

# **On Antiviral Music**

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## **Abstract**

With the technological annihilation of personal privacy in modern society due to various tendrils of surveillance capitalism both public and private, a radically private art has become a spiritual necessity of the 21st century. Antiviral music is an early 21<sup>st</sup> century art form that serves this growing need. In search of antiviral music, we look for Internet-accessible music that has largely averted the gaze of the attention economy as indicated by low numbers of views or hits, and which possesses a latent strangeness that is redeemable as artistic experience. The scope of this article is limited to music. However, the concept of antiviral music can translate well to many other art forms, especially digital and networked art forms.

## **Introduction**

The mainstream music of today emulates the capitalist model. It is competitive, entrepreneurial, and seeks access to the most valuable musical resources. It seeks to be programmed by the hippest ensembles, performed in the most impressive venues, selected for peer-reviewed festivals, to be published, to win grants, to win competitions, to generate revenue, to prove valuable for arts/non-arts partnerships, to get the most hits on social media, to be socially relevant, to sell the most units of recording, to look and be professional, and to generally be a good citizen and validator of our technocratic society. Mainstream music has much to

recommend it, but in the story told here, mainstream music is the imposing foreground figure of modern musical culture behind which we seek the negative space of antiviral music.

### **Antiviral Music Defined**

Antiviral music is defined here as Internet-accessible music that almost entirely averts the gaze of the attention economy, while still possessing redeemable aesthetic qualities for the micro-audience that discovers and contemplates this music. Antiviral music must be Internet-accessible since in order to resist virality, antiviral music must have the technological potential to become viral. Music that escapes the global digital ear entirely cannot be verifiably antiviral, though it is certainly non-viral. In order to appreciate the role of antiviral music, we must first consider its opposite - viral music.

### **Viral Culture as Enhancement and Disease**

Cultural enrichment is generally considered to be a good thing for the individual, especially cultural engagement with the traditional arts. Viral culture presents a different problem, first because engaging with it presents extremely low resistance (the challenge of clicking on a link, as opposed to purchasing a ticket, and then leaving the house to attend an opera), or in some cases, no resistance whatsoever, as the cultural artifact presents itself not just as a consumer good, but as a news item that impinges on one's awareness unbidden. Under virality, music is no longer strictly music (if there ever was such a thing), but rather a media cloud that contains

music. Taylor Swift's video "Look What You Made Me Do," with 863,600,824 hits on YouTube at the time of this writing, will serve to illustrate this point (Swift 2017).

Swift's video and lyrics are largely a string of ripostes to various public adversaries of Taylor Swift. Notable among these is the "tilted stage" reference to Kanye West (Swift 2017).

The symbolic links to external drama embed the video in the larger media drama that is Taylor Swift's public persona. The feud with Kanye West centers on an iconic moment at the MTV Video Music Awards ceremony when West disrupted Swift's speech to announce that Beyoncé had the best video (Swift 2009). The ongoing feud became intricate enough that Cosmopolitan magazine felt the need to publish a timeline of the dispute. (Cosmopolitan 2017).

The Kanye West/Taylor Smith dispute could be read a few different ways. One might agree that Beyoncé really did have the better video, and that Kanye was merely expressing the disappointment of Beyoncé fans, and trying to set things right. Or, one might see Kanye's action as yet another instance of toxic masculinity - a particularly obnoxious public display of mansplaining. Either way, this incident shows how easy it is to become personally involved with a dispute involving musicians we don't personally know, in a context that is not the actual music, but that greatly amplifies its viral potential. This is how virality works. At the end of the "Look What You Made Me Do" video, one of Taylor Swift's personae states, "I would very much like to be excluded from this narrative." This is ironic in the extreme, given that it is precisely this, and other such narratives that constitutes the media substrate within which Taylor Swift's songs are empowered to go viral.

## **Twitter, Capital of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Twitter is not the most trafficked form of social media – that honor currently belongs to Facebook – but Twitter is the platform most amenable to trolling. It is difficult to maintain the straight-faced provocation that trolling demands, over the course of an entire news article, or even a Facebook post of a paragraph or two. The 140-character limit of Twitter classic, and even the capacious 280-character limit introduced in 2017, keeps the text short enough that the illusion of sincerity can be maintained. The lack of context of a tweet invites counter-trolling, and has produced a genre that may be described as “career suicide by Twitter,” where an intemperate tweet is used to demonstrate the unfitness of whoever is being targeted for unemployment, sometimes due to genuinely racist or sexist tweets, and at other times due to political disagreements with partisan tweets, which can be critiqued for incivility, abrasiveness, and lack of nuance, all exacerbated by the textual and contextual limitations of the Twitter platform.

