

# The Importance of Culture in Conceptual Blends: As evidenced in Two Western Comic Strips

by Ruth Molitor and Amanda Thomas

*Students: Graduate Institute of Applied Linguistics*

## **Abstract:**

Much study has been done in the realm of conceptual blends, mainly in the areas of discovering how they are constructed and “run” in an individual’s mind. Molitor and Thomas investigate another component that has, as yet, not been thoroughly explored: the affect of cultural background knowledge on an individual’s ability to run a blend. After a brief overview of the way blends work, Molitor and Thomas analyze two Western cartoons in order to demonstrate the vast amount of cultural background information that must be accessible in order for a blend to be properly understood.

## **Introduction**

As human beings, we are always thinking. But not all of our mental processes take place on a conscious level; in fact, according to cognitive scientists Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, “Nearly all important thinking takes place outside of consciousness...the imagination is always at work in ways that consciousness does not apprehend; consciousness can glimpse only a few vestiges of what the mind is doing...” (33-34).

Among these subconscious cognitive processes is that of ‘conceptual integration’ or ‘blending.’ Blending can be understood in terms of a ‘conceptual integration network.’ The CIN is a mental network that includes at least four basic spaces: two ‘source spaces,’ a ‘generic space’ that captures what both source spaces have in common; and the ‘blended space,’ where elements from both source spaces are blended to form a new reality. The mind performs many types of ‘mapping’ between these various mental spaces to come up with the final product, the ‘blend’ (Fauconnier and Turner 41-42).

It is our purpose here to demonstrate that, while the blending process is universal, its practical application in the thought processes of an individual ought to be analyzed in the light of that individual’s cultural background. We will do so by first giving a brief overview of the blending process, noting how cultural information affects it at each step. Then, we will seek to demonstrate the vital importance of cultural background understanding to the correct “running” of a blend through an analysis of two comic strips: one set of Calvin and Hobbes strips, and one frame from Bizarro. We considered these strips well-suited to our purpose, as they are blends created for Western audiences for the purpose of humor, which is often culturally defined.

## **A Brief Overview of Blending**

Two of the mental spaces in the CIN are the source spaces, or input spaces. These are mental frames summoned up from the mind’s long-term memory; they include vast amounts of information, much of which is culturally influenced. For example, in the Calvin and Hobbes comic strip that we will analyze in this paper, we will see three source spaces: 1) Real estate, 2) Calvin and Hobbes, and 3) Alien contact/invasion. Since the source spaces accessed in a blend are often culturally formed, a blend is best understood by people within the culture in which the blend was created.

