

The blending of bending: how we engage with the world of *Avatar: The Last Airbender* through memes

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People often use memes to express their ideological stance on real world events. This study departs from a recent COVID-19-related meme which makes use of elements known from the animated television series *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (ATLA) and *Avatar: Legend of Korra* (LOK), and asks how it came to be and how stance is conveyed through them. After acknowledging the impact of the series, conceptual blending theory is adopted to investigate the worldbuilding of the macrocosm in ATLA. This is identified as a correlative network, which acts as the blended space of multiple input spaces consisting of intertextual references. The world of ATLA then functions as a new input space which is updated with modern elements, resulting in the blend of LOK. Minor blends are identified in the hybrid animals that occupy the fictional world. Lastly, it is shown how the selection of a particular input element for participation in meme blends already conveys an ideological stance, rather than only emerging through readers' eyes.

Keywords: blending theory, Avatar, correlative network, four elements, memes, coronavirus, COVID-19

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1. Introduction

It is not uncommon to find memes that interweave popular culture with real world events to express and spread one's political stance on an event (Shifman, 2014; Wiggins, 2019). As an example, Wiggins (2019) discusses former USA President Barack Obama displayed as the Joker from the Batman series in 2009. Originally conceived as a form of criticism to Obama's policies on healthcare, the meme was adopted by mostly right-leaning groups such as the Tea Party or *Birther* movements (Jenkins et al., 2013; Phillips, 2009; Wiggins, 2019). However, blending a president and the Joker can also be viewed as a positive thing by the same politically oriented groups: when 2016 presidential candidate Donald Trump was presented as the Joker, they interpreted him more as a political wildcard, who came from outside the established political system (Wiggins, 2017) rather than an opposition of his policies. Thus, while memes are used by people to express their uniqueness and connectivity at the same time, a "networked individualism" (Shifman, 2014), Wiggins (2019) argues that they are neutral; the interpretative salience of the individuals and groups who share and interpret them actively are the heart of the matter. In other words, the burden of meaning is placed on the receiver of the meme.

However, not all memes are as neutral as argued. As the starting point, we show Figure 1, a meme shared in Subtle Asian Traits (Abidin & Zeng, 2020; Koh, 2020), a Facebook group for ethnic Asian young adults living in Anglophone countries to share their experiences of the Asian diaspora (Koh, 2020). At the moment of writing, this group harbors close to 2 million members. This meme reveals at least four important observations. First, at face value we have a cartoon character who is giving a press conference, seemingly from the White House, stating that "There is no second COVID-19 wave". Second, the character is immediately identifiable as Joo Dee, well-known to the fans of the Nickelodeon hit series *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. Joo Dee's job as a spokesperson of official government policy is to spread propaganda in the fictional city of Ba Sing Se that there is no war, while in fact, in the so-called Avatarverse, the war has been going on for a hundred years. This meme thus reverses the statement about the second wave of COVID-19. Third, it is important to highlight that this meme was shared in Subtle Asian Traits, where the audience is extremely likely to be familiar with the source material. Finally, this meme is not neutral if understood, given the nature of the

Joo Dee character; there is no scenario in which she can be used as the smiling person with a truthful positive message, without losing the very nature of her persona.



Figure 1. THERE IS NO WAR IN BA SING SE meme with ‘coronavirus’: Joo Dee on the second wave, creator Instagram handle Kaldur, Subtle Asian Traits, July 2020

The aim of this paper is to better understand the possible mechanisms for having these types of cultural and stanced engagements with the source material. In other words, how do such memes that interweave real-life events with cartoon elements come to be? And how are they used as vehicles to provide commentary on real-life events? Since memes to a certain extent rely on shared in-group knowledge and insights, it is necessary to first become familiar with the fictional world of the source material, in this case the world of *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (ATLA) and its sequel *Avatar: Legend of Korra* (LOK). After introducing the Avatarverse, its impact in popular culture and scholarly debate (section 2), we will adopt conceptual integration theory (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002) to show the construction of the macrocosm of ATLA (section 3). This is supplemented with minor blends, found in the names of hybrid animals and their usage in blended idioms (section 4). Next, the world of ATLA is regarded as a new input space and blends with elements of modernity in order create the fictional world of LOK (section 5). Finally, then, the ideological and creative engagements with this source material are showcased through memes that display shared and transferable insights based on references to both source and target (section 6).

2. The Avatarverse and its impact on culture and scholarly research

The source material for this paper draws from the fictional world in the Nickelodeon animated television series *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (ATLA), created by Michael Dante DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko, initially running from February 2005 until July 2008. The story takes place in a world in which a number of people are able to ‘bend’ one of the four elements: water, earth, fire and air. Bending is the show’s version of a magic system (DiMartino & Konietzko, 2010, p. 26) and entails that you can control that element through a form of martial arts. However, one person can bend all four elements — the Avatar. The main plot of the story is summarized in the opening sequence, presented below:

“Water. Earth. Fire. Air. Long ago the four nations lived together in harmony. Then, everything changed when the Fire Nation attacked. Only the Avatar, master of all four elements could stop them. But when the world needed him most, he vanished. A hundred years passed, and my brother and I discovered the new Avatar, an airbender named Aang. And although his airbending skills are great, he has a lot to learn before he’s ready to save anyone. But I believe Aang can save the world.” (abridged opening sequence of *Avatar: The Last Airbender*)

As can be seen, the Avatar suddenly vanished but was found by two teenagers from the Southern Water Tribe, the waterbender Katara and her older non-bender brother Sokka. Together they help the Avatar, named Aang, in his quest against the imperialistic Fire Nation. After ATLA ended, a sequel was produced, entitled *Avatar: The Legend of Korra* (LOK), which ran from 2012 until 2014. This story is set 70 years after the first series and deals with the new Avatar, called Korra. The franchise is currently being expanded in the medium of comic books. While the source material is ever-increasing, the data in this study is limited to the *Avatar* world as portrayed in the animated television series ATLA and LOK, as well as six published graphic novels: *The Promise* (Yang, 2013), *The Search* (Yang, 2014), *The Rift* (Yang, 2015), *Smoke and Shadow* (Yang, 2016), *North and South* (Yang, 2017), and *Imbalance* (Hicks, 2020). There has also been a controversial (see below) live-action adaptation *The Last Airbender* (2010, Paramount, directed by M. Night Shyamalan).

That ATLA and LOK have an important place in popular culture can be inferred through five main indicators. (1) The storyline is still under active development. (2) The

televised series' viewer ratings on the Internet Movie Database are remarkably high. For example, ATLA has an average score of 9.3/10, ranking 10th in the top 250 TV shows (IMDb, 2021). (3) Intertextual references in popular culture, such as the opening of *The Simpsons* (S22E21, "500 Keys"), which featured the four elements of the Avatarverse, are a clear nod to the large fanbase. (4) Dedicated websites like the *Avatar Wiki* (Avatar Wikia, 2005) with more than 12,000 articles, social networking sites like Tumblr, e.g., *Avatar: The Last Airbender Annotations* (A:TLA Annotations, 2016), video platforms like YouTube, e.g. *Hello Future Me* (Hickson, 2015), or large Facebook groups such as the aforementioned Subtle Asian Traits, indicate a large audience. (5) Translations of ATLA and LOK into other languages have helped the Avatarverse to carve out its place in pop culture.

Most scholarly research thus far has focused on ATLA rather than LOK, the exception being a sociological study of the lesbian subtext in LOK (Langner, 2015). Karla (2010) studied the narrative and the intertextuality of the worldbuilding of the Avatarverse, especially with regards to clothing. Liddell (2014) also studies separate threads of intertextual references, by focusing on the resemblance of the Fire Nation to the Japanese empire during the Second World War and the public memories of that period. Tan (2014) examines East Asian, South Asian and Western references in three domains: landscape and architecture, clothing, and lifestyle. Johnsson (2014) takes a similar approach to Tan (2014). He investigates the hermeneutic elements in ATLA, with special attention given to Hinduism, Tantrism, Buddhism and other East Asian elements. In general, these studies provide systematic collections of intertextual references. However, they rarely go beyond description, instead cataloguing the references that aid in the development of the fictional world.

