

(Eurozine published an edited version of my new essay on copium [here](#). The German translation was published in the spring 2024 edition, Lettre International #144. How do you cope with the wars, climate crisis, and misery all over? Below you can find my original version. In line with the INC experiments called 'expanded publishing', the text comes with a song, [Das Copium Lied](#), recorded and mixed at the UKRAiNATV studio in Krakow. Thanks, Rom and Gleb! /geert)

Copium Compendium: How Do You Cope in this Digital Age of Disaster?

"Well-informed cynicism is only another mode of conformity." Max Horkheimer—"Let's smoke feelings together, it's all about you, me and feelings, which should be forgotten." Arman—"When you need to be polite to your search engine in order to get good results." Francis Hunger—"I got leverage" (t-shirt)—Your AI will talk to my AI—"The heart says yes but the attention span says no." Melissa Broder—"Be the training data you want to see in the world." Kylie McDonald—"Pause for the People"—Chinese saying about the hummingbird: "The bird struggles hard but moves nowhere, yet it is incapable of landing—"No longer 'Socialism or Barbarism' but 'Degrowth or Mad Max'." Patrice Riemens—"Reality is wrong. Dreams are for real." Tupac

There are always new requirements, but none are beneficial for you. They say the opportunity for advancement has faded. Desire was extinguished long ago. Your soul feels depleted, with no discharge of inner tensions in sight. You need change but can't cope with change any longer. What happens when there's no more energy to address the issues head-on, you put off tasks and forget to take care of your body. You feel bored and lonely now that your online friends no longer answer. You got intoxicated last night but it's no longer possible to get high. How do digital souls survive when perseverance means nothing anymore? Once you're too tired to manage your life and deal with planetary dysmorphia there's always the fallback option called copium.

If the goal is to reclaim the power of definition in the fight against right-wing meme hegemony, here is one. Copium is the digital information intake that makes one temporarily numb, intoxicated and deprived of sensation when there is literally zero emotion on display. This is the road taken from bittersweet irony down to confronting and overcoming absolute nihilism. What happens when there's no purpose anymore to deal with the world's true nature and you enter an unnarratable condition?

Copium is a micro-release that helps you to keep going, beyond the destructive side of drug-taking and the psychedelic ecstasy of colourful alternative realities. Push ahead, say it out loud, stay weird and be assured there is life again after the Event Horizon. Enter the tricky pharmakon of the pain-killer-as-attitude that opens up to the miracle. What happens when escalation of shock value tactics no longer works? Once inside the rabbit hole one forgets euphoria, and even the rush. Instead of a theatrical breakdown the fictional yet all too real copium drug causes a 'whatever' flatlining of involuntary capitalism we're thrown into.

The robot is no longer a valid motive to express one's feelings of indifference. While you are at once partly alive and partly dead, today's robots jump, dance, fall and stand up again. Even worse: they apologize and ask how you're doing. Chatbots are trained no longer to be polite and distant as in the case of HAL in *2001: A Space Odyssey* but to be emphatic, provoking violent responses by the frustrated multitudes that rage against artificial stupidity and unfounded hope. "Have a nice day—and please do not forget to rank me!" Shut up, we care but don't care!

Copium is a substance that helps people deal with stress and other negative emotions.^[1] According to *Know Your Meme* "copium is used to describe a fictional drug to help one deal with loss. Making memes is presented as a coping mechanism to deal with negative emotions. Back in the days of Trump the term was used in a meme featuring Pepe the Frog hooked to an oxygen tank labelled copium,"^[2] a chemical "used to soothe the mind of a person who has just lost a debate."^[3] The origin goes back to mid-2003 when rapper Keak da Sneak released the album Copium. There's also a suggestion according to Wiktionary that copium gives energy to denial in those that consume it. The term got popularized in meme space during the 4Chan-Twitter Trump years (2016-2020) and reached its peak after the January 6, 2021 storming of the US Capitol.

