Universal Studios in Orlando, Florida (“T2”). When participants were ushered into the exhibit, “the Director of Community Relations and Media Control for Cyberdyne Systems” (“Kimberly”) would explain that the entity resembles “a combination of the real-world tech companies IBM, Apple Inc., and Microsoft among others” (“Cyberdyne”). The ongoing popularity of this franchise has guaranteed its reboot later this year as *Terminator Genisys*.

![Figure 5: Omni Consumer Products Original Corporate Logo (Stranger; Hall)](image)

In 2014, Brazilian film director José Padilha rebooted the beloved *RoboCop* franchise, which demonstrates that an interest still exists in this narrative. In the original series of films, live-action television series, animated television series, graphic novels, and video games, which ran from 1987 to 2001, the imagined dystopia was, much like Plato’s city of Kallipolis in *The Republic* (380 B.C.E.), limited to one city, in this case the remains of what was once Detroit, Michigan. Most importantly, however, for the purposes of this discussion, was that the chief antagonist in the *Robocop* narratives was Omni Consumer Products (Figure 5), generally referred to as OCP, an entity which could be defined as a both a megacorporation, much like Cyberdine/Skynet in the *Terminator* series, and a corporatocracy, much like the fictional
Weyland-Yutani of the *Aliens* series, and the non-fictional British East India Company, which existed from the year 1600 to 1873 (Landow).

In the original 1987 film, the mighty OCP, an exclusive conglomerate with divisions that impact virtually every strata of governmental, societal, and consumer necessity, had its tentacles in, among other things, private space travel and, most importantly, military weaponry of the robotic variety (“Omni”). OCP has entirely privatized the former, crime-ridden city of Detroit, including its police department, transforming it into a manufactured municipality known as “Delta City.” OCP permits the population of Delta City to participate in a form of representative citizenship by procuring shares of its stock (“Omni”); those who own the most, it would seem, have the most say about what happens. This corporatocracy has the ability to spin itself as a democratic institution, in the sense that anyone, in theory, may buy-in; however, in actuality, the few who are wealthy enough to buy the controlling shares make the construct of Delta City an oligarchical plutocracy, i.e. a utopia for the upper economic classes, and a dystopia for everyone else.

Hence, the dystopia of *Robocop*, much like the *Alien* films, is not a socialist paradise, devoid of capitalist influence. It is, rather the exact opposite. As the University of Texas’s Steve Best has asserted, “in Robocop we witness not the demise of capitalism,” rather its intensification” (Best). The malevolent leaders of OCP oversee “the universalization of market relations, the transmutation of capital as abstract circulation of information and images, and the colonization of new economic spaces—urban gentrification, privatization of prisons and hospitals, automation of the workplace, mass media, and, that ‘final frontier,’ outer space.”

Crime in Delta City, Best continues, which includes:

- drugs, gambling, and prostitution also become important avenues of capital accumulation as the distinctions between civilian, business, and military, legal and illegal, order and
disorder, implode in the movement of capital which is always already violent, immoral, and anarchic, and is itself an implosive logic, prior to and independent of the implosive effects of mass media. (Best)

Accordingly, in this speculative future, the rise of inner-city crime and/or big government either may or may not have been the sources of the initial societal breakdown. Regardless of what brought things to a breaking point, instead of a strong, centralized government riding in on a proverbial white horse to save society from its own collapse, it would seem that an imagined private sector took this mantle of responsibility upon itself. However, the overall tone of Robocop promotes the idea that the corporate city-state experiment is irrevocably corrupt, and exists to benefit the privileged one percent, and not the impoverished masses. Just as in the previous examples of cyberpunk, the sci-fi subgenre that brought the terms “megacity” and “megacorporation” into the vernacular (Hermansson), the Delta City model illustrates how “a weakened state and the rise of super-powerful corporations” are the real, underlying threats to society, in this particular type of dystopian fantasy (Anders).

There seems to be no end to the growing number of other works, including the video game genre, where this type of analysis needs to continue, some of which I hope you’ll be open to discuss at this roundtable. For example, late twentieth and early twenty-first century films with corporatocratic physiognomies might include: 1973’s Soylent Green, 1995’s Tank Girl, 2001’s A.I., The Resident Evil video game and cinematic series, which began in film in 2002, 2005’s The Island, 2008’s WALL-E, 2009’s Daybreakers, and 2014’s The Lego Movie, to name only a few pertinent examples. And so, as we begin the open discussion portion of this session, let’s earnestly explore, together, the previously posed questions of (a.) “which parts of this particular discourse have not been acknowledged?,” and, (b.) regarding ethical business practices, “which ones, specifically, might be revisited as a positive and more optimistic
response to this current trend in speculative fiction?” Thank you, and I look forward to your input this afternoon.

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The Future Will Be A Privatized Corporate Dystopia


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