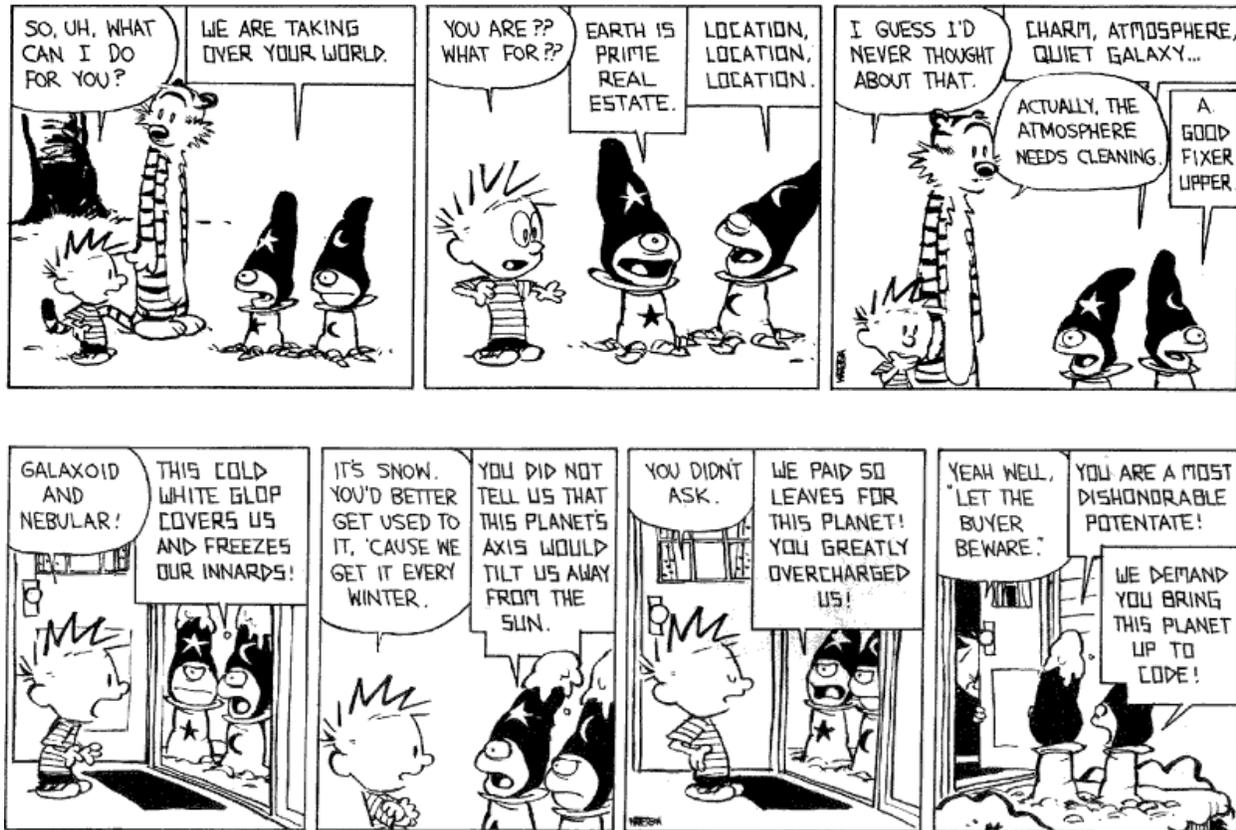
Every blend has ‘emergent structure,’ unique elements that are not copied from the source spaces. This emergent structure is generated through a three-part process of composition, completion and elaboration. Composition refers to bringing together elements of the source inputs to form the blend. Completion is the process of filling in background information from the source inputs, information that is not explicitly mentioned in the blend. Elaboration is the process of “running the blend;” elaboration involves the creation or discovery of those elements that are unique to the blend. Especially in the process of completion, the person processing a blend needs to access a vast store of long-term knowledge, including culturally-dependent frames.

Cultural understanding is vital to understanding blends; this is especially true in the case of comics. Comics are often blends, presented in a succinct format of pictures and words. The humor of a comic is often found in the ‘emergent structure’ of the blend, the elements that are unique to the blend and that do not exist in either of the source spaces. However, if the viewer of the comic is

not familiar with the cultural background of the source spaces, he may not recognize what material is unique to the blend. Therefore, the humor of the blend will likely be lost on him.

Now we will examine the two different comics mentioned previously and identify in each the source spaces, mappings, blending processes and emergent meanings. We will then examine how understanding of western culture is necessary for understanding these blends.

**Blend 1: Calvin and Hobbes**



**Source Spaces**

Three source spaces contribute to this blend: Real Estate, Alien Contact/Invasion, and the *Calvin and Hobbes* comic strip 'world.' These are laid out in the table below with some of their most prominent components (an asterisk indicates an element of the input space not referenced in the blended space). Each input space contains verbal and/or visual 'triggers' in the blended space that reference it and open up to us the input space, including its hidden aspects. These will be elaborated on in the discussion of the three input spaces following the table.

**Table 1: Calvin and Hobbes source spaces**

<b>Real-Estate elements:</b>	<b>Calvin &amp; Hobbes elements:</b>	<b>Alien contact/invasion elements:</b>
buyer	Calvin (young boy)	aliens taking over the planet
property owner (seller)	Hobbes (toy/ imaginary friend)	'little green men': unusual physical attributes
factors to consider (location, charm, atmosphere, neighborhood, condition, etc.)	snow	planetary attributes (axis, place in galaxy, atmosphere)
price/payment	backyard/house	planetary potentates
real estate lingo	Earth	galaxies, solar systems

codes & standards unforeseen defects *deeds, titles *realtor's percentage, closing costs, etc.	*parents *philosophical discussions *boy/girl antagonism *etc.: entire 'world' of C&H as portrayed in comic strip	*Area 51 *'take me to your leader' *space travel
---	--	--