Copium can also be read as a reference to the US opiate crisis. As a contemporary meme states: "Turns out, the real opiates of the masses... is opiates." However, we're talking here about symbolic ways how to grapple with stress, panic and anger, not about the luring self-destructive ways out. The late French philosopher Bernard Stiegler describes this period as the collapse of 'global childishness', "leaving the white middle classes to sink into misery, alcoholism, drug addiction and resentment, accelerating the regression of their life expectancy as well as the collapse of their

‘intelligence quotient’.”[4]

While *Urban Dictionary* defines copium as a “metaphoric opiate inhaled when faced with loss, failure or defeat, especially in sports, politics and other tribal settings,”[5] the emphasis here lies on the structural aspects of a life defined by serial defeats. What happens when the loss becomes permanent and gets hardwired into the techno-social existence? The shock doctrine that defined the neo-liberal age is long gone, yet ‘change’ is for the happy few. The shock is permanent now and has become an integral part of 21st-century life. What remains is diversity in the form of stagnation, regression, crisis and decline and a never-ending sense of disaster of what Kim Stanley Robinson in his science-fiction novel *Ministry for the Future* called Götterdämmerung capitalism. Nothing will disappear voluntarily, out of the blue. Appearances refuse to fade away. With both history and technology further speeding up, the hyper forces become autonomous entities that no longer need the human subject. That’s the bleak life after the tipping point.

In 1843 Karl Marx wrote the following famous sentences: “Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.”[6] The aim of religion then was to calm down uncertainty in life. Around the same time, the ‘God is dead’ phrase started to circulate. Blame Kierkegaard, Stirner and Nietzsche, but once the secular genius was out of the bottle, no ‘spiritual renaissance’ could reinstate the violent authority of religion (with fundamentalist regimes in Iran and Afghanistan serving as a cruel reminder). Fast forward from the 19th century and the question is what the ‘copium of the people’ looks like today. What calms you down? How do you cope? What are ways to incorporate insecurities in the light of the inevitable? The raw objectivity of the collapse alone will not lead to political action unless we take vulnerability into account. This is the lesson for 2020s. We’re supposed to be actors but behave like 20th-century spectators. This is our melancholy: “Just that something so good. Just can’t function no more.” (Love Will Tear Us Apart, Joy Division)

Instead of defining coping as a psychological strategy whereby the subject rejects a harsh truth and adopts a less disturbing belief instead, let’s stress the survival aspect of the repetitive everyday life that does not allow for (revolutionary) change. The spirit of capitalism may be dead—but so is the will to resist and overthrow the regime. “Take a chill pill, will you?” (popular

saying). Coping is then a result of the loss of the positive side of ideology as a belief system. And being in the world is reduced to killing time. It's time to go easy on the job and quit the hustle. Let's chill and check the socials. What are 'coping mechanisms'? In this light, copium can be anything, it's an empty container as long as it elevates the pain and is understood as a metaphorical opiate. While some associate it with subdued addictive substances and things like sports, sleep, porn or food, copium can better be understood as essentially digital time killers such as binge-watching series, playing games and doom-scrolling TikTok videos. And don't forget all the senseless YouTube sessions.

Copium stands for Vita Nonactiva and provides relief from contemplation, giving your brain a break.[7] What happens when worries go in circles and it has become impossible to make a decision, any decision? Apathy used to be a stigma. No longer. There is sympathy for the slacker. Everyone has had enough. This is the big difference from thirty years ago when neo-liberal positivism was still the norm and the slacker was looked down upon as a lazy, sub-cultural figure languishing about as Generation X. The state of distraction today equals impulsive digital interactions that offload the anxieties onto another platform or app. Send an instant message, swipe to match on a dating app, or comment on a post. All this will never bring rest or tranquillity, let alone mindfulness.