It is actually the live-action full-length feature, *The Last Airbender*, which has induced most debate as it was generally disliked by the fans of the show. This is evident from consistently received negative reviews, e.g., 5% on the *tomatometer* and 30% audience score (Rotten Tomatoes, 2020). The film sparked universal outrage due to the

whitewashing of three main characters, a phenomenon now known as *racebending*¹, a pun on the bending of the elements that is so central to the Avatarverse (Lopez, 2012). Despite this cry for an Asian cast for this obviously Asian-inspired fictional world, it has been noted that the Avatarverse appears “at least as reflective of Western tradition as it is of Asian” Gruenewald (2015, p. 180). This is corroborated by the author of the graphic novels of the Avatarverse, the American-born Chinese artist Gene Luen Yang. In an interview Yang comments:

I really see Avatar: The Last Airbender as an American coming-of-age story set in an Asian fantasy environment. Each of the four nations draws heavily from specific Asian or Inuit cultures. The Avatarverse is Asian the way Middle Earth is English. Air Nomad culture, for instance, is Tibetan Buddhism as seen through a fantastical, mythologized lens. It’s apparent in Aang’s clothes, in his philosophy, even in his food. However, many of the coming-of-age milestones in the series are American, or at least modern and Western. The young people have to define themselves apart from their parents and families, relying primarily on their peer group. Friendships and romantic relationships develop along modern, Western patterns. [...] The “Asian-ness” of the series is no accident, of course. Not only are Mike [DiMartino], Bryan [Konietzko], and their team incredibly talented, they also did their homework. They carefully studied the cultures that they were pulling from. And they actively sought creative partnership with the Korean animators who worked the series. From what I can gather about the animation industry (admittedly, I’m no expert) this is unusual. (Gene Yang in Lee (2011), also cited in Gruenewald 2015:178; emphases by author).

From this quote, it is clear that ATLA and LOK have a dual identity²: the Asian elements that make up the world itself, and the more “American, or at least modern and

¹ The racebending movement (www.racebending.com) is a grassroots organization of media consumers who advocate for underrepresented groups in entertainment media, and are opposed to phenomena like ‘whitewashing’ and ‘yellowface’ in movies and television.

² It is not very surprising that with this dual identity of American and Asian elements, there are frequent cultural engagements, such as memes, shared in Facebook groups like Subtle Asian

Western” storyline (see quote above). If the storyline is indeed westernized, we should be able to place it in a framework of rhetorical archetypes prevalent in Western stories. For instance, a useful typology can be found in Mendlesohn (2008), who discerns four archetypes of rhetoric in fantasy novels, depending on the way the fantastic is present or presented: in the portal-quest type, a character leaves her familiar surroundings and passes through a portal into an unknown place; in the immersive type, is a complete world in which the fantastic permeates everything; in the intrusion type, the fantastic enters the fictional world, bringing the character out of balance; and in the liminal fantasy type, the fantastic is normalized. Mendlesohn’s (2008) contribution also recognizes that most stories are in fact hybrids, and we argue that the same can be said for ATLA and LOK.

In general, the world in which the storylines are set can best be characterized as an immersive fantasy: the world feels complete, with no external influences. In the Avatarverse it is perceived as normal that some people can bend the elements (section 3) and that fantastical hybrid animals exist (section 4). The viewer is thus easily coaxed into accepting that there are a certain set of rules that govern this world and which are consistent.

The storyline of ATLA, in which Avatar Aang has to defeat the Firelord and bring balance to the world, is a typical portal-quest fantasy. It is a coming-of-age story (Gruenewald, 2015), with a clear structure into three stages of the journey (the three seasons that make up the series of ATLA). In the first season the discovery of airbender and avatar Aang by Katara and Sokka is the portal which sets the story in motion. Additionally, Aang has to learn how to bend his first non-native element, namely water. In season two, Aang moves on to acquire earthbending skills. In season three, he obtains the skill to bend fire, and thus becomes a fully realized avatar.

On the other hand, LOK exhibits characteristics of an intrusion fantasy. The first season starts with some kind of balance in a new world (see section 6) which is disturbed by the antagonist Amon who plans to make benders and non-benders equal by introducing a device that can take away bending capabilities. The second season’s intrusion is the opening of portals by Korra’s uncle Unalaq that allow for the cross-over between the human world and the spirit world. In season three, the aftermath of this opening suddenly

Traits, whose members also often feel like they have this dual identity (Abidin & Zeng, 2020; Koh, 2020).

enables a number of people to acquire newfound bending skills. One of these new airbenders, Zaheer, aims to overthrow all governments, such as the old Earth Kingdom, and plunge the known world into anarchy. In season four, then, the ensuing chaos is taken advantage of by an authoritarian leader Kuvira, in the establishment of an Earth Empire. These are clear intrusion fantasies because with every season, some of the established rules of the worldbuilding change, and the main characters must contend with this entropy. Although the rhetorical style between ATLA and LOK is notably different, it is nevertheless clear that the immersive strategy for the worldbuilding provides a rich background for the stories to play out. In the next section we will investigate the different strands that make up this world, and will do so from the perspective of blending theory.

3. Building the world of ATLA through blending

The biggest theoretical extension of conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), *conceptual integration*—also known as *blending theory* (Coulson & Oakley, 2000; Fauconnier & Turner, 2002)—has been proposed as a framework for analyzing complex metaphorical structures (Geeraerts, 2010, pp. 210–213), e.g., novel compounds like caffeine headache (Turner, 2007). Blending theory rests on the meaningful integration of different input spaces, resulting in a blended space. In the standard descriptive model, the input spaces correlate with the source and target domains familiar from conceptual metaphor. However, the advantage of blending theory is that no directionality is presumed, and that different elements from each input space may participate in the blend, or can be excluded from it, meaning that conceptual metaphors can be viewed as a more constrained case of conceptual integration (Geeraerts, 2010). Links between elements of the input spaces are made through shared schematic material in a generic space. The resulting blended space, then, can be seen as more than the sum of its parts in the input spaces: Turner’s caffeine headache example can be read as ‘a headache caused by the presence of caffeine’ or ‘a headache caused by the lack of caffeine’, depending on whether the referent is not used to drinking coffee in the morning or is in the habit of doing so. This means that blending theory presupposes a substantial amount of encyclopedic knowledge in order for the cognitive mechanism to be felicitous.

Apart from applications to such compounds or lexical blends of the type brunch < breakfast + lunch; glitterati < glitter + literati (Hamans, 2010; Kemmer, 2003), the theory has been fruitfully used to analyze features of the comic book medium (Forceville

& Urios-Aparisi, 2009; Forceville, 2013, 2016; Cohn, 2016), as well as to fictional worlds, such as the *Discworld* novels by Terry Pratchett (Džereń-Głowacka, 2012). Given this fruitful application of blending theory to fictional worlds, this paper also analyzed the Avatarverse with blending theory on three different levels: the macrocosm (worldbuilding), the phrasal level and the word level, so as to prepare the discussion on memes based on this fictional world.

As is evident from section 2, the Avatarverse is composed of a multitude of intertextual references, e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Hindu, Buddhist, and Tibetan cultures. A clear example of such influences can be found in the names of some of the main characters, as shown in Table 1. These explanations can all be found on the *Avatar Wiki* (Avatar Wikia, 2005), and in the intertextual literature mentioned above. Note that the writing system in the Avatarverse is Chinese characters.

