

What is an oxymoron?

AIM meeting, 5th Apr 2013

University of Amsterdam

Sune Gregersen, University of Copenhagen

“Oxymoron”

oxys ‘sharp’ + *moros* ‘dull’, ‘stupid’

Paradox “This sentence is false.”

Antithesis “To err is human, to forgive, divine.”

Alexander Pope, “An Essay on Criticism”, 1711

Verbal oxymoron: Structure

Adj + N “the murderous innocence of the sea.”

W.B. Yeats, “A Prayer for my Daughter”, 1919

Adj + Adj “young ancient faces”

Graham Greene, Brighton Rock, 1938

Verbal oxymoron: Shakespeare

“O heavy lightness, serious vanity,
Misshapen chaos of well-seeming forms!
Feather of lead, bright smoke, cold fire, sick health”

Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet, 1.1.168-70

STEREO

COLUMBIA

STEREO
360 SOUND

SIMON & GARFUNKEL SOUNDS OF SILENCE



Verbal oxymoron: Shen 1984

Direct oxymora, e.g. “heavy lightness”.

Indirect oxymora, e.g. “cold fire”.

Cruse 1986: Inherentness; *fire* “inherently” *hot*.

Variation: *strike* - *good* or *bad*?

Verbal oxymoron: Lexical opposition

“More or less” rather than “either or.”

More common in verbs, adjectives, and abstract nouns.

Oxymora with concrete nouns
prototypically indirect.

Verbal oxymoron: Gibbs & Kearney 1994

Context-free interpretations of oxymora.

“Cold fire” – PASSION IS HEAT?

*Genre expectations, context, real-world knowledge,
cognitive environment.*

Visual oxymoron: Kennedy 1982

Visual representation of an entity with two incompatible features.

“a man drawn with a halo and horns, or the robes of a saint and the six-guns of a cowboy” (1982: 599)

Visual oxymoron: Hughes 1984

Incongruity between an object and the material of which it is made.

Marble paper boat, artificial flowers.

= all visual representation oxymoronic.

Visual oxymoron: Teng & Sun 2002

“Symmetric image alignment” of incompatible entities.

However, verbal oxymora are not symmetric.

Visual antithesis?

Visual oxymoron: A tentative definition

The depiction of an entity or concept with a feature or quality which appears contradictory.



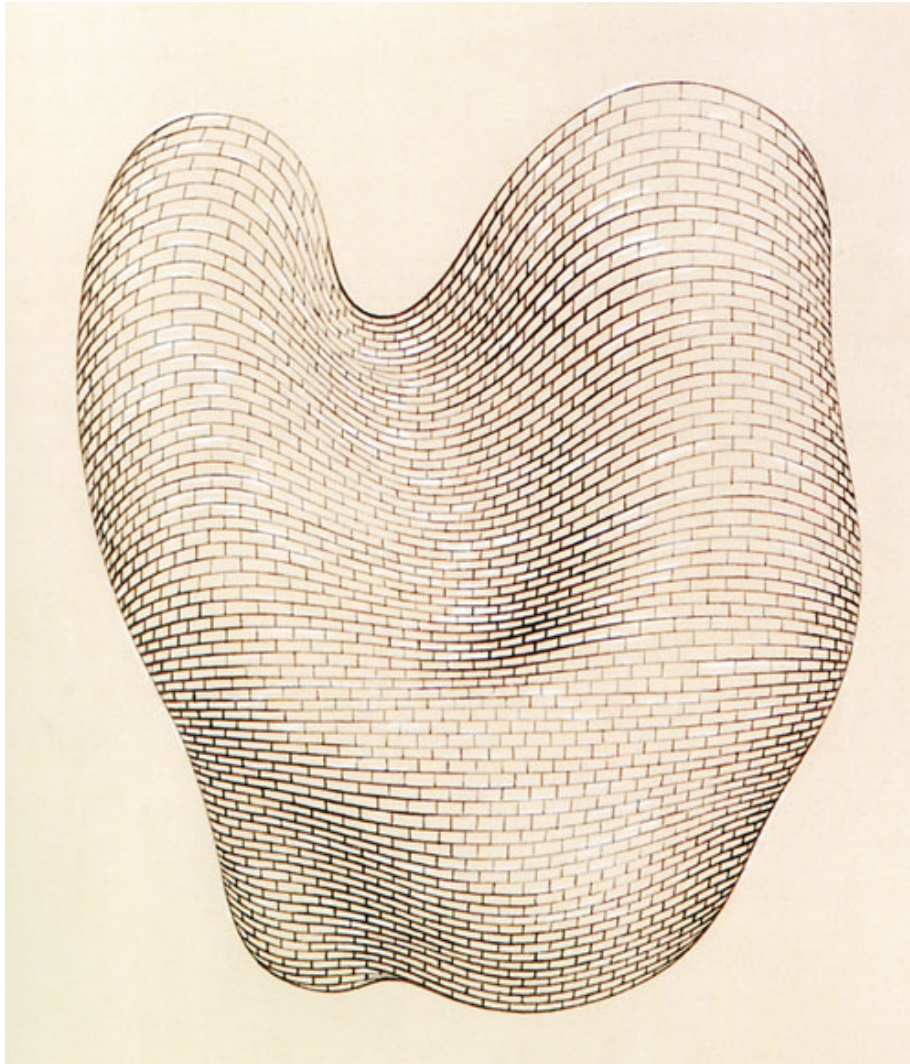
Oliviero Toscani/Benetton, "Priest and Nun", 1991



René Magritte, "The Ignorant Fairy", 1950



Buster Keaton, "The Boat", 1921



Hans Bellmer, Untitled, 1957

Verbal – visual

Ambiguous verbalisation: *dark light* vs. *dark flame*.

Visual signs: *Iconic* (C. S. Peirce), motivated,
concrete.

Verbal signs: *Symbolic*, arbitrary, “abstract”.

Visual oxymora are less obvious than verbal ones.

Future studies

Demarcation.

Relation to other tropes.

Other modes.

Thank you.

Works cited

- Bellmer, H. (1957). Untitled. Drawing. *Petite anatomie de l'inconscient physique*. Paris: Le Terrain Vague.
- Cruse, D. A. (1986). *Lexical semantics*. Cambridge UP.
- Gibbs, R. W., Jr., & L. R. Kearney (1994). "When Parting is Such Sweet Sorrow: The Comprehension and Appreciation of Oxymora". *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research* 23. 75-89.
- Hughes, P. (1984). *More on Oxymoron*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Keaton, B. (1921). *The Boat*. Live action movie. USA: First National Pictures.
- Kennedy, J. M. (1982). "Metaphor in pictures". *Perception* 11. 589-605.
- Magritte, R. (1950). *The Ignorant Fairy*. Oil painting. Private collection, Brussels, Belgium.
- Peirce, C. S. (1932). *Collected Papers, Vol. 2: Elements of Logic*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP.
- Shen, Y. (1987). "On the structure and understanding of poetic oxymoron". *Poetics Today* 8. 105-22.
- Teng, N. Y. & S. Sun (2002). "Grouping, Simile, and Oxymoron in Pictures: A Design-Based Cognitive Approach". *Metaphor and Symbol* 17:4. 295-316.
- Toscani, O. (1991). *Priest and Nun*. Printed advertisement. Italy: United Colors of Benetton.