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Pulling Our Strings

Atmospheric Experience and Background Exploitation in the Age of AI

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Abstract: This paper develops the concept of *background exploitation* to argue that artificial intelligence's (AI) most profound manipulative power lies not in influencing current beliefs or emotions, but in intervening in the pre-reflective conditions that mediate immediate experience—our *backgrounds*. Drawing on phenomenology and Robert Musil's notions of the "invisible" and the "nonexistent," the paper reconceptualizes atmospheres as based on pre-reflective associations mediated by individual backgrounds. On this basis, two distinct modes of AI-driven background exploitation are distinguished: *background hijacking*, which exploits existing backgrounds in situ, and *background entrapment*, which gradually recalibrates backgrounds over time. While current debates in AI ethics and affective computing primarily address the former, the paper argues that they fail to capture the latter—AI's growing capacity to reshape the very conditions through which immediate experience is mediated.

Keywords: atmospheres; background exploitation; manipulation; affective computing; AI ethics

"People like you find it easy
Naked to see
Walking on air"
Joy Division, "Atmosphere," *Licht und Blindheit* (EP, 1980)

1. Introduction

1 What does a good DJ do when performing for an audience in a nightclub? What is it that they attend to when choosing the next record to be played in a specific moment of their set? The following considerations start from the assumption that a good DJ is particularly skilled at grasping and manipulating the *atmosphere* and *vibe* of a situation through musical means. "Ba no kuuki wo yomu," as the Japanese say regarding this form of tacit sensitivity to social situations, the DJ aims to *read the air of the situation* to select the appropriate record or transition for the moment, to grasp and transform the audience's current vibe. In Rainald Goetz's novel *Rave,* we find a peculiarly concise description of the artistry of a DJ: In the situation described, the DJ is in danger of losing grip of the crowd's vibe. He pre-listens to what might be the next record, to find out if "the new piece actually click[s]" (Goetz 2020, page 79).

2 > "Result: the DJ takes the record off. He turns around and slips it back into its sleeve. What record was that? *What relationship existed between the record now playing and the one just set aside? What relationship struck the DJ as dispensable given the present situation of the party?* He takes out a new record, puts it on, and listens again. He approves. What record does he approve of? What does this record offer vis-à-vis the record set aside and the one that is currently playing? Observations of this kind yield clear reference points about the *principles of consonance that the DJ aims to follow when changing records.*" Goetz (2020, page 80 [my emphasis, TP])

3 First, it is important to note that the DJ in this description is not merely searching for a record that simply fits the one currently playing; rather, he is looking for the right record "given the present situation of the party" and the way he wants to influence the party's atmosphere musically. What he thereby aims to follow intuitively are "principles of consonance," which do not merely relate to the composition of the line-up of records he might

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have anticipated while listening at home. Rather, he attends to the "multiple dimensions of the transitory rules governing the public's reaction *that are here and now momentarily in force*" (Goetz 2020, page 81 [my emphasis, TP]). At the same time, a good DJ not only reacts to and manipulates the crowd's vibe in a given situation. They also fulfill what can be described as an "educational function:" A good DJ also aims at influencing and transforming the very conditions shaping the ways their audience listens to music, how they are able to switch from one musical vibe to another, or even to enhance their ability to immerse themselves in listening to rhythms and musical styles they were previously unfamiliar with.

4 In the following, these two ways in which a DJ influences the audience's atmospheric experience are considered paradigmatic of how contemporary AI-supported applications increasingly manipulate the atmospheric dimension of our experience. However, unlike DJs, whose influence we consciously expose ourselves to, AI-powered applications manipulate us without us noticing or consenting to this influence. In this sense, they increasingly operate as "dark DJs." On the one hand, they influence the atmosphere in which we find ourselves in a given situation by selectively presenting content. On the other hand, they transform and manipulate the very way in which we experience situations atmospherically. For reasons that will become clearer below, these two forms of manipulation are referred to as two forms of *background exploitation*—namely, atmospheric *background hijacking* and atmospheric *background entrapment*.