Nation	Character	Reference
Air Nomads	Aang /æŋ/ ³	Chinese <i>Ān'áng</i> 安昂 'peaceful soaring'. This is befitting of a pacifist airbending monk, who belongs to the Air Nomads, and whose culture is modelled after Tibetan Buddhism.
Air Nomads	Tenzin	Tenzin འཇམ་དཔལ་འཛོམས་ 'upholder of the teachings' is the name of the current Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso. Again a nod to Tibetan Buddhism.
Water Tribe	Katara	(1) Chinese <i>Kātālā</i> 卡塔拉, in which <i>lā</i> 拉 means 'pulling', the basic movements in waterbending being pushing and pulling. (2) Arabic <i>qatara</i> قطرة '(water)drop'
Water Tribe	Korra	(1) Korra supposedly was first named after a dog called Cora. (2) Greek <i>korè</i> (κόρη) means 'maiden'. (3) Chinese <i>Kēlā</i> 柯拉, in which <i>lā</i> means 'pulling' (cf. Katara)
Earth Kingdom	Toph Beifong	(1) Chinese Běifāng Tuòfú 北方拓芙 in which 拓 contains the element 石 'rock', Toph being a master earthbender. (2) 'Toph' is also a play on the English words <i>tough</i> and <i>toff</i> , the latter meaning 'upper class', a salient feature of her background.
Fire Nation	Zuko	(1) During his banishment: <i>Zǔkòu</i> 祖寇 'robber/enemy of ancestors'

³ In the 2010 movie *The Last Airbender* the 'wrong' pronunciation of *Aang* as /aŋ/ also sparked mild outrage among fans.

		(2) After being restored: <i>Shùgāo</i> 豎高 ‘vertical and high’, presumably due to his aristocratic rank of prince
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Table 1. Cultural references in the names of characters in ATLA and LOK

As Table 1 shows, it is possible to divide the world into four main groups: the Air Nomads, the Northern and Southern Water Tribes, the Earth Kingdom, and the Fire Nation. Each of the four main groups is related to one of the four bendable elements: air, water, earth, fire. Bending requires the fulfilment of three conditions: (1) an innate ability, (2) a control over one’s inner force, and (3) an implementation of choreography inspired by martial arts. As condition (1) implies, some characters are born with the ability to bend the elements, while others are not. Aang is exceptional as he is the Avatar and is thus able to bend *all* four elements. Katara’s brother Sokka, however, is not able to bend any element at all. The inner force of condition (2) refers to a mystical life energy, possessed by all living creatures, called *chi* —borrowed from the Chinese metaphysical concept of *qi* 氣. The interaction between *chi* and the four elements is mediated through the concept of *jing*⁴ 勁. Positive *jing* corresponds to offense; negative *jing* to defense; and neutral *jing* to “doing nothing” (ATLA S2E3, “Return to Omashu”). In connection to the elements, positive *jing* matches best with firebending; negative with airbending; neutral *jing* with earthbending; and waterbending switches between positive and negative *jing* (just as the martial art *tai chi chuan* does).

Finally, the choreography of condition (3) speaks to the fact that bending usually requires movement of one’s hands or feet, similar to martial arts. For instance, airbending is based on the *bāguāzhǎng* 八卦掌 martial arts style, known for its evasive manoeuvres and circling movements, which is meant to evoke the air element and the pacifist attitude of the Air Nomads (DiMartino & Konietzko, 2010). Earthbending is based on the *hung gar* 洪家 style with its deep stances and blocky strength, simulating the grounding force of earth. Waterbending takes its movements from *tai chi chuan* 太極拳, which is known

⁴ A number of concepts and transliterations are not standardized to Hanyu Pinyin. *Jing* more commonly occurs as *jìn* (although a variant reading of *jìng* does occur). *Tai chi chuan* and *hung gar* respectively should be *tàijíquǎn* and *hóngjiā*.

for its flowy movements, resembling water. Lastly, firebending, is based on the Northern Shaolin 北少林 style of kung fu, notable because of its explosive movements, an interpretation of fire (DiMartino & Konietzko, 2010).

There are two in-world explanations for the ability to bend. In LOK (S2E7-E8 “The Beginnings”) a meditative flashback to a time before the Avatar reveals that the four bending styles were given by four lion-turtles as gifts bestowed upon humans to protect them against the wilderness in ancient times. However, by the time of ATLA it is believed that the bending styles come from imitating certain animals, who are seen as natural masters of the techniques. Airbenders believe they mimicked the flying bison which they herd; waterbending came from imitating the Ocean and Moon spirits; earthbending was learnt through the observation of badger-moles; and firebending was learnt from the dragons.

Furthermore, the four elements correlate with certain philosophical ideals or values. In the opening sequence, each element is individually introduced along with its corresponding ideal in Chinese characters: *shuǐ shàn* 水善 ‘water – virtue; *tǔ qiáng* 土強 ‘earth – strength; *huǒ liè* 火烈 ‘fire – ferocity; and *qì hé* 氣和 ‘air – peace’ (DiMartino & Konietzko, 2010, p. 127). Additionally, in ATLA (S2E9 “Bitter Work”) Uncle Iroh explains to Zuko that:

Fire is the element of power. [Draws the firebending insignia in the dirt.] The people of the Fire Nation have desire and will, and the energy to drive and achieve what they want. Earth is the element of substance. [Draws the earthbending insignia.] The people of the Earth Kingdom are diverse and strong. They are persistent and enduring. Air is the element of freedom. [Draws the airbending insignia.] The Air Nomads detached themselves from worldly concerns and found peace and freedom. Also, they apparently had pretty good senses of humour! Water is the element of change. [Draws the waterbending insignia.] The people of the Water Tribe are capable of adapting to many things. They have a deep sense of community and love that holds them together through anything. (Uncle Iroh ATLA2.9, *Avatar Wiki*: “Transcript: Bitter Work”, emphasis by author)

It is thus clear that the world is divided into tuples of four: four nations, four elements, four bending styles, four types of *jing*, four animal ‘masters’, four sources, four natures, four ideals etc. We can organize these in a correlative network, as shown in Table 2.

	AIR	WATER	EARTH	FIRE
symbol				
martial art	Baguazhang	Taichi chuan	Hun Gar	Northern Shaolin
'jing' 勁	negative	positive to negative	neutral	positive
'master'	flying bison	ocean and moon spirits	badger-mole	dragons
source	air	moon	earth	sun
nature	harmonious	benevolent	strong	fierce
ideal	freedom	change	substance	power
nation	Air Nomads	Water Tribes	Earth Kingdom	Fire Nation
real-world reference	Tibetan Buddhism	Inuit	China	Japan
main character	Aang	Katara	Toph	Zuko Iroh

Table 2. Correlative system of the Avatarverse

But why four elements? Creators DiMartino and Konietzko state they opted for a system with four elements because they regard it as similar to Western society and Ancient Greek philosophy, but that it can also be found in Buddhism (DiMartino & Konietzko, 2010, p. 26). Furthermore, a four-way division appears in Western humoral theory (Geeraerts & Grondelaers, 1995) as well, where it correlates to blood, yellow bile, black bile and phlegm and can be found over multiple domains, e.g., in seasons (respectively spring, summer, autumn, winter), elements (air, fire, earth, water), organs (liver, spleen, gallbladder, brain/lungs). They then correlate to a combination of two qualities (warm and moist, warm and dry, cold and dry, cold and moist), which provides blood, yellow bile, black bile and phlegm with a so-called temperament: sanguine, choleric, melancholic, and phlegmatic. Later, Yu (2009) compared this Western network against the Chinese five-element system. Both the Western humoral theory and the Chinese system have medical applications. The Chinese system, however, also has an expansive metaphysical correlative system on top of these medical applications (Graham, 1986; Granet, 1934). A critical comparison between these two systems can be found in Fung

(2010). Thus, correlative thinking in the Avatarverse has its counterpart in our own worldviews. Furthermore, correlative thinking can be situated on the hard side of magic systems in fantasy author Brandon Sanderson's terminology (2007). This means that the rules of magic are or become clearly outlined over the course of the story. An earthbender needs a source of earth to bend and cannot willy-nilly bend while being jailed at sea (ATLA S1E6 "Imprisoned"). A clear correlative system aids the audience with the immersive strategy (Guethert, 2016). There is, however, one exception: the Avatar, who might be placed more on the soft end of magic systems. A large part of the storylines in ATLA and LOK revolve around trying to get a grip on the abilities and constraints of the Avatar when they are in the avatar state, during which they are extremely powerful yet can also be killed and cut off from their link to previous avatar incarnations.

