

**"It's All Par for the Lifestyle, Kids": Conventional Metaphors for Risk and
Misfortune in Cyberpunk and Post-Cyberpunk Literature**

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The title quote for this paper comes from the 2008 novel, *Moxyland*, by Lauren Beukes. The plot of *Moxyland* focuses on the intertwining of the lives of four twenty-somethings residing in a Capetown of the near future. Reviewers tend to categorize this first novel by Beukes as either a member of or a descendent of a subgenre of science fiction labeled 'cyberpunk,' acknowledging the novel's solid roots in the original 1984 cyberpunk novel *Neuromancer*, by William Gibson. Fellow science fiction/cyberpunk author Charles Stross defines Beukes' novel as "... what you get when you take your classic 80s deracinated corporate alienation sensibility, detonate about six kilos of Semtex under it, and scatter the smoking wreckage across 21st century South Africa – [...] the larval form of a new kind of SF munching its way out of the intestines of the wasp-paralysed caterpillar of cyberpunk" (*Praise for Moxyland*).

As in all attempts at generic definition and most especially attempts within the fast-changing cultural environment of science fiction, descriptions of cyberpunk (and post-cyberpunk) vary. But, even among those who see elements of science fictional neorealism in cyberpunk, certain characteristics of the subgenre are considered stereotypic: (1) an exploration of emerging technologies' potential societal impacts in the near future; (2) characters who are adept at the manipulation of these technologies (cyber-cowboys) yet operate outside mainstream corporate society; and (3) an at least

marginally dystopic urban/suburban setting. As Lance Olsen contextualizes this in his 1992 article “Cyberpunk and the Crisis of Postmodernity”:

Cyberpunk might initially appear to be science fiction’s version of neorealism [...]. Clearly [...] similarities exist and are worth exploring, but a fundamental difference in vision separates neorealism and cyberpunk. Neorealism ultimately expresses a conservative narrative and metaphysical consciousness; cyberpunk in its purest form expresses a radical one (147).

He adds that cyberpunk explores the “heterogeneous fringes of our society,” questions the “shared perceptions of an empirical universe,” and challenges logic, chronology, and selfhood (148). In other words, with its combination of near future setting and rebellious characters and narrative, cyberpunk is that subgenre of science fiction most directly associated with radically independent revisionings of today’s society. For those who consider 1980s style cyberpunk to be ineffectual, to be “wasp-paralyzed,” ‘post-cyberpunk’ becomes the label of choice for newer, ‘hipper’ near future revisionings.

As SF author/scholar Samuel R. Delany and others have noted, readers of science fiction are particularly primed to be aware of literal interpretations for what are more normally metaphoric expressions. Seo-young Chu, in her recent book *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep*, goes so far as to argue that “lyric figures are systematically literalized, substantiated, and consolidated in science fiction as ontological features of narrative worlds” (10-11). The title quote for this paper, however, is not representative of the creative metaphors that can be given a literal, if fictional, existence in science fiction. Nor is it intended to be taken literally.

The narrator who speaks those title words in *Moxyland*, one of four narrators in this novel, is a young man named Toby who considers himself an up-and-coming blogger of a slightly futuristic sort. Specifically, Toby wears an expensive, high-tech coat that records

and potentially broadcasts live everything around him, while simultaneously displaying other images on its surface to a local audience. It's useful to know that Toby's narration is frequently also clearly commentary for his audience.

Early in the novel, when Toby's ostentatiously wealthy mother stops giving him money because she does not want to continue to support his lifestyle and drug use, he goes to a rundown, derelict neighborhood to see an acquaintance who might help him earn some cash using his online gaming skills. As Toby describes the way his acquaintance lives:

It's all borderline illegal, mainly because of the health hazard he and his slumfriends pose, but at least they're not drug dealers or human traffickers or anti-corporate terrorists, which are all the cops really care about. Occasionally, they'll get harassed, mainly for tapping into the grid and using juice they're not paying for, and they've had to move twice already in the last six months, but it's all par for the lifestyle, kids. Take note before you consider a career in the lucrative but feckless world of underground game-dealing." (p. 93-94)

Toby, who has never needed a full-time job or worried about power bills, seems to have a particular and somewhat romantic view of the less than luxurious circumstances of these game-dealers. Additionally, what I particularly want to draw attention to here is that he represents this view by paraphrasing the extremely common conventional game/sport-based metaphor "par for the course."¹

The potential significance of Toby's metaphoric phrasing comes from contemporary cognitive linguistics theories, which unlike traditional metaphor theories, do not consider conventional, 'dead' metaphors to be lacking in metaphoric impact. In particular, cognitive linguistic theories, supported by psycholinguistic studies, argue that conventional linguistic metaphors arise from, reflect, and reinforce *conceptual*

metaphors, which are not linguistic forms but are rather fundamental elements of how we perceive and relate to the world, of how we understand reality (Lakoff and Johnson 3). These conceptual metaphors can be culture-specific and are frequently based in “image schemas” tied to our physical perceptions of the world.