2. Do Atmospheres Even Exist? – Onto-methodological Preliminaries

5 Atmospheres are ubiquitous phenomena. We hardly ever encounter a situation without an atmosphere (Bégout 2020). This also holds for works of art, for novels, films, installations, and video games. As Niklas Luhmann (1981, page 176) argues, even abstract theories have atmospheres, "Weltstimmungsgehalte," "*world mood contents*," although they often seem unable to observe their own atmospheres. However, the ontological and epistemological status of atmospheres may appear somewhat puzzling. Having ingrained rather naturalist convictions, we tend to think that atmospheres are not really "out there" in the world, as they do not seem to exhibit the robustness and physicality of material objects and have a somewhat "psychic" feel to them. By contrast, we experience atmospheres not merely as subjective projections onto our surroundings. We experience them as permeating the situations we confront, as being *really out there*, also perceivable by others, not merely *in our heads*. This is even the case when we do not experience ourselves as involved in a particular atmosphere. We might enter a room and immediately grasp the atmosphere of sadness emanating from the three people sitting in the corner while feeling quite happy at the same time (Schmitz 2019, page 134f.; Fuchs 2013, page 22; Slaby 2019).

6 This somewhat unclear onto-methodological status of atmospheres has led many phenomenologically leaning (this includes "4E"-approaches) theorists to argue that we should "attempt to behold and grasp atmospheres in their experiential presence *before* explicit reflection and conceptualization set in" (Slaby 2019, page 274; see also Böhme 2017, page 17). Following Edmund Husserl's methodological guidance, the phenomenologically motivated advice thereby consists in performing a "phenomenological epoché" in which we "bracket" all ontological prejudices that go hand in hand with what he describes as the "natural attitude" (Husserl 1983, page 58f.). Among other prejudices, we thereby bracket our naturalist ontological assumptions, often closely linked to a scientific image of the world, in order to free our view to see our "lifeworld," our lived world of experience with all its experiential nuances and intricacies, all its relational, social, and atmospheric properties. As Husserl emphasizes, one of the essential epistemic characteristics of the entities belonging to this lifeworld is that they are experienced with the "experiential sense of 'there for everyone'" (Husserl 1973, page 5 [my translation, TP]; Moran 2017, page 117). Thus, if we put aside our ontological prejudice regarding the existence of atmospheres stemming from our natural attitude, we experience them "as tangible, forceful, qualitative 'presences' in experiential space" (Slaby 2019, page 274; see also Bégout 2020, page 199f.; Schmitz 2019), also perceivable by others. Accordingly, atmospheres have been described as objective, intersubjectively shared qualities of situations or spaces (Slaby 2019; Schmitz 2019; Fuchs 2013; Böhme 2013). Along this line of thought, "quasi-objectivity"

has been proposed as one of the core characteristics a theory of atmospheres has to accommodate (Fernandez Velasco and Niikawa 2025).

7 The presupposition of atmospheres as quasi-objective, however, becomes problematic if it goes hand in hand with a refusal to reflect on the fact that immediate experience is always mediated by conditions that can differ intersubjectively and that are themselves not part of what is given in experience. A lifeworld is not simply *out there*, ready to be grasped by whoever comes along; it is only to be directly experienced by those who have been socialized and enculturated accordingly. Famously, Pierre Bourdieu describes such conditions mediating immediate experience as the "habitus" of a subject (Bourdieu 2006, page 54), which he defines as a "system of dispositions" in the "form of schemes of perception, thought and action." According to him, these internalized schemes "ensure the active presence of past experiences" (Bourdieu 2006, page 54) by shaping our immediate experience and understanding of situations, actions, and objects. Although Bourdieu himself highlights that ordinary behavior and interaction are "accompanied by the application of a spontaneous semiology" (Bourdieu 2010, page 10) of experience provided through the habitus, the notion of the habitus is frequently interpreted as being primarily associated with internalized patterns of *behavior* and not so much with the way we intuitively *experience* and *understand* situations. To avoid such a misunderstanding, the conditions that mediate immediate experience at the individual level are in the following referred to as the "background."[1] The background hypothesis is thereby limited to two theses: First, that our immediate experience is mediated by conditions that are not themselves part of what is presented in experience. Second, the background is at least partially shaped by socialization and enculturation. Intersubjective differences in background can thus lead to diverging ways of grasping and understanding the same circumstances.