There are many more elements to the Calvin and Hobbes frame than are depicted in these two strips; between 1985 and 1995, the comic strip's creator, Bill Watterson, developed a *complete* "world" around Calvin and Hobbes (Wikipedia). By the time this strip appeared in 1994, readers had extensive knowledge about young Calvin and the elements in his world. Access to all of these is provided immediately by the images of Calvin and Hobbes. This frame provides some of the organizing structure for the blend in that it provides the setting (Earth, in particular, Calvin's 'world') and the scale (the aliens are Calvin-sized), plus all of the features inherent in the strip.

The Real Estate frame is mostly accessed by a string of clichés closely associated with that profession: "Location, location, location," "prime real estate," "charm, atmosphere..." "a good fixer upper," and "let the buyer beware." These phrases accomplish the task of calling up an entire script of home buying. Elements implied but not made explicit in the blend include the process of looking for a home to purchase and the process of making a bid, closing, transferring the deed, moving in, etc. This frame provides most of the organizing structure through the home-buying script, though it does not appear visually in the blend.

In this way, the Alien Contact/Invasion frame differs from the Real Estate frame in that it is accessed both visually and in the dialog. Galaxoid and Nebular are the consummate "little green men" complete with tentacles, "outer space" names, unusual clothing, and one large eye apiece. The aliens' first words, "We are taking over your world," immediately bring the frame from mere 'encounter' to 'invasion.' Their alien-ness is also continually referenced by their vocabulary: they mix space travel lingo in with the real estate lingo but do not know the word for 'snow,' referring to it as "this cold white glop."

## Mappings

This is a complex blend, containing a number of mappings. Some of them occur across all three input spaces; others apply to only two. The table below lists several of the more salient mappings found in the blended space. Some of the humor of the strips lies in these mappings. For instance, the aliens call Calvin "a most dishonorable potentate." The 'potentate' of the space blend maps neatly to the unmentioned but implied 'homeowner' of the real estate blend in that a planetary potentate has the right to dispense of his planet as he sees fit, including selling it. The humor of the blend in this instance is that Watterson also maps 'potentate' directly to Calvin, a six-year-old boy who does not have the right to sell planet earth but has apparently convinced two sophisticated aliens that he does.

**Table 2: Calvin and Hobbes mappings**

<b>Real-Estate</b> property factors to consider (location, charm, atmosphere, neighbor-hood, etc.)	→	<b>Alien contact/invasion</b> planetary attributes (axis, place in galaxy, atmosphere)	→	<b>Calvin &amp; Hobbes</b> Earth's location, atmosphere, etc.
property owner (seller)	←	planetary potentates	→	Calvin ☺
buyer	→	'little green men': unusual physical attributes	→	Galaxoid & Nebular
purchasing property	→	aliens taking over the planet		
'fixer upper'			→	earth's atmospheric damage
price/payment			→	50 leaves

unforeseen defects			→	snow/winter
--------------------	--	--	---	-------------

### Blending Processes

The goal of this blend is primarily humor. This is achieved through the interaction of the three input spaces in the blend by the processes of composition, completion, elaboration, and compression. The table below highlights the main way(s) each of these processes comes into play in the blend. As is evident, most of the humor is achieved through the process of elaboration, “running the blend.” However, completion and compression also contribute to it. Through completion, readers of the strip access elements from each input space that create humorous incongruities in the blend. The amount of compression between the two strips is difficult to determine, as the resource from which these two strips were taken showed them one after the other, but they may not have originally run thus. However, the compression created by doing this allows the reader to infer the negotiation process in which Calvin and the aliens presumably engaged (which is much more humorous, in this instance, when left to the imagination because it refers the readers to Calvin’s wiles in previous strips). Compression also shifts the scene quickly to winter, which sets the scene for comedy in that the aliens regard it as a planetary defect.