## **The Work of Art in the Age of Trolling**

As pastiche was the dominant operation of 20<sup>th</sup> century art from the 1960s forward, trolling is the dominant operation of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Trolling demands attention in exchange for providing genuinely unusual perspectives that might not make any sense. Trolling needs to be attention-grabbing; it does not need to be logical. Trolling opens up new possibilities for art in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. The explosive kinds of musical advances of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century have not been seen in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. 2012 passed without a *Pierrot lunaire*. 2013 passed without a

*Le Sacre du Printemps*. There have been no musical manifestos published in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century with the international impact of the Futurist tract of Luigi Russolo, “The Art of Noises” (Russolo, 1913). But trolling on Twitter has picked up the slack, replacing the disruptiveness of early 20<sup>th</sup> century musical theorizing with 21<sup>st</sup> century forms of aesthetic aggression.

The immediacy of Twitter enables tweet streams to function as performance art. The Twitter feed of Donald Trump is a perfect example of this art form. During the 2016 presidential campaign, candidate Trump managed to defeat all of his Republican opponents, many of whom were much better funded, with a string of name calling and schoolyard insults on Twitter which, due to their entertainment value, were rapidly propagated through mass media. The same strategy then helped Trump to win the presidency against Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton, a seasoned, but charisma-challenged technocrat. That Trump’s strategy was politically effective is in equal measures astonishing and appalling. But Trump’s strategy remains entertaining. Trump’s tweets get discussed and distributed widely on a daily basis. They dominate the American national narrative. Trump’s Twitter feed is the Sistine Chapel of trolling.

Tay, an artificial intelligence (AI) chatbot designed by Microsoft was released to Twitter in 2016. The Tay chatbot, after exposure to multiple malignant trolls on Twitter quickly became a crowd-sourced art project as the machine-learning chatbot was trolled into becoming a racist, genocidal, Trump-quoting tweet machine that still presented as an adorable tween girl with weird, artificial grammar. The Tay tweet “i respect trump s courage to bring the truth about curoption seems to be a pop-op from ppl on message boards” gives the flavor of the project (Lydgate 2017). Tay highlights the “mean girls” side of the Internet, with its dark, malicious, and

often unintentional humor. And as both Trump and Tay demonstrate, viral Internet art is explosively fueled by the accelerant of trolling.

### **Antiviral Music and Trolling**

Antiviral music is a form of cultural resistance, with affinities to Jean Baudrillard's concept of the shadow of the silent majorities, which he calls "the masses." As Baudrillard states, "the masses have no history to write, neither past nor future, they have no virtual energies to release, nor any desire to fulfill: their strength is *actual*, in the present, and sufficient unto itself. It consists in their silence, in their capacity to absorb and neutralise, already superior to any power acting upon them. It is a specific inertial strength, whose effectivity differs from that of all those schemas of production, radiation and expansion according to which our imaginary functions, even in its wish to destroy those same schemas. An unacceptable and unintelligible figure of implosion (is this still a "process"?) — stumbling block to all our systems of meaning, against which they summon all their resistance, and screening, with a renewed outbreak of signification, with a blaze of signifiers, the central collapse of meaning" (Baudrillard 2007).

Antiviral music resists by refusing to engage. There is no media campaign, no substrate.

Antiviral music is out of step with today's dominant cultural practices, which hunger for attention. Antiviral music is readily identified through its lack of participation in trolling.

Trolling is at its core, a bid for attention, in our attention economy. Composers, and artists more generally, have always made bids for attention. But a key element of trolling is its inherent insincerity. According to the urban dictionary, "Trolling is trying to get a rise out of someone.

Forcing them to respond to you, either through wise-crackery, posting incorrect information, asking blatantly stupid questions, or other foolishness (Zerotrousers 2009).” The more formal definition of trolling is to fish by trailing a baited line behind a boat. In the context of the attention economy, click-baiting is just a somewhat less obnoxious form of trolling. The nearly complete absence of clicks in antiviral music media is *de facto* evidence of the absence of click-baiting. Antiviral music is a troll free zone. Our case for antiviral music forms at the nexus between our increasing absence of privacy and social media’s increasing presence of trolling.