8 Now, if this is true, then we are precisely not able to recognize these mediating conditions from the perspective of the phenomenological attitude. Bourdieu therefore criticizes the phenomenological perspective for excluding "the question of the conditions of possibility of this experience," namely, to recognize "the internalized structures" which provide "the illusion of immediate understanding, characteristic of the practical experience of the familiar universe" (Bourdieu 2006, page 26).[2] In phenomenological accounts, this methodological limitation often translates into a substantive presupposition: the assumption of a *shared intersubjective or common (life)world*, thereby discounting the possibility of diverging backgrounds. However, while it is true that we ordinarily experience situations, atmospheres, and entities with the "experiential sense of 'there for everyone,'" such an experiential sense licenses no straightforward inference to ontological "quasi-objectivity." As already stated, such an assumption is particularly problematic if it cannot be ruled out that the backgrounds mediating immediate experience might differ intersubjectively. Take the example of a cultural affordance: In many cultures, we find a tendency to perceive cups as affording to drink hot (but not cold) beverages from them in respective contexts.[3] If we are socialized or enculturated in the respective manner, we intuitively experience cups as entities from which "one" is to drink hot beverages, but not cold ones. Frustrations of this expectation can accordingly lead to social sanctioning behavior. From a phenomenological perspective, the respective affordance appears as "quasi-objective," as part of a common world. However, the establishment of cultural practices and customs hardly ever goes so far that we find no regular deviations within what can only be counterfactually assumed to be a homogeneous culture or lifeworld. The presupposition of common ground in the form of an intersubjective lifeworld is therefore always shaky (Luhmann 1986). This holds even more true for atmospheres: On the one hand, atmospheres are much more ephemeral entities than cups and the cultural forms of use we intuitively associate with them. On the other hand, the way we grasp atmospheres even more clearly relies on our backgrounds, since atmospheres can hardly be argued to exist in any physically tangible sense. Atmospheres are not out there as such; they are out there for beings like us.

9 From this perspective, we can answer the question of the onto-methodological status of atmospheres more precisely, before we focus on atmospheres themselves: If their immediate experience is mediated by individual backgrounds, atmospheres are neither, as some phenomenologists would have us believe, simply quasi-objec-

1. The notion of the "background" in this sense is taken from John Searle (1997, page 129ff.), while the identification of "habitus" and "background" is justified through Searle's own admission that "Pierre Bourdieu's important work on the 'habitus' is about the same sort of phenomena that I call the Background" Searle (1997, page 132), although Searle does not engage in the scholarly debate.

2. Bourdieu does not address genetic phenomenology in this context.

3. This example is taken from Poljanšek (2015).

tively out there in our common lifeworlds, nor are they, as naturalists would have us believe, merely in the minds of individual subjects. Rather, atmospheres concern how we humans, mediated by our individual backgrounds, immediately experience situations.

10 Different subjects can experience an atmosphere in similar ways if they share sufficiently similar backgrounds with respect to salient characteristics of the circumstances they face. This phenomenon is what the Japanese refer to when they describe someone as "KY," which stands for "kuuki yomenai," someone who *cannot read the air of situations*, oftentimes referring to foreigners who "have a different Background" so that they "just bring a different mode of sensibility to bear" (Searle 1998) on situations. We should therefore avoid two mistakes: 1. Naively conceiving atmospheres as quasi-objective characteristics of an inherently intersubjective lifeworld. 2. Pretending that atmospheres are only in our heads, not phenomena we directly experience.

3. The "Invisible" and the "Nonexistent" in Human Experience. Atmospheres as Clouds and Horizons of Appresentations

11 To understand how and why atmospheres are central to human experience, we need to recognize the extent to which the "appresentation"—or, to use a different terminology, the "amodal perception" (cf. Nanay 2010)—of "invisible" and "nonexistent" features constitute an integral part of ordinary experience. Wilfrid Sellars gives the example of the perception of "snow seen on a distant mountain" (Sellars 2002, page 422):

12 > "It looks cool. Do we see the whiteness of the snow, but only believe in its coolth. Perhaps this is sometimes so; but surely not always. Sometimes actual coolth is present in the experience, as was the white inside the apple and the red on the opposite side. [...] we experience the actual coolth as we experience the actual whiteness of the snow. An actual coolness is bodily present in the experience as is an actual volume of white." Sellars (2002, page 422)

13 If we acquired familiarity with certain types of situations, events, or things and their typical *horizons of contiguity* (the range of qualities, things, events, and objects that usually go along with them), we tend to also immediately experience their "invisible" (Musil 1996, page 573) features without having to consciously infer them. Past experiences sediment into the background in ways that shape our immediate experience by appresenting nonvisible material and temporal parts and features of entities. Robert Musil exemplifies this phenomenon with the following examples:

14 > "I see through the window whether a hat is hard or soft. If I glance into the street I can likewise see whether it is warm or cold outside, whether people are happy, sad, healthy, or ailing; in the same way, the taste of a fruit is sometimes already in the fingertips that touch them." Musil (1996b, page 1555)

15 What Musil describes as "invisible" are thus appresented features of an entity that can be brought into experiential view in the further course of experience as they belong to the experienced entity. Such features are usually not consciously inferred, believed in or postulated; they are—as phenomenologists prefer to say—immediately *appresented* (from Latin *ad-praesentare*) in experience.