One way to recognize the existence of a particular conceptual metaphor is to discover the linguistic reflections of it, and a conceptual metaphor may have many different linguistic instantiations. For example, one conceptual metaphor that is reflected in a large number of conventional metaphors is ARGUMENT IS WAR (Lakoff and Johnson 4). Lakoff and Johnson, in their seminal work *Metaphors we Live By*, provide several compelling examples of conventional metaphors that seem to be linguistic instantiations of this conceptual metaphor:

Your claims are *indefensible*.

He *attacked every weak point* in my argument.

His criticisms were *right on target*.

I *demolished* his argument.

You disagree? Okay, *shoot!*

If you use that *strategy*, he'll *wipe you out*.

He *shot down* all of my arguments. (Lakoff and Johnson 4)

A large number of conceptual metaphors have been noted for our culture, including such relatively clear examples as LIFE IS A JOURNEY/ PURPOSES ARE JOURNEYS, TIME IS MOTION/MOVEMENT, HIGH STATUS IS UP-LOW STATUS IS DOWN, HAPPY IS UP-SAD IS DOWN.² There is of course no comprehensive list of all the conceptual metaphors of our or any other society, and one could argue about which are

¹ This metaphoric phrase apparently appears on websites almost 20,000,000 times as counted in a March 2011 Google search.

the more central or basic conceptual metaphors and which are more complex derivatives, but it is reasonable to suppose (and in fact seems supported even by the few examples just mentioned) that some of our conceptual metaphors relate directly or indirectly to our understanding of fortune, misfortune, and risk-taking.

So, getting back to the metaphor Toby uses early in *Moxyland*, we can look at it in terms of its possibly relationship to any conceptual metaphor that shapes our understanding of misfortune, a particularly relevant concept for cyberpunk. Games and sports are certainly common source domains in English metaphors (You make your bets, you take your chances, go for the brass ring, shoot for the moon, etc.) and this provides evidence to support the idea that we have a conceptual metaphor LIFE IS A GAME/SPORT.³ Toby's metaphoric expression "par for the lifestyle," while a mildly creative play on the more dead metaphor "par for the course," very strongly evokes this conceptual metaphor. If cognitive linguists are correct, then the use of this metaphor, no matter how superficially dead, will activate some cognition related to gaming. In this instance, it makes sense that Toby is, in fact, portraying his view in terms of his and perhaps his acquaintances' own game focus.

If, however, cyberpunk is radical literature, detaching experience from cultural norms, then there may be the potential for cognitive conflict between cyberpunk themes and the presence of conventional "dead" metaphors whose source domains do in fact have communicative impact. While Toby in particular is not the most culturally estranged character in cyberpunk, nor even in *Moxyland*, some questions about the relationship

² Lakoff and Johnson 1980 is a good source for many additional examples, as is Kovecses 2002/

³ . Kovecses 2002 has specifically proposed the cognitive metaphor LIFE IS A GAMBLING GAME.

between cyberpunk and cognitive metaphor seem natural: First, to what extent are contemporary conceptual metaphors unintentionally evoked or perhaps intentionally highlighted and manipulated in cyberpunk novels? Next, how might the presence of linguist instantiations of particular conceptual metaphors interact with the more radical ideas, images and metaphors of cyberpunk? And of course, how do we evaluate the impact of evoked conceptual metaphors within the context of shifting points of view in these novels? To begin to address these questions, I chose to do a preliminary study of conceptual metaphors for fortune and misfortune in three cyberpunk or post-cyberpunk novels published over three decades—Gibson’s *Neuromancer*, *Snow Crash* by Neal Stephenson, published in 1992, and *Moxyland*.