**Table 3: Calvin and Hobbes blending processes**

composition	structured mainly by the schema of real estate: process of looking for, evaluating and acquiring property; pitfalls encountered in this process also contributed to by the schemas of alien contact/invasion and <i>Calvin and Hobbes</i>
completion	background info of real-estate: general knowledge of how the property-buying process works, ‘buzz words’ for real-estate agents, important factors that home buyers look for, ‘horror stories’ of people getting cheated background info of alien invasion: ideas of aliens from sci-fi books and movies, including ideas of what they look like, how they speak, what their purpose is in coming to earth, how they interact with earthlings background info of Calvin & Hobbes: Calvin a young boy with a stuffed tiger and a huge imagination, lives on earth, wily, unique perspective on grown-up world
elaboration	alien invaders looking on earth as real estate individual human – Calvin – has negotiated the sale of the entire planet to aliens Calvin ‘selling’ earth for 50 leaves aliens impotent to exact retribution when cheated Calvin (human) engaging in normal conversation with aliens Earth’s tilt on its axis regarded as planetary defect
compression	2 aliens stand for aliens as a whole Calvin stands for earthlings compression of ideas: whole real-estate process compressed into a few phrases

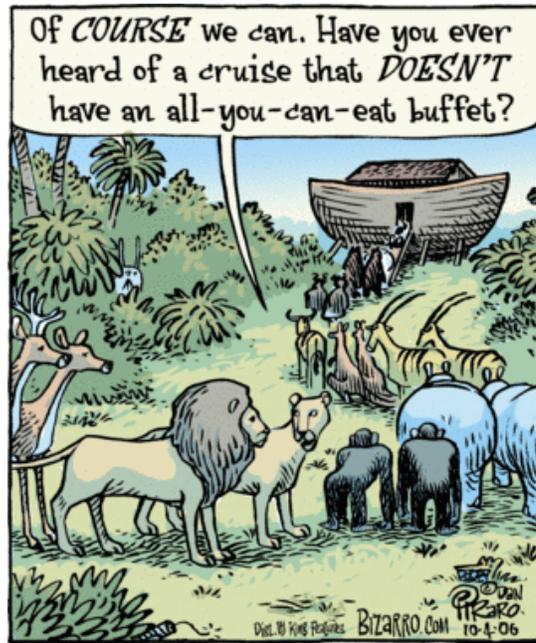
### Emergent Meanings

In the blend, the frame of alien invaders is re-worked through the influence of the two other frames so as to become humorous rather than frightening. The Real Estate frame portrays the aliens as prospective home-buyers. This puts a new perspective on the whole idea of alien invasion: rather than a hostile takeover, this portrays an objective analysis of the properties of Earth as real estate and a ‘legal,’ procedural property negotiation between species. The Calvin & Hobbes input space contributes to the re-thinking of an alien invasion as well, in that it goes against the usual perception of aliens from outer space as being far superior in intelligence: in this comic, a young boy outsmarts the aliens.

## The Generic Space

'Property acquisition' is common to both the real estate and the alien invasion frames. Both contain individuals or groups intending to acquire a designated piece of land and the processes involved in doing so. This theme does not fit so well with the Calvin and Hobbes frame, since that particular frame is so much larger and more complex than these two strips indicate. A broader term for the generic space may be 'Interpersonal interactions,' although this seems to be rather too generic in that it ignores the main idea that creates the humor.

## Blend 2: Bizarro



## Source Spaces

Three source spaces contribute to the blend in this comic: Noah's Ark, Cruise and Carnivores. It is interesting to note that one of these source spaces (the Ark) is brought to the blend only through the picture, the second (the Cruise) is represented only by the caption, and the third (Carnivores) is almost entirely inferential. And interesting as well is the fact that all of the humor in the blend depends on the reader being able to draw necessary mappings and inferences from the input spaces.

The picture of a queue of animals, two-of-a-kind, waiting to get onto a particular design of big brown boat, immediately summons up the source space of "Noah's Ark." These bare elements—drawings of the waiting line of animals and of the Ark—are enough to tell us which input space we should access. In our mental frame of Noah's Ark, there is a whole 'web' of elements that contribute to our understanding of the blend. For example, we know that in the Noah's Ark account, once the animals got on the Ark, the whole world flooded with water. We know that Noah was present, had built the Ark, had gathered the animals to get onto the Ark, and was obliged to provide food for the animals for the months they lived together on that giant boat. We also know that this real historical account happened millennia ago. This background information will ultimately be vital as we try to process the meaning of the blend.