Coping is a defence mechanism in situations of stress. But what happens when this 'mechanism' enters geo-politics, behavioural psychology and, ultimately, sold back to you through social media marketing? The neuroscience enlightenment campaign has paid off. The workings of the brain's reward system are now common knowledge. Patterns of cybernetic control have been recognized. The higher art of coping, which arises with all this techno-cynical reason, is at the same time a reflection on Mark Fisher's diagnosis of the state of frenzied stasis. "[Trying to make ends meet, you're a slave to money then you die.](#)" (The Verve).[8]

Hauntology is one option but what happens when the nightmare returns, like in a *Groundhog Night* zone, a story that, unlike *Groundhog Day*, would start all over again the moment the main character falls asleep? Will copium, a term once popular on Twitch and sometimes also called hopium, only extend the nightmare? One wonders, will the digital papaver make the chain of disasters worse or rather soften its mental impact? Or does it, in the saying by Kurt Vonnegut, work more like a painkiller ("aspirin of the people")? For

a moment, rays of God beams are shining down from the clouds and then disappear, in a glimpse.

According to therapists, we need to cope 'in order to deal with disadvantage or adversity'. But once you run out of coping skills, there is always copium as a last resort. This is the promise. Regression is a never-ending downward slope. We're thrown back to coping mechanisms after access to the past and future gets blocked. There's just horror of the eternal presence of the monotonous every day. The scent of dark orchids. While everything appears to change, nothing does. Dealing with a world driven by reactive forces has become a central issue, considering the easy way people flow in and out of existence in this world. What's your poison?

There is an uncanny whirlpool of factors at play that spins around an empty core called the Self. This is what happens when feelings of being undesired, unwanted and isolated are experienced together, on an industrial, cosmic scale. This is the late social media age of collective loneliness, also known as the not-yet-widely-recognized Turkle syndrome. But the issue is no longer being alone in the crowd. The sad and lonely gather to muffle the perception of pain and create quasi-communities with accompanying ideologies in an attempt to give it a sense of meaning of living in the void. Whether there is an actual lack of actual social networks and personal (emotional) bonding or not is no longer relevant. The techno-social reality supersedes identity identity-building of an outsider group. Once failure is democratized and becomes a general condition with multiple ways to express itself, we need to look beyond this or that subculture and address the general techno-affect.

Let's dig into a particular case. In her research on young male incels and their online forums, Canadian researcher Kate Babin lists four factors for the lack of social cohesion that I will reinterpret here. Babin starts with *othering the in-group* practice because of the "rampant distrust between members on a forum." This reflex of exclusion mirrors a general lack of trust on platforms and can be seen as an internalization of surveillance and extractivism. One is never really alone online, or in a closed group, for that matter. There are always big and small Others virtually present that watch and follow in a semi-invisible manner. There is never really trust. The social feeling is a fake one, at best unreliable.

On this overcrowded planet internet, coping is never just of solitary concern. Levels of paranoia in open networks are at an all-time high, while tacit activist knowledge on how to identify infiltrators and spies remains virtually

non-existent. Large flocs of users are ready to disappear overnight, never to be seen again. While in the past this culture of uncertainty was associated with online anonymity, these days social media make it so much easier to investigate who's behind a username. At best copium acts as a mask. If only we could see online comment culture as masquerade balls during Venice Carnival.

The second element, *clogging up the forum*, is again an internal matter, used to show engagement through minimal involvement. There is a pleasure in derailing an internal discussion or exchange like this and disrupting rational deliberation. I post, like and share, therefore I am. When the signal-to-noise ratio tips, the power of discourse is momentarily disrupted to reproduce the community feeling.

Shitposting is the third factor Babin lists, a culture-jamming technique in a foreign feed, for instance on YouTube or Twitter. Often only one bad remark will suffice to end an online discussion and start an avalanche of 'engagement', a trick cultivated by the grifters that make up the troll-industrial complex. The advice of 90s cyberculture: 'not to feed the trolls' did not scale beyond the do-good hacker community and is nowadays largely unknown to mainstream users. An additional issue here is the absence of tools to moderate in elegant ways. Platformed communities are not equipped with the possibility to shield themselves as online environments are supposed to remain 'open' (to grow), surrounded by ad tech. Closed groups simply do not have to deal with shitposters. The way users dealt with 'zoom bombing' during the Covid-19 years with the release of an exclusive passcode to subscribed participants before the event or meeting shows how easy it is to shield off online exchanges. However, old media love to continue to report shitposting incidents as a sign of the decline of the medium—and society in general. Instead of accusing adolescent others of immature behaviour, it may be better to frame these acts as part of an ideological conflict, a culture war or, more contemporary, cyberwarfare.

