

The natural history of snowclones

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The cliché templates known (since 2004) as *snowclones* –

X3: ... the three most important [electoral] issues in Michigan are: "Jobs, jobs, jobs."

Not your R's X: Not Your Mother's Tableware

have two-part histories, a first phase in which a fixed *model* gains currency, a second in which variations are played on the model, sometimes leading to a second fixing, a crystallization of these playful allusions into a snowclone.

In the first phase, an idea is expressed in various ways: "what one person likes, another person detests", "things that please some people repel others", etc. All of these are understood literally, require no special knowledge to understand, and can be created on the spot. Eventually, one particular formulation becomes conventional, in a cliché, striking quotation, proverb or saying, catchphrase, slogan, or memorable name or title: "One man's meat is another man's poison."

Then this model may quickly extend by developing open slots, or by playful allusion: "One man's Mede is another man's Persian". Sometimes, every part of the model that can be varied for effect is:

Eye Guy: Queer Eyes for the Spanish Guys, Straight guys for gay eyes, Homosapien eye
for the Neanderthal guy

Brokeback: Backdoor Mounting, Breakdance Mountain, Brokeback Mounties

In snowcloning, these variants become fixed as formulas with open slots in them, and with a mostly calculable meaning: One man's X is another man's Y. It's still possible to play creatively with the expression, but most variants will fit the template.

Neither fixing is inevitable. Ideas can be around for millennia before the first fixing; the model "The three most important things in real estate are: location, location, location" (on which the X3 snowclone is based) dates only to the middle 1950s. And some playful allusions – Eye Guy, Brokeback – never crystallize into a formula.

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