The lion's quip, "Of course we can. Have you ever heard of cruise that *doesn't* have an all-you-can-eat buffet?" brings to our minds the input space of "Cruise." In the complex 'web' of our western idea of what a cruise is, there are many elements: a large cruise ship, a large body of water on which the ship cruises, an extended number of days spent cruising on the water, people who take the cruise, workers on the cruise, and gourmet cuisine for all the meals. We are also aware that cruises are expensive and usually enjoyed by people who have money to spend on more lavish vacations.

The third input space is that of "Carnivores." Even if we have never seen a lion in real life, we have been taught since we were young that lions are big animals that eat other animals. They are in a scientific class of "carnivores," meat-eating animals. An awareness that lions are carnivores, combined with an understanding of the other two input spaces, helps us find the

humor of the blend: the lions are waiting in line to get on the Ark, and they come to the conclusion that the other animals waiting to get on the Ark are actually the buffet that will be served for food!

### Mappings

There are a number of mappings in this blend that contribute to the ‘generic space,’ the elements which are matched between the two input spaces. Although these elements in reality might not be similar to one another, in the context of the blend, they are seen as “matches.” It should be noted that not all of these are visually or linguistically represented in the comic. Rather, the reader is expected to tap into his background knowledge of the input spaces to come up with them. The mappings between the two input spaces are represented in the following table:

**Table 4: Bizarro mappings**

Noah’s Ark		Cruise		Carnivores
Ark	← →	cruise ship		
animals	← →	people taking a cruise	← →	lions
water Ark floats on	← →	ocean being cruised on		
Noah	← →	workers on the cruise ship		
food for the animals	← →	buffet-style meals	← →	other animals

Mappings can only be understood and matched within the context of the blend. For example, outside the blended space, the animals climbing onto the Ark would not be seen as the buffet food for the lions who are about to take a cruise. In the Noah’s Ark context alone, all the animals would be seen as passengers, and something else would be the food. But within the blend, these creative mappings shown above—and the new virtual reality that stems from them—are possible.

### Blending Processes

The emergent structure of this blend—i.e., the characteristics that contribute to the unique meaning and structure in the blended space—is formed through processes of composition, completion, elaboration (“running the blend”) and compression. The humor of the comic comes mostly in the elaboration, because it is in “running the blend” that we find surprising and creative mismatches that would not happen in “real life,” but that are perfectly acceptable in the world of the blend. Compression is an element of every blend: either time or space, or both, can be compressed in the blend. The following table shows the processes that take place in the formation of the emergent structure of this blend.

**Table 5: Bizarro blending processes**

composition	elements from Noah’s Ark source space: animals, Ark elements from Cruise source space: passengers, boat, expectations of good food elements from Carnivores source space: lions (carnivores), other animals (food for lions)
completion	background info of Noah’s Ark: Biblical understanding of how Noah built the Ark, how God brought at least two of each kind of animals to come onto the Ark, how the animals were on the Ark for more than a year and needed to be fed and cared for that whole time; cultural understanding that a picture of a line of animals two-by-two going up to a particular type of boat is a picture of “Noah’s Ark” background info of Cruise: cultural understanding of a cruise, which includes a fancy boat, lots of passengers, and good service and good food during the days on the cruise background info of Carnivores: lions are predators, other animals are their prey
elaboration	Lions are passengers about to go on a cruise The other animals in line are expected to be the buffet for the meals on the cruise

compression	Time is compressed in this blend: input spaces from different millennia—Noah’s Ark and the age of the cruise—are merged together into one joint scenario.
-------------	---

### Emergent Meanings

The emergent structure of this blend is interesting; in processing the blend, the reader must make several mental adjustments. At first glance, the animals are waiting in line to get onto the Ark; at second glance, it appears that the animals (at least, the lions think) are actually going for a cruise; finally, it becomes apparent that it is only the lions (again, at least they think) who are going on the cruise, and the other animals are to be dinner!