Babin's fourth and last characteristic is *fatalism*, by far the most interesting of her factors as it invites us to compare fatum today with Jean Baudrillard's *Fatal Strategies*, published in 1983. Babin notes that "any positive mention of an interest or a hobby which presents an opportunity for members to connect is instead diminished and labelled a 'cope'." So what's the fatum here? Software, community ties, the Zeitgeist, the incel identity trap? In her conclusion, Kate Babin notes that the incels.is forum she investigated

“creates division within a subcultural community, leading to an absence of social support, low-quality relationships and extreme negative affectivity.” Identity in this case is not celebrated as a liberation but a paranoia trap. The fatality is a second-order, weak version of Baudrillard’s romantic notion of the seductive ‘evil’ side of the Inevitable. Instead, what’s experienced is an instable order of fabricated elements, glued together in a temporary setting. Instead of fate, there is design. Fluidity is the opposite of predestination. The real existing attitudes confronted here are forms of confusion, which manifest as ‘optionalism’ (“I have the freedom to choose between a multitude of options and in the end cannot decide.”)

As Timothy Morton noted, “The outdoors is already indoors.” The coexistence of me and the disasters is a reality. Morton describes problems that “one can understand perfectly, but for which there is no rational solution.”^[9] We are always wrong. Should the collapse be accelerated or can the katechon-restrainer, given its spread is properly administered, be upheld? Is copium then the ‘katechon from below’ (crowdsourcing efforts to delay the arrival of the Antichrist)? For instance, how will users cope after the Internet Mass Extinction when billions of profiles get wiped out in a singular event? For a while, each and every disaster gets parked in our personal histories in a parallel trajectory—until it no longer can. Will it become necessary for public health and political activism reasons to start to design the collective psychic armour that will protect against the detrimental mental fallout of platform disasterism?

Disrupting habits, breaking consensus and questioning power come at a price and can best be done together. That’s the power of the attacking herd and the tragedy of the loner. Better not to take action before but after a new beginning. This can easily become a vicious circle as what comes first? Beginnings are caused by concepts that transition into action. Concepts that themselves are caused by scars.

While politics is often pushed aside as a soap opera or a bureaucratic game, popular figures are themselves turned into copium. According to Italian theorist Franco Berardi, we should analyse the unsinkable Donald Trump as an addictive (social) media celebrity, a political copium of a peculiar kind. “Copium is defined as an immaterial substance you need to inject in your brain to cope with the intolerable. There is a revenge of the depressed mind of the American people, but also self-excitement for the memetic mind. Americans, in their majority, have so far used that repellent individual in a

move to sabotage the globalist elite. But now there is something more crazy. The American mind needs to cope with the persistence of intolerable reality, so they open up the box of Pandora of total erasure of reality as Rational, unleashing a limitless sphere of memetic meaninglessness. The sphere of meaninglessness is not limited by plausibility, not to mention trustability or truth. The question for many is thus how to cope with the depression provoked by the limits of reality, by the predictability of rational choices.”[\[10\]](#)

Can memories of the past function as copium? Russian researcher Nina Danilova has written an interesting study on the status of *déjà-vu* today, a phenomenon driven by an “overabundance of memory and the disappearance of hopes for a better future.”[\[11\]](#) But what happens when memory can no longer be captured and is simply no longer there? What’s the *déjà-vu* effect when in a culture of psycho-technic amnesia? *Déjà-vu* of the little that’s left? Sure, one can train mnemonic techniques but the lure of tech is always there to assist us when sudden waves of nostalgia resurface and we browse through our photo collections, social media collections and the occasional emails. We consist of technical devices, as prosthesis, as Stiegler calls it. Users feel mnemonically disabled and cannot live without their devices.