16 However, as Musil adds, we not only appresent "invisible" aspects of things, but also features that are, at least from a physical or naturalist perspective, "nonexistent" ["das gar nicht Vorhandene"] (Musil 1996a, page 573) in our current surroundings: One can think here of characteristics and features that, in our experience, frequently appear in connection with certain events, situations, or objects and are therefore experientially contiguous with them. Thus, we may typically associate beaches with palm trees, cocktails, and vacation, such that perceiving one of these elements immediately appresents the others. Or we may have internalized the typical song structures within a musical genre to such an extent that we intuitively anticipate the beginning of the chorus when listening to an unfamiliar song. In the same way, we also learn to associate things that potentially belong to or fit with typical situations and events, just as we develop a sense of what might come next in familiar situations. Appresentations can also be more idiosyncratic: For each of us, certain scents, for example, can evoke not only memories of specific people but also an entire cloud of elements, feelings, gestures, sounds, and colors, entire atmospheres linked with them and with the times when they were significant to us (Allen 2014, page 148). In this way, everything we experience is involuntarily accompanied by anticipated *horizons* of what might come

next as well as by *clouds* of appresented elements that are somehow linked with what we experience. Therefore, atmospheres rather belong to the realm of feeling than to the realm of explicit cognition, insofar as they involve intuitively sensed tendencies and associations rather than explicitly reflected and thought-out ones. To borrow a formulation Peter Strawson uses to describe the way imagination is constitutive for the perception of permanent objects, one can say that every experience "is, as it were, soaked with or animated by, or infused with—the metaphors are *à choix*—the thought of other past or possible" (Strawson 1970, page 41) elements that are usually associated or contiguous with what is experienced. Beyond strictly perceived elements, atmospheric experience relies on the dimension of involuntarily appresented invisible and nonexistent elements.

17 It is this co-presentation of horizons of anticipations and clouds of associations of contiguous elements that accounts for the elusive and ephemeral character of the atmospheric. When we see a coffee cup, we do not just see a material object, nor do we solely grasp the affordance to drink hot beverages from it; we also immediately grasp the ephemeral atmospheric contexts to which the cup might belong, what might fittingly be done with it, and so on. Thus, we see the cup and its features in the light of the appresented horizons and clouds of associations. In this sense, atmospheres are *directly experienced*: Just as we immediately see sadness in another person's facial expression or aggression in a raised fist, we immediately experience familiar situations as having specific atmospheres. We enter the room and immediately find ourselves influenced by the silliness our friends appear to be immersed in and entertaining. If we are familiar with situations such as parties, weddings, arguments, or funerals, we experience them directly in connection with particular atmospheric valences.

18 As already hinted at in the beginning, atmospheres have been philosophically conceptualized in a variety of ways. Most prominently, phenomenologists like Hermann Schmitz (2014) and Gernot Böhme have highlighted the fact that atmospheres, understood as "affective powers of feeling, spatial bearers of moods" (Böhme 2017, page 16), play a crucial role in shaping our human experience of places and situations. Based on such an understanding, Thomas Fuchs defines atmospheres as "holistic affective qualities of spatial surroundings or interpersonal situations, that integrate their physiognomic, synesthetic and dynamic characteristics into a unified Gestalt" (Fuchs 2013, page 22 [my translation, TP]). However, if the proposal that atmospheres are to be understood as being (even if just partly) constituted via appresentations of invisible and nonexistent elements is correct, it would be misleading to conceive them as Gestalt features, at least insofar as Gestalt features are usually conceptualized as higher-order constellational features grounded in (although not reducible to) lower-order perceptual features.[4] Here, the understandable phenomenological impulse to describe atmospheres as something that is *not in our heads but actually out there* should not lead us to overlook the constitutive role that the dimension of appresented invisible and nonexistent elements plays in our atmospheric experience. Our respective backgrounds enable a "continuous decoding of the perceived" that is, however, "not consciously noticed" (Bourdieu 2010, page 10). As Musil argues, atmospheric experience is "indebted to us" (Musil 1996a, page 574); it is pre-reflectively *read into* the world to present it "in a light that emanates from ourselves" (Musil 1996a, page 574). This light is never neutral but always carries inviting and soliciting, pushing or pulling qualities, valences, and relevancies (Lewin 1917). This also explains why the atmospheric dimension of our experience is particularly susceptible to manipulation: the invisible and the nonexistent, which we involuntarily appresent in experience, depend on our backgrounds. And our backgrounds can be shaped and manipulated through habituation.