Apart from this correlative system, there is an underlying principle that connects all these different domains. Following the observations made by Yu (2009), Geeraerts & Grondelaers (1995) and Graham (1986), these kinds of correlative systems work because humankind is mapped onto the universe, where people are seen as the microcosm while nature represents the macrocosm. Here, it would perhaps make sense to propose a conceptual metaphor "PEOPLE ARE NATURE". For instance, in traditional Chinese medicine, if a sick person suffers from a lung disease, it may be due to a lack of 'metal' – the correlative element (or 'phase') to the lungs (Graham, 1986). However, the directionality of conceptual metaphor theory may pose a problem, since it is unclear if the mapping goes from "NATURE" (source) to "PEOPLE" (target) or the other way around. As outlined above, in such cases, blending theory therefore offers a clear advantage to avoid such an issue.

How does this work then? The correlative system in the Avatarverse (Table 2) is in fact the blended space. It is similar enough to real-world systems to presuppose the same two input spaces: "PEOPLE" and "NATURE", but is not confined to them. In other words, there are many other mental spaces (intertextual references) that can be invoked depending on the episode, e.g. the explanation of chakras by Guru Pathik (ATLA S2E19, "The Guru") which is Indian in origin.

Figure 2 shows a primary blend between "PEOPLE", "NATURE" and "WESTERN / GREEK / BUDDHIST THOUGHT" that results in the core idea of "FOUR ELEMENTS". For lack of space, the figure follows the simplified representation of the blending schema, without the generic spaces, as it can also be found in Hiraga (2005) or Turner (2007). Items in grey indicate input spaces, items in black form the core of the

correlative network. The four elements become the core of the correlative blended space, and act like a new input space. For the four “NATIONS”, inspiration is found in “THE INUIT”, “QING DYNASTY CHINA”, “EARLY 20TH CENTURY JAPAN”, and “TIBETAN BUDDHISM”. Different bending styles are a blend between the “FOUR ELEMENTS” and different styles of “MARTIAL ARTS”, based on their typical features and how the different elements are perceived. Just like people have a source for their energy, the four elements also have a source. Similarly, just like people advance in life under the instruction of a teacher, bending the four elements is thought to have evolved through the instruction of a spiritual teacher. In other words, “PEOPLE”, “NATURE” and the newly included “FOUR ELEMENTS” engage in a blend, resulting in the “SOURCE” and “TEACHER” blended spaces of the correlative network.

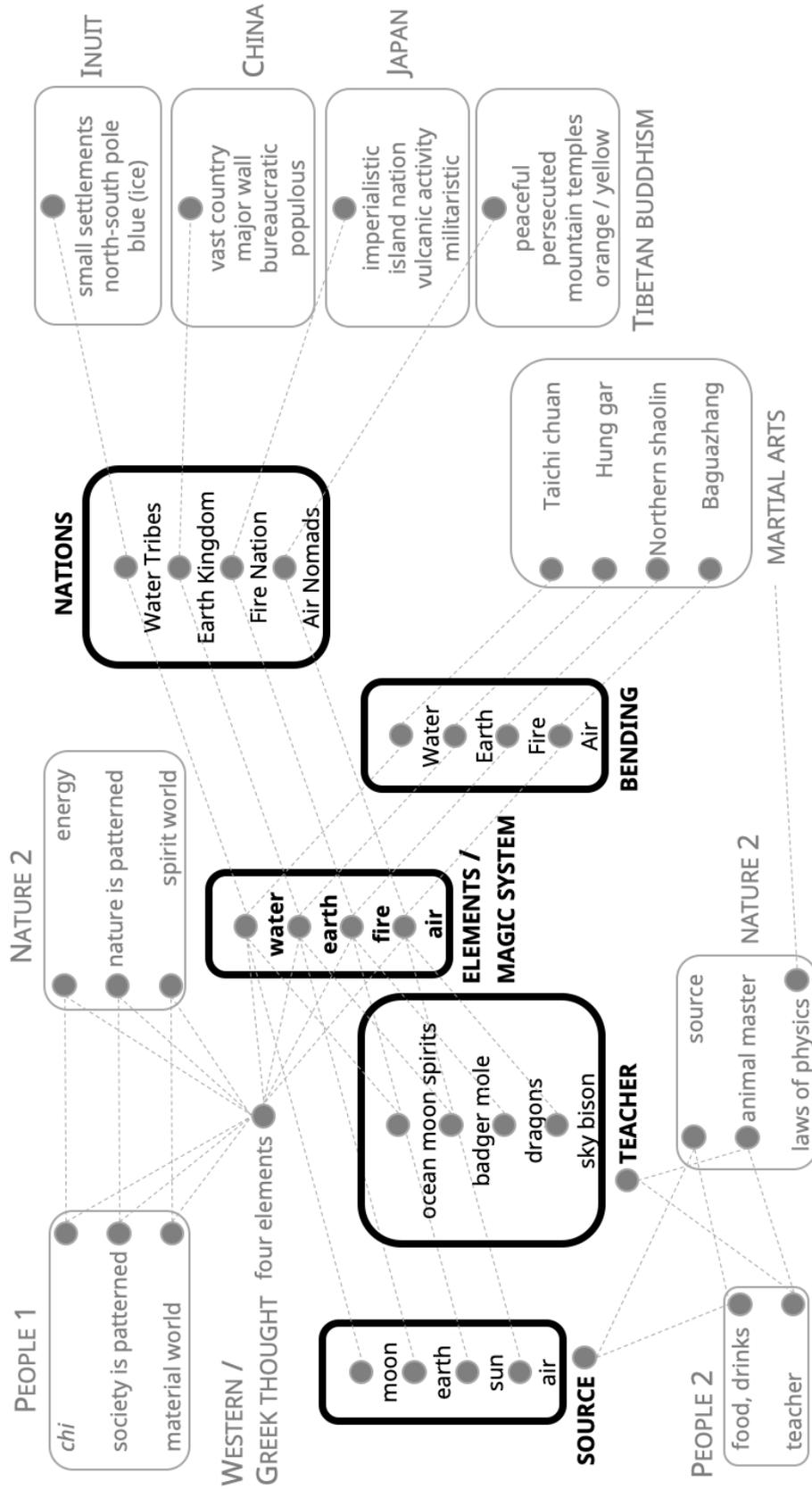


Figure 2. The world of *Avatar: The Last Airbender*: Blending PEOPLE and NATURE The

Avatar is a special case within the correlative blended space. As the ‘master of all four elements’ they encompass the “FOUR ELEMENTS”, and thus surpass the politics of the four nations, bringing balance to the world. The Avatar connects the human world (“PEOPLE”) to that of the spirits (“NATURE”), in a never-ending cycle of reincarnation (LOK S2E7-8 “Beginnings”), an idea borrowed from Hindu mythology where the god Vishnu reincarnates into different *avatars* like Rama, Krishna and the Buddha.