With Paolo Virno, Danilova defines *deja vu* as “a condition that determines apathy, fatalism, and indifference to the future, since history seems to be known in advance and unalterable.” Danilova asks: “Why is thinking of the future so problematic within the temporality of *déjà vu*?” Micro *déjà-vu* moments, whether narco-technically induced or not, are one of the many contemporary manifestations of ‘stuckness’, provoking a sense of stagnation of both society and its subjects. Why did we already experience this apocalypse before it happened? There can only be one end, but not in this story: we are stuck in a final phase that deliberately upholds its resolution. What happens when life gets trapped in a repetitive loop and we can only listen to the same old funeral songs? You want to move on but in the current sadist scenario there is no way to elegantly exit from the scene.

In a digital cosmos, held together by copium, there are fifty shades of grey. The Russian take on this is always an interesting one. As Nina Danilova explains in an email exchange; “the Russian mentality is set to resist any hint of rose-tinted glasses. Our way is to hit the bottom so hard that you see stars.” I ask about *Toska*, the Russian form of despair beyond depression,

sadness and melancholia, and how it relates to copium. Danilova: “Toska indicates a realm where irony doesn’t work anymore, toska is always a post-ironic state of disillusion. Irony is still a form of copium, as the meme world demonstrates. In the tosca state of mind, one cannot hide behind it anymore. Copium can therefore by some be put aside as a frivolous Western affair—with still too much hope between the lines.” Russians, we might say, subsist in the realm of post-copium. A continuum of culturally determined despair. As a dialectical antithesis, one could propose that it is precisely copium that prevents the cultivation of suffering and the ultimate establishment of death cults.

Once you’ve witnessed sudden mood shifts from anguish and mourning to outrage and anger as the core patterns that express discontent in society, ideological labels such as optimism and pessimism become interchangeable. The copium engine sits in the midst of all of this, right in the middle, making sure the pendulum never stops. In contemporary online culture there are both the happy emotions of ‘hopecore’[\[12\]](#) and the infinite doom scrolling ‘corecore’ mode. Both are forms of collective psychic armour to protect the precarious multitudes from the growing flood of disasters. While gurus, therapists, influencers, friends and parents believe in the power of positive messages, users who yearn for better times learned to leave open all options: hope may as well turn out to be a mental painkiller while a visit to the dark side can be equally uplifting. Both morale-boosting talk and dank memes can quickly lose their impact and become disgusting. But do not forget the power of singing the blues.

In the end, copium is a way to bridge empty time, flat, never-ending periods that are no longer intense nor circular but stretched and repetitive. When life is a series of pseudo-events of others, time flies fast and nothing stands out.[\[13\]](#) It may be counter-intuitive to reintroduce and impose a waiting time for no good reason but the rebellion against friction-free smoothness feels right. The decolonization of time is at hand: Operation Find Lost Time. Stagnation fused with a never-ending stream of disasters to create an inflationary spiral. Remember, the long durée of the malaise and the temporality of the crises are no longer opposites and have become a toxic mix. Better relax and do nothing special. The ontological shock is not coming. Instead, distributed forms of waiting are on the rise. Chilling together provokes. Expect a planetary call for a strike on time soon.

For Cade Diehm from New Design Congress in Berlin copium is distinctly

different to nostalgia, cozy web and escapism. “They all have similarities but copium itself is a derogatory description of delusion as cope instead of defeat. It peaks after the storming of the US Capitol on January 6, 2021. Copium is like coming last in a foot race and thinking you’re winning. It is a form of post-Trump HODLing. BAYC ‘gm’ and WAGMI, QAnon loser moms ‘awaiting the storm’ any moment now: General Flynn and Q are coming in to drain the swamp next year. Nostalgia for last month. That’s the promise. It’s the intensity for power or control, filtered through nostalgia but super immediate. It’s not a desire for current affect, and its not a longing for something long past, it’s a denial of the immediate.”[\[14\]](#)

Upsetting Silicon Valley billionaires and their start-up clone armies worldwide would be an easy strategy to disrupt the ever-growing demand for copium. Their invisible tricks include employing behaviour psychologists and other techno-magic tricksters. But these no longer work due to mass vigilance at the frontlines of the subliminal wars. But for how long? It takes time, but even subliminal tactics are understood by the multitudes even if they will eventually be rendered useless. The aim would be to reverse the strategy to disappear into the background as an infrastructure that is invisible. Such a strategy is not likely to be questioned: challenge power to fight it out in the open. If their influence can longer be diffused, at least make sure there is no return to normal anymore for the extractivist class.