A glance at any newspaper article or scholarly paper will illustrate that conventional metaphors are ubiquitous in language use, yet how radical can a text be if it continually evokes the prevailing metaphoric conceptualizations of our world? One way to get around this problem could be to avoid any language on a subject. In fact, while misfortune is highly visible through strong implicatures in references to setting and plot in the three cyberpunk novels I examined, direct references to fortune and misfortune are very limited. For example, in *Neuromancer*, Gibson never once even uses the words “fortunate” or “unfortunate” or their equivalent adverbs, and uses “fortune” only three times, always referring to money. There are a total of eleven instances of the word “luck” or its derivative “lucky,” but none said by or reflecting the point of view of the cyber-cowboy protagonist, Case. The closest is when Case is watching a bit of Chinese viral software in cyberspace that is intended to target a rogue AI and the narrator tells us, “Case watched childhood symbols of evil and bad luck tumble out along translucent

planes, swastikas, skulls and crossbones, dice flashing snake eyes (174).” Even here, it is the nature of the cyberspace representation of bad luck, that it turns software into images that relate to human experience, rather than a representation of the radical worldview of any character. Similarly, dead metaphors like “in trouble” and “hard times” are also absent from the text.

Gibson does, however, make obvious reference to one misfortune in *Neuromancer*, and he uses and highlights a conventional metaphor to do so. The misfortune is Case’s who, we learn at the beginning of the novel, has been mentally crippled by a neurotoxin that destroyed certain small parts of his nervous system necessary for him to experience cyberspace. The narrator describes this as follows: “The damage was minute, subtle, and utterly effective. For Case, who’d lived for the bodiless exultation of cyberspace, it was *the Fall*. (*note capital) [...] The body was meat. Case *fell into* the prison of his own flesh. (6)” The conceptual metaphor at work here is, roughly speaking, CHANGE FOR THE WORSE IS DOWN. The metaphor is evoked twice in a row, by the words “the Fall”, which is capitalized, and “fell into.” Here, though, Gibson is applying a conventional metaphor to an unusual type of misfortune, the “misfortune” of being forced to have one’s mind housed in one’s (perfectly healthy) body. Metaphors of “falling” or “down” or “weight pressing down” continue to occur sporadically throughout the novel, often related in some way to Case’s perceptions or circumstances.⁴ The conceptual

⁴ For example, on page 173, Molly, a bodyguard or “razorgirl” who has semi-befriended Case says to him, “Guess you’re kind of like he (her ex-boyfriend) was,” [...] “Think you’re born to run. Figure what you were into back in Chiba, that was a stripped down version of what you’d be doing anywhere. Bad luck, it’ll do that sometimes, get you down to basics.” Notice that *she* does reference bad luck. See also a “weight of memory” reference on page 155.

metaphor CHANGE FOR THE WORSE IS DOWN also, in part, succeeds in maintaining the novel's cyberpunk sensibilities because the falling is again tied to the metaphor of cyberspace itself, which represents itself to the mind as a physical space that one can indeed rise into or fall from.

Finally, Gibson's awareness of and selective use of the CHANGE FOR THE WORSE IS DOWN metaphor is highlighted further by a direct narrative challenging of another conceptual metaphor – IDEAS ARE (LINGUISTIC) OBJECTS.⁵ When Case encounters Wintermute, a powerful AI who appears in cyberspace as people from his past, he is concerned that Wintermute can read his mind. Wintermute clarifies the situation, saying “Minds aren't *read*. See, you've still got the paradigms print gave you, and you're barely print-literate. I can *access* your memory, but that's not the same as your mind” (145).

In *Snow Crash*, misfortune is also recognized largely through inference (though variants on the word 'luck' do pop up in minor contexts). Additionally, there are two protagonists in this novel, both of whom at least try to consider themselves more rebellious than unfortunate. While Hiro Protagonist, one of the protagonists of *Snow Crash*, lives in a U-Stor-It unit with a wannabe rock star roommate, when the narrative reflects his point of view (and narrative point of view is very subjective in this novel), it simply points out that there are worse places, like the smaller units with no direct outside access. (19) For most of the novel, Hiro represents himself to be a thirty year old rebel who has rejected the corporate lifestyle to be a hacker (and sometime badass pizza delivery guy). His physical circumstances, however, as well as his failed relationships and his references to his own age (as in, “Software development, like professional sports,

has a way of making thirty-year-old men feel decrepit” (56)) serve as hints that he is not completely satisfied with his situation in life. The novel’s second protagonist, a fifteen year old girl who calls herself YT (for Yours Truly), reflects not on her own misfortunes but on the misfortunes of others. For example, when she is in the hands of a bizarre religious cult, the narrator tells us, “Sometimes, she worries about her mother, then she hardens her heart and thinks maybe the whole thing will be good for her. Shake her up a little. Which is what she needs. After Dad left, she just *folded up into herself* like an origami bird thrown into a fire” (323). Here the relevant conceptual metaphor is, again roughly, MENTAL PROBLEMS ARE PHYSICAL ENTRAPMENTS/ISOLATION. A variation on this metaphor appears just a few lines later, while the narrator is still presenting YT’s point of view. This time we learn what her work processing fish for this cult has taught her:

[...] she [...] realizes that this is just like life must be for about 99 percent of the people in the world. You’re in this place. There’s other people all around you, but they don’t understand you and you don’t understand them, but people do a lot of pointless babbling anyway. In order to stay alive, you have to spend all day every day doing stupid meaningless work. And the only way to get out of it is to quit, cut loose, take a flyer, and go off into the wicked world, where you will be *swallowed up* and never heard from again (324).