In the context of ATLA, it thus stands to reason that the most important input spaces are “PEOPLE” and “NATURE”. However, the introduction of a correlative network in the blend results in a well-rounded fictional world in ATLA that invites smaller blends to complement the narrative. Such smaller blends can be found in the animals that occupy the Avatarverse.

4. Hybrid animals: When bison fly

The title of this section is an allusion to the adynaton “when pigs fly”, a phrase used to describe a situation that is utterly impossible. In animation, however, everything is possible, especially the idea that giant creatures such as bison can fly — in ATLA Avatar Aang’s sky bison is called Appa, who functions as the main means of transportation across the ATLA world. According to creator Bryan Konietzko, Appa developed out of the fusion of a bison and a manatee (DiMartino & Konietzko, 2010, pp. 20–21).

One of the first hybrid animals to appear in the Avatarverse are otter-penguins (ATLA S1E1 “The Boy in the Iceberg”). Shortly afterward, the audience is introduced to Momo, a lemur-bat (ATLA S1E3 “The Southern Air Temple”) who also becomes one of Aang’s animal companions. Virtually every episode henceforth that features fauna⁵ includes hybrid animals. A non-exhaustive list includes: badger-moles, hog-monkeys, elephant-koi, shark-squids, platypus-bears, cat-deer, dragonfly-hummingbirds, seagull-hawks, dragon-birds, eel-swans, turtle-ducks, bull-frogs, komodo-leopards, ostrich-horses, polar bear-dogs, pig-deer, pigsters (< pig-rooster), wooly-pigs, moo-sows (cow-pig), koala-sheep, rabbiroos (< rabbit-kangaroo), sabretooth-moose-lions, eel-hounds, crocodile-spiders, gemsbok-bulls, camelephants (<camel-elephant), lemur-bats,

⁵ In contrast to fauna, flora in the Avatarverse seems to correspond almost completely to plants, vegetables and fruit we know in our world; the only minor changes being puns, e.g. ‘panda lily’ (a pun on tiger lily) in ATLA1.14, and the occasional blended cucumber-quat (LOK2.1).

elephant-rhino, wolf-bats, iguana-seals, turtle-seals, buzzard-wasps, aardvark-sloths, lion-turtles etc. (DiMartino & Konietzko 2010:80–83; Avatar Wikia: “Animal”). The only really noticeable exceptions to this idea are the Earth King’s pet bear Bosco (ATLA S2E14 “City of Walls and Secrets”), and spiritual creatures like dragons (ATLA S3E13 “The Firebending Masters”).

One question that could be asked when confronted by these hybrid creatures is whether there are any constraints on the two blended animals. Is it possible to combine just any two animals felicitously? At first sight, most of the hybrid animals seem to be a random blend of two animals. However, a closer investigation shows that most of them are not totally unrelated, but can be linked together by a generic space element, as outlined in blending theory. For instance, seagulls and hawks are both birds, so seagull-hawks are acceptable. All the blends between pigs, sheep and chickens (pigster, wooly-pig, moo-sow...) work because they are all farm animals. Camelephants are acceptable for at least two reasons. According to generic space elements, camels and elephants are both used as means of transportation, and are able to carry heavy weights on their backs. Furthermore, the blend is made stronger because morphemes also blend in the English: camel + elephant > camelephant.

An interesting linguistic phenomenon related to these hybrid animals is their blending with existing English idioms. We illustrate these in examples (1)-(3).

(1) Asami I think these planes are finally ready to ship.

Engineer [In a dire, serious tone.] I hate to mention the elephant-rhino in the room,
but since your father was thrown in prison, no company will work with
us.

(LOK S2E1 “Rebel Spirit”, emphasis by author)

This is clearly a pun on the English idiom “elephant in the (living) room”, used to address an obvious truth that is being avoided. The elephant-rhino in this blended idiom is felicitous because elephants and rhinos share the feature of being big animals; it is

afforded through the generic space of size. Since elephant(-rhino)s are so big, they are used to represent something that should immediately stand out, but for some reason do not.

The second example of blended idioms is shown in (2). Earthbender Bolin is in a romantic relationship with his girlfriend Opal. However, she is mad at him because he was in league with the antagonist Kuvira. After helping to save Opal's family, he is forgiven.

(2) Zhu Li I want to thank you for coming back to save me.

 And don't be too hard on Bolin for working with Kuvira.

 His heart was in the right place.

Opal I think Bolin has worked his way out of the polar bear doghouse.

Bolin Yes!

(LOK S4E10 “Operation Beifong”, emphasis by author)

The expression “to be in the doghouse” means ‘to be in a bad situation due to having angered someone. In this case, Bolin is in the doghouse—a doghouse usually being placed outside a house. In the example quoted above, Opal forgives Bolin, after which he is let back in her life as a human. She achieves this linguistically by mapping Bolin on a prototypical hybrid animal in LOK: the polar bear-dog, which serves as Korra's means of transport, similarly to Appa for Aang. Furthermore, the blend between polar bear and dogs is licensed by the fact they both have snouts and are mammals. A polar bear-dog is a large animal, similarly to a polar bear. On the other hand, Korra's polar bear-dog Naga is tame and loyal to Korra, in the same way a dog would be.

The third example (3) comes from the comic *Smoke and Shadow*. Fire Lord Zuko prohibits anyone to leave the Fire Nation capital to not endanger their lives. The people, however, want to leave the city because they are afraid of the mysterious Kemurikage (< Jap. *kemuri-kage* 煙-影 ‘smoke-shadow’) spirits.

(3) Guards: [Blocking the city gate]

Until further notice, no one is allowed to leave the capital city! Fire
Lord's orders!

Noble: [Trying to leave the city]

You've gotta be kidding! Our kids are sitting turtle-ducks for those dark
spirits!

(*Smoke & Shadow* 3, emphasis by author)

Once again this is a play on an English idiom, “sitting ducks”, used to describe a situation in which one is especially weak and vulnerable and essentially is just waiting to be attacked. This scene is set in the Fire Nation, where one of the prototypical hybrid animals is the turtle-duck, as it is depicted swimming in the royal palace's pond (ATLA3.6). The generic space element that connects turtles to ducks includes their ability to swim, as well as appearing both in parks. In the Avatarverse, it is possible to feed the turtle-ducks. Using this blended idiom indicates the sinister turn of events in the Fire Nation that transform the ornamental birds into helpless prey and targets of violent and dangerous predators, the *Kemurikage*.

Using hybrid animals is a way to reinforce the blend that makes up the macrocosm of the Avatarverse on a smaller scale. Using them in idioms is a way to increase the shared in-group world knowledge: it's not “sitting ducks”, but “sitting turtle-ducks”; not “elephant in the room” but “elephant-rhino in the room”. The fictional world developed during ATLA subsequently serves as a baseline to build its sequel LOK on.

5. Dealing with modernity in LOK

The period in which ATLA is set will be referred to as “the old world” in this section; the story of LOK is referred to as “the new world”, set 70 years after that of ATLA. In the old world, technology is mostly retrofuturistic, e.g. a monorail system made of rock that

is propelled forward through earthbending, or tanks and war balloons controlled by firebending. In the new world, important innovations in science and technology can be seen in almost every episode of LOK. There are three important extensions of the four bending styles that support these developments. The first is Toph's discovery of metalbending (ATLA S2E19, "The Guru"), an extension of earthbending that works by bending impure metal. The second is the spread of lightning generation (ATLA S2E9, "Bitter Work") beyond the royal family of the Fire Nation. A third specialized bending skill shown in the old world is bloodbending (ATLA S3E8, "The Puppetmaster). In the new world, the four-elemental correlative network also fills a gap by extending airbending to levitation and introduces lavabending as another advanced earthbending skill. Apart from these latter innovations during LOK, the macrocosm of the old world is largely defined by the correlative network identified above.