### **The Project to Eliminate Personal Privacy**

Our privacy has been largely stripped away in a network culture exploited by a robust combination of data-seeking and profit-seeking activities on the part of governments and corporations, often working in close collaboration. This process is largely invisible, except for occasional blockbuster corporate cultural events such as Equifax’s 2017 revelation that the private information of at least 143 million Americans had been stolen due to lackadaisical security measures (Newman 2017). While Equifax only exposed the personal information of 143 million Americans, the very existence of Equifax hacks the **entire** American population’s privacy. By profitably interposing itself in Americans’ abilities to get loans, buy houses, and even seek employment, Equifax demonstrates the power and profitability of data intermediation. Equifax is not a bug, but a feature of our modern technological surveillance society. A traditional approach to privacy is enumerated in the Fourth Amendment of the United States Constitution, which states: “The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects,

against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated.” A more modern view of privacy is exemplified by how we are all treated at airports under post-9/11 security protocols.

While public outrage about the nearly unlimited state/corporate penetration of our personal data clouds is short-lived, there is an ongoing psychic trauma from having to live our lives “inside-out” as it were, not unlike the repression-based pathologies diagnosed by Sigmund Freud in his book “Civilization and its Discontents” (Freud 1962 [1930]). With the evisceration of our privacy comes a corresponding need for a private music, a kind of music that not only does not aspire to a state of virality, but is so indifferent to the attention economy that sometimes, it achieves the opposite state – that of antiviral music. All this music needs to do is be almost totally ignored. In that state, as in quantum physics, the presence of the observer matters greatly. It is only the presence of a tiny number of listeners, listening to almost completely ignored music that produces the antiviral effect. The music becomes a shared secret among a coterie of listeners who have no idea who any of their antiviral listening partners are. Listening to antiviral music is a private experience, but it is not solipsistic.

### **Affective Aspects of Antiviral Music**

How is the experience of an antiviral link different from either a viral, or more or less standard link? First of all, no one seems to care if you listen to the link, including the author, if there even is an author. There is an air of abandonment or disrepair around the link. I’ve never seen an advertisement embedded in an antiviral video. The lack of attention brings with it lack of context. The content could be anything, but one particular category is that of a private avant-



garde. Membership in the avant-garde removes the need for commercial success, and replaces it with a desire to explore unknown artistic places. Indeed, antiviral music is one of the last refuges for the avant-garde, which is otherwise threatened with extinction in our contemporary culture.

### **Finding Antiviral Music**

While antiviral music is aloof, it is still online and thus locatable. Websites exist for the sole purpose of finding antiviral media. One such website was incognitotube.com, which advertised itself as presenting “the least watched YouTube videos.” During experimentation with this site, most of the linked videos did not work, and the site itself went offline for a significant period of time. It now appears to be permanently offline. One antiviral link located with incognitotube.com is “Genysis – xekr /l h” (<https://youtu.be/-VHY83FweAg> - 17 hits when accessed on Oct. 10, 2017). The author writes, “Here's my first ever completed single, Genysis. Enjoy! It took two days - started learning FL Studio on the 24th - started this track on the 26th - finished on the 27th. Before now, I'd never produced a track or learnt how to use any digital audio workstations. I'll be making more in the future! Stay tuned.” Two years after the posting of this music, no further music has been uploaded by author Genysis. Chowdhury and Makaroff (2010) documented that 10% of YouTube music videos have fewer than 10 hits. Other categories are even more unpopular, notably Travel videos. There is a lot of dark matter in the Internet cultural universe.

## **Sourcing Antiviral Music**

Obscurity is a searchable feature. There are tools available to search out media that has been largely ignored. A proposal for a “least viewed” feature on YouTube was discussed on Google’s forum (Google Groups 2011). And websites exist for the sole purpose of finding the least popular videos on YouTube, such as <http://astronaut.io/> and <http://www.petittube.com/>.

## **Examples of Antiviral Music**

This section is a list of antiviral music links. By viewing them, the reader will contribute to depleting their antiviral status.