This humorous scenario would never happen in reality. Real lions don’t take cruises, and don’t think and speak in English or any other human language. And the animals who got on the Ark didn’t think they were getting on for pleasure ride or vacation. Various elements of the blend, in their original source contexts, wouldn’t ‘work,’ but in the blend they work fine—in the blend it is perfectly acceptable for lions to talk, and for the animals who are getting on the Ark to be going on a cruise.

## How cultural understanding is necessary for understanding these blends

### In the Calvin and Hobbes Blend

It must be noted here that the *Calvin and Hobbes* comic strip has been translated into numerous other languages and is popular in Europe and Asia as well as America. Our purpose here is not to argue that the entire comic strip relies on western/American cultural backgrounds for its humor. Calvin *is* a young American boy, but readers need not be American – or even western – to appreciate the comic strip. Some of the themes that appear in it are universal. However, we are arguing that this particular set of strips does rely largely on such backgrounds and therefore may not be understood in a less westernized context. Each of the three input spaces are analyzed below for elements in them that necessitate cultural background knowledge, and we engage in brief speculations about how the meaning of the strips may be changed or lost if such knowledge is not accessible.

#### Real Estate

The entire frame is called to mind by the real estate ‘buzz words’ prevalent throughout both of the strips. In cultures where these words do not have anything to do with the notion of real estate, the strip could conceivably be translated, but the entire real estate frame – accessed by at least six statements in the lingo of the frame, could be reduced to just the second segment of the two strips, in which the alien actually uses the words ‘real estate.’ The rest of the references would not play a part in accessing it but would simply be random elements in a conversation about planet earth.

Another possibility is that some cultures do not have the concept of real estate as we know it at all. Land and property transactions are conducted differently and may not involve the same procedures (seeking out property based on desirable qualities, acquiring it from an individual, resolution of conflict, etc.). Western/American readers bring to the strip all of their previous experiences of real estate transactions as well as a general understanding of the process gleaned from friends, family, the media, etc.

Understanding real estate from a western/American cultural background is crucial not only for integrating this frame into the blend (and thus for structuring the blend itself) but also for understanding the strips’ humor, particularly the second strip. In the first strip, a person with only vague knowledge of this frame could conceivably see the humor in the counter-expectation: the aliens, rather than intending to decimate all human life in their takeover of the planet, are simply looking for a ‘quiet galaxy’ in which to live. That is funny, but not nearly as funny as when the language calls to mind cosmic real-estate agents advertising planets available for invasion like we advertise homes for sale.

However, the humor of the second strip depends upon the reader’s ability to draw on cultural knowledge of the legal procedures involved in buying a home. Earth’s tilt is portrayed as a defect (similar to an uneven foundation) of which the buyer is unaware at the time of purchase. The humor is bound up in the last frame, where two out of the three utterances contain language specific to legal aspects of the American real estate business: “Let the buyer beware” and “bring [it] up to code.”

## **Alien Contact/Invasion**

The Alien Contact/Invasion frame contributes as much to the blend as the other two input spaces, and is nearly as enmeshed with cultural references. The idea of invaders from outer space is hardly a cultural universal. It is in the west that such ideas have become well-developed, so that most American children (and children of many other western cultures) could give a description of an alien and describe how they act. Cultures unfamiliar with the idea of aliens may identify these as spirits or monsters.

But it is key to the humor of this blend that the aliens should be aliens and not merely spirits or monsters. Their first encounter with an earthling is (unfortunately for them) with the wily Calvin, who somehow convinces them that he rules the planet and 'sells' it to them for a price of 50 leaves. This is only possible if they have no knowledge of human life on earth. Spirits are generally assumed to have such knowledge. Monsters might not, but then they are usually still inhabitants of earth, so that the references to galaxies and planets would be lost.