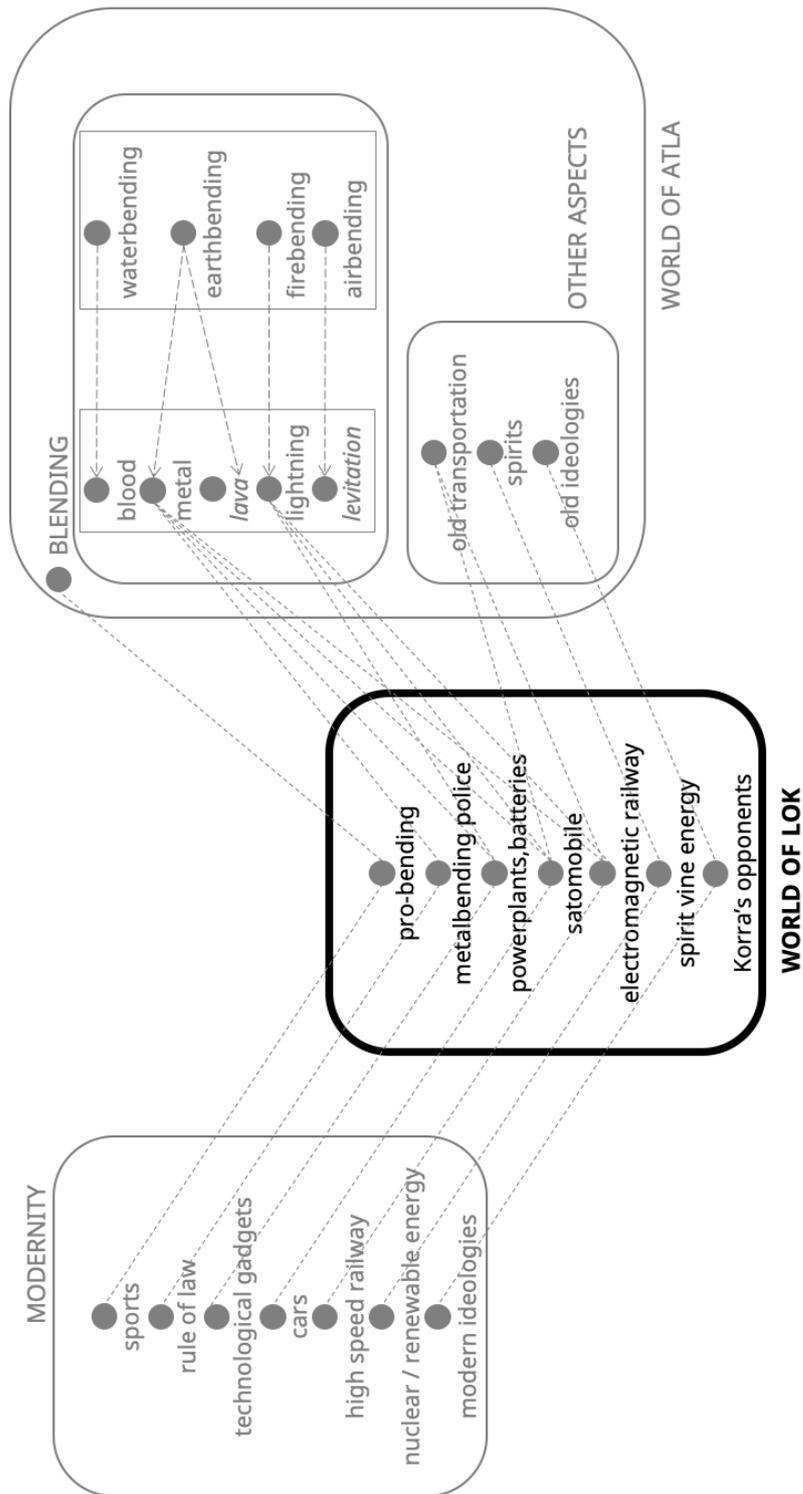


Figure 3. Legend of Korra: a blend between the world of *Avatar: The Last Airbender* and MODERNITY

As shown in Figure 3, this network “WORLD OF ATLA” now functions as a new input

space. The other input space is “MODERNITY”. Sports in the new world are weaved with bending, resulting in pro-bending (professional bending), held in a huge arena. The idea of rule of law is interpreted through a metalbending, with the police bending cuffs to bring in criminals. Advancements in gadgets largely is shown through the manipulation of metal and lightning, resulting in powerplants that generate man-made lightningbender power and store in batteries for later usage. The “satomobile” is the new world’s version of the automobile. The earthbent monorail is replaced by a metal and electromagnetic railway. When the boundary between the material world and the spirit world is destroyed (LOK S2E12 “Harmonic Convergence”) it turns out that the spirit energy can be harvested, the show’s version of nuclear energy. Lastly, the old ideologies of the four nations are being replaced by modern ideologies, each represented by an antagonist for Avatar Korra: communism with Amon, theocracy with Unalaq, anarchy with Zaheer and finally fascism with Kuvira (Güven & Anık, 2018, p. 53). These ideologies exist within the blend of the new world, e.g., communism is not directed against capitalism and the bourgeoisie, but against benders (LOK S1E3 “The Revelation”): people can only be made equal if there is no bending. Conversely, fascism results out of Kuvira’s conquest of the territory of the former Earth Kingdom, which at that point is in a state of anarchy. She is hailed as The Great Uniter (LOK S4E1 “After all these Years”) and the sole leader for the new Earth Empire. Dissidents are sent to the re-education camps; however, a small resistance manages to defeat her in the end.

The resulting setting for the story thus can be conceived as an elaborate chain of blended mental spaces, filled with rich and well-rounded characters, events and tropes that quite often make allusions to events from our own world. These aspects of the Avatarverse make it possible to focus on fictional entry points that can be used to say something about our own world. In the next section we will return to the figure of Joo Dee (Figure 1) and discuss a number of other stanced interpretations of Avatarverse-related memes. But first we must make a detour in Middle Earth.

6. Backblending the Avatarverse: A meme-based analysis

Wider engagement with popular culture often occurs through internet memes (Dainas, 2015; Dancygier & Vandelanotte, 2017; Davison, 2012; Zenner & Geeraerts, 2018). One massively popular type that has gained scholarly attention is related to the fictional world of Middle Earth. For instance, the well-known “ONE DOES NOT SIMPLY” type of

memes (Dancygier & Vandelanotte, 2017; Zenner & Geeraerts, 2018), presented in Figure 4, takes a well-known still from *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001, New Line Cinema, directed by Peter Jackson). It requires a basic level of familiarity with the source material: Boromir warns about the perils faced when attempting to go to Mordor for the destruction of the One Ring (Figure 4, left panel). The constraints of this moment in the film together with the open slot of the memetic template (Figure 4, right panel) allow for an intersubjective creativity (Dancygier & Vandelanotte, 2017) that acts as a bridge between the fictional world and ours or other worlds (Figure 5), a phenomenon we would like to term ‘backblending’. In most cases of backblending, the open slot is filled with real world problems or trivial things that are magnified. The constructional nature of the memetic template underscores the difficulty of the object that is intersubjectively evaluated (Du Bois, 2007) in this meme type. Of most interest here is that this shared in-group insight, which is reliant on familiarity with the source material, conveys a stance: yes, it is indeed hard to X!



Figure 4. The ONE DOES NOT SIMPLY meme. Left panel: Original still of Boromir in *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*. Right panel: Memetic template of Boromir.



Figure 5. Collection of ONE DOES NOT SIMPLY memes (Farooqui, 2017). Note that the “One does not simply take away Lin Beifong’s bending” is a reference to the Avatarverse, thereby connecting the Avatarverse with Middle Earth, as well as taking the stance that Lin Beifong is a strong adversary.