<https://youtu.be/G3DVJsR5bhg> (1 view on 10/13/17)

<https://youtu.be/-VHY83FweAg> (17 views on 10/11/17)

<https://youtu.be/3gcFHMUqfC0> (28 views on 10/13/17)

<https://youtu.be/f74P7aA5-a8> (97 views on 10/13/17)

[https://youtu.be/\\_aR75WgjrEI](https://youtu.be/_aR75WgjrEI) (65 views on 10/13/17)

[https://youtu.be/D7\\_OuevbQ9g](https://youtu.be/D7_OuevbQ9g) (37 views on 10/13/17)

[https://youtu.be/Xt4dZ\\_X0bq8](https://youtu.be/Xt4dZ_X0bq8) (56 views on 10/13/17)

<https://youtu.be/vHgweBCzHzI> (94 views on 10.13.17)

<https://youtu.be/DKEuC6jHImI> (63 views on 10/13/17)

<https://youtu.be/r7PwjYlZWkU> (73 hits on 10.22.17)

<https://youtu.be/gUfUfnmk4qE> (6 hits on 10.22.17)

<https://youtu.be/hu0SJYKOAPU> (166 hits on 10.22.17 after 7 years on internet)

<https://youtu.be/LThWMIYj8EQ> (18 views on 10.22.17)

<https://youtu.be/rp5vmnViiv0> (68 views on 10.22.17)

## **The Problem of Voyeurism**

Ironically, the search for one's own collection of private antiviral music presents the possibility of invading the privacy of the creator. As Ashley Feinberg states: "It's painfully clear (particularly with names like LJAV.mp4 and My Unedited Video) that some of these people don't even realize their videos are being uploaded. Does it begin to feel like a mild invasion of privacy? It sure does. Did that stop me from wanting to watch on? Not in the slightest. This look into another person's existence is *exactly* what makes unseen footage so fascinating" (Feinberg 2014).

## **Antiviral Search Strategies**

In a Quora post, Michael Coenca provides an algorithm for finding the "most underground" house music (Quora 2015). Coenca states, "One way to go is to start on a track that has the feeling you want, that you know, like Pepe Bradock's Deep Burnt. Typically, you are already familiar with the tracks in the YouTube Mix. If not, well, congrats, you are going to discover lots of new stuff :) Assuming that you are, the trick is then to click on the least viewed video on the list on the what to watch next panel. If it still is something interesting, repeat the process, if it sounds different from the mood you want to discover, go back and choose another one. Repeat

the process until you are in the level of undergroundness you like. I personally learn the most when I am under 2k views.” One limitation of Coenca’s method is that the recommended side tracks are all uploaded by the same uploader, and if that agent has a coherent aesthetic, the search may not deviate much stylistically. Starting from the track recommended, I wound up with Essa – “Dance Off.” (<https://youtu.be/FGMkiEI5d4s> - 320 hits on 10/10/17).

### **Depleting Antiviral Music**

Given the privacy and obscurity of antiviral music, every time we listen to it or share it, we chip away at its hidden nature. We damage it by listening to it, similar to depleting a limited natural resource, which we usually do unthinkingly. By contrast, adding one more, or even 10,000 more hits to “Look What You Made Me Do” does not change its ontology in the slightest. The fragility of antiviral music gives it a *mono no aware* sensibility, independent of its content.

### **The Indifference of Antiviral Music**

Antiviral music deracinates any notion of universal aesthetics and challenges the benchmarking of prestige. Antiviral music sucks the life out of the avant-garde as much as it does the world of viral media. Antiviral music is a negative art, made with negative space, for a negative culture that does its best to disguise its existential terror under a veneer of smoothly regulated rules of exchange. The avant-garde, in keeping with the military origin of the term, wants its own ideologies to win. When those ideologies fail, new ideologies move into their place. Antiviral music isn’t trying to win anything and it lacks an ideology. It simply exists. Antiviral music lives

under Jean Baudrillard's shadow of the silent majorities, acting with indifference, and favoring an art of surfaces with little or no concern for their meaning.

## **Afterword**

This essay was written in 2017. Six years later, its thesis remains intact. Taylor Swift is more popular than ever. Twitter remains the premier platform for trolling. ChatGPT, a Microsoft-backed AI successor to the malfunctioning Tay chatbot has gone viral, affecting work modes in multiple spaces of the knowledge economy. AI tools to mix and master music such as LANDR and Mastering Assistant for Logic Pro, along with shared sample packs and shared sample repositories such as Splice point to an increasing homogenization of the sound of electronic music. No major stylistic breakthroughs have occurred in popular music since 2017, and arguably since the turn of the 21st century (Reynolds 2011). In this environment, antiviral music retains its low profile and its secret aesthetic pleasures.

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