Overall, Stephenson, like Gibson, seems to use *some* linguistic forms tied to prevailing conceptual metaphors, but uses them for specific purposes.

In *Moxyland*, the most recent of the three novels, Beukes appears to seek some consistency for each of the four narrators in terms of what conceptual metaphors, and particularly what metaphors for misfortune, are instantiated, though more random examples show up in the dialogue of other characters. The narrations of Kendra, Toby,

⁵ This metaphor relates to the famous “conduit metaphor” (cf. Reddy 1979), which envisions language as physically passing thoughts from one mind to another one.

Tendeka, and Lerato are interwoven (and each chapter is titled just by the name of the narrator of that chapter). Toby does not get the first word; Kendra, a young talented but struggling photographer who likes to use old film, does. At the start of the novel Kendra is about to be injected with nanotechnology that will both protect her health and turn her into a sort of human marketing tool for a soft drink called 'ghost.' Kendra's language is peppered with literal and figurative images of the power of natural forces to overcome things (and herself). She is "effluent," "reeling" from the forces pushing at her, and she talks about how people can be "worn hollow." To give just one example, as she is heading to the corporate medical center to get her injection, she observes:

The corporate line shushes through the tunnels on a skin of seawater, overflow from the tide drives put to practical use in the clanking watery bowels of Cape Town – like all the *effluent* (emphasis mine) in this city. Like me. Art school dropout reinvented as shiny brand ambassador. Sponsor baby. Ghost girl. (7)

Tendeka, the most idealistic and rebellious but naïve of the narrators, is a social worker activist who is starting to consider more radical activism. His metaphors seem to be the most unoriginal and conservative – problems 'come down' and are "heavy." This ultimately works as an effective choice because we eventually learn that Tendeka has been tricked by corporate powers into playing the role of corporate terrorist. Both Tendeka and Kendra die at the end of the novel.

The other two narrators in *Moxyland*, Toby and Lerato, are alive at the end of the novel, and may possibly even be (at least temporarily) in greatly improved circumstances. Toby, who repeatedly speaks of life, risk, and fortune in terms of games and/or war, has gained all the immunities of Kendra's nanotechnology (they had sex once) but it is not (yet) a tool of the giant corporation that ultimately decided to kill Kendra. Lerato, who is a gifted programmer, has been given a huge promotion by her corporation because the

activities that she saw as rebellious and risky were actually a proving ground of a sort for the corporation. A conceptual metaphor that seems to play at least some role in her world view is HUMAN AS MECHANISM/MACHINE. For example, she sees the one bit of good fortune to come from her family background to be a “*kick start* into corporate life” (133).

Ironically, the last metaphoric expressions in both the final Lerato chapter and the final Toby chapter, are completely conventional. Lerato’s new boss tells her, “Smart girl. You’ll be running several identities, posting inciting organizing. Whatever is required. Let’s just say you’re on the top. Heading skywards.” (358) The conventional actually highlights the fact that Lerato’s good fortune is a tenuous one. (If she had refused the corporate offer, they would have pushed her out the window of a high rise building.) Similarly, Toby’s final lines (and the book’s) evoke HAPPY IS LIGHT in the most conventional possible way. He says, “I step out of the door into a whole new *bright* world, feeling exhausted and exhilarated. And thirsty” (367). Toby’s thirst is the indication that he, like Kendra, will feel compelled to drink large quantities of Ghost and will reveal his nanotech infestation in other ways as well. He may not stay free of corporate controls for long.

Overall, like Gibson and Stephenson, Beukes seems to be largely conscious of her uses of linguistic expressions based on dominant conceptual metaphors, at least of those related to fortune and misfortune. While the novels may not avoid all allusion to unintended and contradictory concepts buried in conventional metaphors, this study suggests that these cyberpunk authors do pay some attention, not only to the creative use of metaphors to enhance their own themes but to the power of “dead” metaphors to

reintroduce the literal source domains into our thoughts. Perhaps, then, this is related to science fiction authors'/readers' expectations about metaphor, to their awareness that all metaphor can be made literal in narrative worlds.

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