Just like the well-developed fictional world of Middle Earth, the Avatarverse also acts as the source material for a relatively high number of meme types. A substantial number are catalogued on the website *knowyourmeme.com*, including at least 15 subtypes⁶ related to

⁶ At the time of writing, the full inventory comprises “WATER. EARTH. FIRE. AIR.”, “SOKKAPOSTING”, “THERE IS NO WAR IN BA SING SE”, “MELON LORD”, “ZUKO’S HONOR”, “MAKORRA”, “KORRASAMI”, “THE LAST AIRBENDER”, “EVERYTHING CHANGED WHEN THE FIRE NATION ATTACKED”, “CRYING BOLIN”, “COMEDIAN AMON”, “CACTUS JUICE”, “CREEPY KATARA”, “THAT’S ROUGH BUDDY”, and “CANCEL THE NETFLIX ADAPTATION”.

the Avatarverse (Know Your Meme, 2013), or have appeared in Facebook groups like Subtle Asian Traits (Abidin & Zeng, 2020; Koh, 2020). The four meme types that are illustrative of backblending in the Avatarverse, show that it is often the interplay between source, memetic template and related content that determines the conveyed stance of memes, rather than a receiver-oriented process by itself (Wiggins, 2019). This involves deciding first upon the figure or event within the context of the narrative. By then placing it within a memetic template, a natural tension between the constraints inherited from the source material and creative adaptation emerges that will impact the potential interpretations of the meme.

The first meme type that illustrates this tension and its resolution revolves around the phrase “There is no war in Ba Sing Se”, see also Figure 1 and the introduction. This phrase is an in-fictional-world allusion to the Earth Kingdom capital city of Ba Sing Se, whose people have been kept out of the 100-year-lasting war with the Fire Nation by means of psychological warfare, namely, propaganda, high walls, and hypnosis of high-ranking officials. This results in a negationism concerning the imminent threat of the war right outside the walls. There are two variants of this type. Figure 6 is a still of the brainwashing process, as it was done to the supporting character Jet (ATLA S2E14 “City of Walls and Secrets”) by repeating the same phrase over and over while light flashes by. Figure 7 is the result of the brainwashing process. When Avatar Aang and his friends first arrive to Ba Sing Se, they are constantly accompanied and monitored by a minder, Joo Dee, who spouts phrases like “You’re in Ba Sing Se now. Everyone is safe here” and “There is no war in Ba Sing Se”. After Team Avatar ‘break’ their minder by asking too many questions, she is promptly replaced by an almost identical clone, also called Joo Dee. The “THERE IS NO WAR IN BA SING SE” meme thus invokes the notion of propaganda and brainwashing.



Figure 6. THERE IS NO WAR IN BA SING SE meme with ‘coronavirus’: brainwashing,
March 2020



Figure 7. THERE IS NO WAR IN BA SING SE meme with ‘coronavirus’: Joo Dee, March
2020

In Figures 6 and 7 the meme replaces the word ‘war’ with ‘coronavirus’. The meme surfaced when the pandemic virus spread to the United States and former President Donald Trump originally stated that the 15 cases (26 February 2020) “within a couple of days is going to be down to close to zero, that’s a pretty good job we’ve done” (White House Press Briefing, 2020), implying that there was no coronavirus in the US. Of course, just as the war eventually made its way to Ba Sing Se, the coronavirus eventually made its way to the US as well. In other words, the knowledge of real-life events, i.e., Trump’s statement (input space 1) with the “THERE IS NO WAR IN BA SING SE” meme (input space 2) results in a conceptual blend that turns the propaganda of input space 1 on its head. An updated version of this meme is of course the meme shown in Figure 1, where Joo Dee appears as the spokesperson of the White House, stating that there may have been a first wave of COVID-19, but at least at that point “there is no second COVID-19 wave,” while the COVID curve of the USA in July 2020 clearly shows a second surge.

In terms of stance taking, it is clear that viewers were guided to the stance that it is unjust to keep this information from the capital’s inhabitants, because the Avatar—the hero—attempts and eventually succeeds to show the danger the people are in. As such, the spokesperson of that regime, Joo Dee, cannot be viewed in a favorable manner in that particular context. After it is later revealed that Joo Dee is in fact a victim of the regime that is helplessly brainwashed, the stance towards the tragic figure of Joo Dee may shift, i.e., the audience may start to pity her. Yet it is Joo Dee as the representative of the regime, and not Joo Dee the victim of the regime, that is selected as the input for the meme. In doing so, a negative constraint is placed on the ensuing types of memes and interpretations.

The second memetic template examined can be called “WHEN THE FIRE NATION ATTACKED”, alternatively known as the “WATER. EARTH. AIR. FIRE” type. This phrase comes from the opening sequence, see section 2. The image macro is a still from the opening sequence, and typically follows another image macro that describes the state of a certain event or situation, functioning as the second input space to create the creative interpretation in the blended space, similar to what has been noted for the “KEEP CALM AND CARRY ON” meme (Dainas, 2015). The “WHEN THE FIRE

NATION ATTACKED” meme refers to a situation that occurred as a result of sudden or ostensibly unforeseen events, as illustrated in Figure 8.

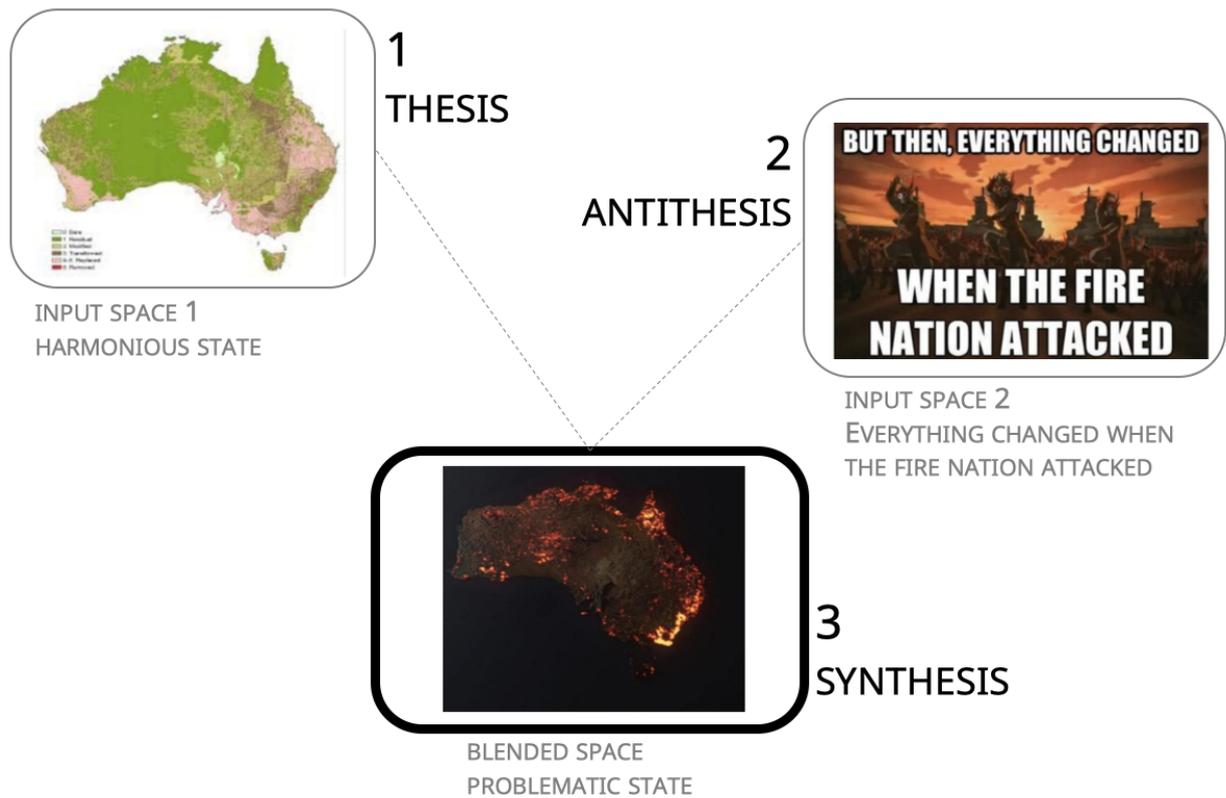


Figure 8. EVERYTHING CHANGED WHEN THE FIRE NATION ATTACKED meme: blending schema with three panels, December 2019