For Hannah Arendt, solitude meant solitary reading—while being with other authors. This is not how we perceive the current desolate situation. Copium is causing us to no longer be there when the web of human relations unravels. Confronted with the worldlessness, the temporary lapses of absence may cause feelings of guilt but the need to know has taken over. Indifference rulz. “Although I want to express my emotions, all I can report back is a gradual loss of affect, plus a growing sense of isolation. Is this what medieval monks called *taedium vitae*, a weariness that arises not from life’s burdens but from its crawling emptiness?” David Kishik writes in his *Self Study, Notes on the Schizoid Condition*. This is the inner struggle for (tele)presence. It is time to articulate the dialectics of the absent presence.

Accelerationists see the unfolding of the forces of digitization as a guarantee for the apocalyptic transition from this late capitalist bourgeois society to cool socialism. Against the passive certainty of the collapse, nothing more energetic, exciting, erotic than the energy of new beginnings that overcome the death cult. This is Hannah Arendt’s *Lebensphilosophie*: the liberating

feeling of not having been here before. Escaping the prescribed apathy, cynicism, paralysis and depression and act, again, historically. What comes after boredom? Discover the power of self-organization as a way to overcome the depleted self. Reclaim the social: it is now or never. Action is the apriori, the coming community will not be presented on a silver platter. Tactical media are a radical interruption of the historical continuity of platform domination and do not need a wolf at the door to thrive. There are multitudes of urgencies. To list them would be a mistake and bound to make one depressed. Best to run into an urgency of collective design: your very own *collapse trouvée*. Franny Choi: “By the time the apocalypse began, the world had already ended. It ended every day for a century or two. It ended, and another ending world spun in its place.”^[15]

[1] Taken from an ironic Fandom page:
<https://sussycentral.fandom.com/wiki/Copium>.

[2] <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/copium>.

[3] <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Copium%20gas>.

[4] Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time 4*, manuscript, translated and edited by Daniel Ross, 2021, p. 236.

[5] <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Copium>: “My hairline is totally fine”,
“You’re high on copium, on dude...” lennilaube.

[6] <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm>.

[7] While in *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt is interested in the *vita activa* as contrasted with the *vita contemplativa*, the proposal here would be to update Jean Baudrillard’s speculative propositions of the inert and obsese as resistant strategies and reinterpret them as the contemporary hegemonic position of the *vita inactive*.

[8]
<https://lyricsondemand.com/onehitwonders/bittersweetsymphonylyrics.html>.

[9] Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2013, p. 136.

[10] Email exchange, August 19, 2023.

[11] Nina Danilova, *Watching Oneself Live: Contemporary Art Negotiating the Temporality of Déjà-Vu*,

PhD thesis submitted to Universidade Católica Portuguesa, Lisbon, 2023, p.

[12] Urban Dictionary defines hopecore as “ a genre of videos that invoke a feeling of hope, glee, wholeness, and most happy emotions. They can range to nostalgic clips, beautiful scenery, and usually have an audio of spliced together videos and songs.”

<https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=hopecore>.

[13] “Today was strange. I didn’t feel particularly good or bad — more of a numbing neutrality. Time flew by fast as I went through daily motions without anything standing out. Work, eat, watch the rain. An oddly uneventful day that left me feeling kind of hollow.”

<https://medium.com/change-your-mind/i-feel-numb-time-to-recharge-600f9f4d7d2>.

[14] Signal chat, September 14, 2023.

[15]

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/151513/the-world-keeps-ending-and-the-world-goes-on>.