These references to planets, galaxies, and various properties of Earth are what mainly contribute to the humor from the Alien Contact/Invasion input space when combined with our culturally-acquired background knowledge of aliens. This background knowledge associates aliens from outer space with all of this vocabulary and conjures up ideas of highly intelligent, technologically superior beings traveling through the galaxies. The line "We are taking over your world," as mentioned above, accesses a specific part of our 'alien' web: that of invasion. Once again, this concept is culturally acquired through movies, cartoons, and campfire stories, about alien invasions and documentaries about UFO sightings and crop circles. Readers who cannot access such background information miss the humorous twist as the aliens begin giving a fairly reasonable explanation for their desire to take over earth: they are practical investors, not hostile invaders.

## **Calvin and Hobbes**

This input space differs from the other two in that its accessibility is not as limited. The reader draws upon background knowledge gleaned from reading other strips in the series, so that the *Calvin and Hobbes* world is a 'culture' within the reader's culture. It is this that readers access when they read the strip. The most important background information necessary is about Calvin. These two strips alone give no information as to his age, social standing, etc. But for the second strip's humor to be fully realized, we must know that Calvin is *not* Earth's potentate. Other factors, such as the interaction with Hobbes, are not really vital to understanding the strip, although they do help.

## **In the Bizarro Blend**

An understanding of western culture is important to understanding of at least two of the three input spaces that feed into this blend. And without an understanding of those two spaces, one viewing the comic would probably not even catch the references to the third space—that of the world of carnivores. Each input space will be discussed below, with reference to the elements that must be culturally understood in order to contribute to an understanding of the blend.

### **Noah's Ark**

The Noah's Ark frame is not one that is solely accessible in the west. Rather, any culture that has exposure to the Old Testament will probably know this story, as it is one of the most prominent in the Bible, as well as one of the most significant events in human history. However, in order to trigger the Noah's Ark frame, the person viewing the comic needs to understand that it is this particular frame that the illustration is meant to signify. In our country and culture, we are used to seeing in Sunday school or children's books this familiar depiction of the Noah's Ark frame: a line of animals waiting to get on the Ark. A person from another culture, even a culture that was familiar with this story, could stare at this comic and have no idea what was being pictured; but anyone in our culture who looks at this instantly thinks of the animals getting onto Noah's Ark.

### **Cruise**

Some cultures have no familiarity with large bodies of water such as the ocean, or with vehicles that traverse the water; much less do they any concept of a "cruise," where

people get on a boat and spend days on the water, for purposes of relaxation. But in western culture, we are familiar with the idea of the "cruise." Cruises are one form of vacationing, usually reserved for those who have more money to spend; and on a cruise, people expect to be well taken care of and well fed. So, as soon as we read the lion's quote, we instantly think of the stereotypical cruise frame: people lounging about and amusing themselves on a spacious ship that is floating on clear, blue waters on a perfect sunny day.

### **Carnivores**

The Carnivore frame is one that is accessible to any culture that has seen animals eat other animals. Especially in a culture familiar with lions, this input space would not be difficult to access, if one were able to follow the appropriate clues that lead to that frame! In the case of this comic, if the reader were not able to understand the frames of Noah's Ark and Cruise, he would never catch the implied references to the world of the carnivore, where animals eat other animals.

In order for a person to fully understand the meaning and humor of this blend, he needs to have an understanding of the western culture that has shaped and determined the input spaces that went into the making of the blend.

### **Conclusion**

Through this paper we have demonstrated the importance of cultural background for understanding certain types of blends. In particular, it is important for understanding comic strips. We realize that cultural background is not the only factor that contributes to the understanding of a blend; personal experience with the input spaces, for instance, is also a contributing factor. Fully accessing the input spaces requires cooperation between several processes of which cultural background is a vital element.

### **Bibliography**

Calvin and Hobbes. Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Calvin\\_and\\_Hobbes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Calvin_and_Hobbes).

Fauconnier, Gilles and Mark Turner. 2002. The way we think: conceptual blending and the mind's hidden complexities. New York: Basic Books.

Piraro, Dan. October 4, 2006. Bizarro. King Features Syndicate.

Watterson, Bill. December 12, 1995. Calvin and Hobbes. Universal Press Syndicate.

Watterson, Bill. December 20, 1995. Calvin and Hobbes. Universal Press Syndicate.