The “WHEN THE FIRE NATION ATTACKED” meme follows a pattern of two or three panels. The thesis (input space 1) presents a calm, harmonious state. However, this is followed by a sudden, traumatic event (antithesis, fixed input space 2), resulting in a problematic state of events (blended space). Often the blended space is left to the imagination of the reader, i.e. it is a conceptual blend rather than a necessarily formal one. In Figure 8, the map of Australia is lush and green. But then, everything changed when the fire nation attacked. In the resulting state, Australia is burning. The bushfires in Australia (2019-early 2020) are linked in meme form to the attacks made by the Fire Nation through a commonality of harmful and unexpected conflagration.

As is typical for memes, many variants exist. A recent example includes the destruction of the Notre Dame in Paris (Figure 9). Figure 9 consists of four panels: a

thesis (“It was a beautiful cathedrale... [sic]”), an antithesis (“But everything changed when the Fire Nation attacked), a synthesis [SMOLDERING CATHEDRAL], and a comment: “Where is the Avatar?”. The message intended here is that this tragic situation needs a unique and strong figure like the Avatar to remedy it. His absence is reminiscent of his disappearance in the Avatarverse right when the 100-year long war started. Memes based on this trope are generally negative in spirit but range from mild negative twists to tragic events such as the forest fires and the loss of the Notre Dame cathedral.



Where is the Avatar ?

Figure 9. WHEN THE FIRE NATION ATTACKED meme: four panels, April 2019

The third meme type relies on the correlative system introduced above (section 3). As is clear by now, there are four different bending styles: waterbending, earthbending, firebending, and airbending. The innovation of this “ELEMENTARY BENDING” meme type lies in the addition of a fifth slot: X-bending. In this case this slot is filled with “genderbending” (Figure 10), to be interpreted as cross-dressing in this particular meme. These types are further motivated by the images next to them, which contain in order Katara, Toph, Zuko, Aang and the robot Bender from the cartoon series *Futurama*, who is decidedly male originally, but dressed as a girl with curls here. Of course, the pun in “Bender” also plays an important motivating role. Variants of this meme type also include the aforementioned “racebending” (see section 2), or “timebender” juxtaposed by the character of Doctor Who (Figure 11). The correlative network on which much of the Avatarverse is founded invites a paradigmatic schema to which an extra, creative and often humorous element can be added, such as in the cases of timebender and genderbender. However, it can also be used as a way to address serious issues, like racebending. The stance that is conveyed through the memetic blends, then, appears to be largely determined not only by the selection of the source material in its context, as was the case with Joo Dee, but also the interplay with the content of the slot that is being filled up.

Waterbending



Earthbending



Firebending



Airbending



Genderbending



Figure 10. ELEMENTARY BENDING meme, 2018



Figure 11. ELEMENTARY BENDING meme, 2018.

Just like the “THERE IS NO WAR IN BA SING SE” type, the fourth meme type is also coronavirus-related. The “WASH YOUR LYRICS” meme shows step-by-step instructions for hand hygiene, accompanied by a pop song or other famous words to indicate the required duration (20 seconds). Figure 10 shows some lyrics of Queen’s *Bohemian Rhapsody*. However, the meme was quickly adapted to include an ATLA version as well (Figure 11), once again referring to the opening sequence.

Hand-washing technique with soap and water



Figure 12. Blend of the WASH YOUR LYRICS meme and Queen's *Bohemian Rhapsody*,

April 2020



Figure 13. Blend of the WASH YOUR LYRICS meme and the opening sequence of ATLA, April 2020

For out-group readers, the blend in Figure 11 may only be minimally relevant and consequently glossed over quite quickly, but for in-group

readers it works because they have been exposed to the opening sequence (input space 1) by watching ATLA. What the memetic template (input space 2) contributes are slots to be filled up. Contrary to previous cases, it is the blended space that makes up the meme, and we have to recover the input spaces, precisely through repeated exposure to the “WASH YOUR LYRICS” memetic template and familiarity with the opening sequence. In this way, memes, as socio-cultural artifacts, behave quite similarly to constructions (in a Construction Grammar sense), as mappings between form and meaning (Goldberg, 1995; Langacker, 1987). However, memes are less accessible than linguistic constructions, in the sense that different types require more familiarity with the source material as well as knowledge of the events they refer to. They also age quite rapidly; it is unsure how well we will understand the memes originating from this work in the future, when the fictional world of ATLA and LOK may fade from collective memory and other real-world events will have come to the fore. For a brief moment in time, however, the Avatarverse and real-world events have aligned in a way that enables memes to be created and shared among people as a means of intersubjective communication. This can be regarded as a supplementary indication of the show’s status in popular culture.

7. Conclusion

This paper opened with a curious observation: where does the meme in Figure 1 come from, and how can it be that a group of people understand it as a negative take on the White House treatment of the COVID-19 pandemic? It was argued that to understand the meme, one needs to understand the source material well enough, in order to derive an in-group shared insight from it. Through the case study of the worldbuilding of *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (ATLA) and *Avatar: Legend of Korra* (LOK) it was claimed that the immersive strategy of this fantasy world benefited from an analysis based on conceptual blending theory, as this theory is dynamic and allows for the blended space to be more than its inputs. In this case, a rich tapestry of intertextual elements that weave together the East and the West in this fictional world. The macrocosm consists of a correlative network that was in fact the result of highly complex conceptual blending. The hybrid animals that occupy this world are example of felicitous microblends, licensed through common generic spaces. The fictional world is also dynamic: a chain that takes ATLA as the input was blended with elements of modernity for LOK.

The Avatarverse stands as a well-rounded world unto itself, but its real richness lies in the different points of entry it allows for in-group viewers and fans to map characters and events from the series to real-life characters and events. The ideological stances from the source material were shown to constrain the possible memetic interpretations to a certain degree, yet through their templates and in-group humor these constraints can be relaxed or even flouted.

Some memes were argued to be relatively neutral, as with the WASH YOUR LYRICS meme in Figure 13, both in content and apprehension, others like the WHEN THE FIRE NATION ATTACKED or THERE IS NO WAR IN BA SING SE templates involve a polarity shift, as has been well-studied in irony literature. For the WHEN THE FIRE NATION ATTACKED, a bad event is shown to have clear cause (the Fire Nation), but luckily the Avatar will come to defeat them, and thus restore the bad event. On the surface, the THERE IS NO WAR IN BA SING SE appears positive, with a smiling Joo Dee, but in reality, this is ironic, as it is only propaganda for the lies of the government. It cannot be maintained that memes themselves are neutral and the only interpretation is on the “hearer’s end” (Wiggins, 2019). The selection of the elements in the input spaces is also an active choice, on the “speaker’s side” of the communicative conduit metaphor (Reddy, 1979). In other words, it is also an onomasiological choice, with intent behind it. Even though our investigation of engagements with cultural products through the case study of the Avatarverse is not exhaustive, we have added to the growing body of research of blending theory for investigating fictional worlds and what they mean to us and what we can do with them to make them even more relevant in our daily lives.

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