

From Telos to Anti-Telos: Rock and Pop Choruses, 1964–2019

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The chorus has been the dominant feature of rock and pop songs since the mid 1960s. In this presentation, I trace the development of a particular type of chorus, which I call the telos chorus. Telos choruses begin with a climactic arrival and plateau at a high energetic level, eschewing any internal trajectory and encouraging a significant amount of “rocking out” on the part of the listeners. I begin by discussing the emergence of telos choruses in the 60s and 70s through their heyday in the dance-obsessed 1980s. I move on to the expansion of the telos idea through the grunge and hip-hop movements in the 90s and 2000s, and ultimately to its subversion in EDM-infused pop of the recently concluded decade. Through examples from Bob Dylan to Nirvana to Taylor Swift, I argue that form in rock and pop is not just a basic template for song design but an inherently expressive feature of the genre.