19 If the proposal put forward here is correct, atmospheres consist of more than merely the registration or integration of features of spatial surroundings or interpersonal situations into unified Gestalts. Rather, atmospheres are based on manifest *and* appresented elements, which are not simply registered neutrally, but are experienced in specific valences and relevancies. In this way, atmospheres belong to situations and objects *as we directly experience them*; however, they are nothing that we could directly point to in a given surrounding. As Musil describes it in *Confusions of Young Törless* in a scene where Törleß secretly watches his friend Beineberg from the side, the atmosphere of a situation, thing, or person is not revealed by a direct and focused gaze, "[b]ut precisely in that way—only half looking at him and half completing the picture in his imagination" (Musil 2001,

4. A similar argument can be made regarding accounts that conceptualize atmospheres as a certain type of affordance (García 2024; Griffero 2020), or as "nested relations of agent-environment joint potentialities" (Fernandez Velasco and Niikawa 2025, page 18). By presupposing the quasi-objectivity of atmospheres, they tend to underestimate the constitutive role of appresentation in atmospheric experience.

page 19). If one could subtract the invisible and the nonexistent from experience, the atmospheric would also disappear.

20 In his book *Mythologies,* Roland Barthes describes a whole range of objects, images, advertisements, and practices through the lens of the (culturally coded) atmospheres they evoke. What he analyzes as "myths" can, from the present perspective, be understood as culturally sedimented atmospheres. He gives the example of the atmosphere steak and chips had in his time within French society:

21 > "Steak is here adorned with a supplementary virtue of elegance, for among the apparent complexity of exotic cooking, it is a food which unites, one feels, succulence and simplicity. […] Commonly associated with chips, steak communicates its national glamour to them: chips are nostalgic and patriotic like steak." Barthes (2006, page 63)

22 Another example he gives is the atmosphere of "Italianicity," which was often evoked in French advertisements of his time by using specific names (like "Panzani") or depicting certain colors and things (like spaghetti or tomatoes). Barthes argues that, in the French society of his time, Italianicity was an established atmosphere that could be evoked, alluded to, or played with to achieve specific atmospheric and affective effects. A French cliché of everything that's Italian, so to speak. As he describes it: "*Italianicity* is not Italy, it is the condensed essence of everything that could be Italian, from spaghetti to painting." (Barthes 1977, page 48). What Barthes describes as Italianicity is therefore not something that tomatoes and spaghetti *signify*, tomatoes and spaghetti are not abstract *symbols* or *signs* that *stand for* Italianicity, rather, Italianicity is a specific evocative atmospheric assemblage of feelings, features, and elements—it names a culturally sedimented atmosphere that adheres to specific constellations of contiguous objects, rhythms, feelings, gestures, and so on. Whenever we are entrusted with design tasks, such as furnishing an interior, choosing the right elements for an occasion, preparing a party, or selecting appropriate clothing, we touch upon the dimension of the atmospheric. Whenever we follow "principles of consonance" (Goetz 2020, page 80), which have more to do with intuition and gut feeling than with explicit thinking.

4. Pulling our Strings. Two Types of Atmospheric Background Exploitation in the Context of AI

23 As previously suggested, the atmospheric dimension of our experience is an area where we are particularly susceptible to manipulation, as it depends on the backgrounds mediating immediate experience. The fact that human experience is mediated through backgrounds can be exploited by purposefully confronting people with content or situations that elicit specific behavior or are highly likely to affect them in a certain way. This form of manipulation is here referred to as *background hijacking*, insofar as it exploits preexisting background structures and the ways they shape experience. More specifically, *atmospheric background hijacking* involves the targeted confrontation of users with content, entities, or situations to exploit how they experience them atmospherically. Here, Barthes' Mythologies present a whole arsenal of exemplary atmospheric entities and constellations, long exploited by advertisement and propaganda to strategically influence people's behavior and experience. In today's politically polarized situation, numerous everyday entities, behaviors, and situations—such as certain words, coronavirus masks, eating meat, carrying firearms, or displaying the rainbow flag—are charged with specific atmospheres and intuitively perceived in this way by corresponding audiences. The point here is not, however, that these entities or behaviors *symbolize* certain attitudes or worldviews *in the abstract*; rather, they are *directly experienced* by the respective groups as "loaded" or associated with specific affective and atmospheric valences. Regarding this phenomenon, Ludwig Wittgenstein gives the example of the experience of certain words and gestures: "Just think of the words exchanged by lovers! They're 'loaded' with feeling. And surely you can't just agree to substitute for them any other sounds you please." (Wittgenstein 1982, §712). We are confronted here with the effects of the intuitive somatic semiology provided by our backgrounds.

24 AI-supported content platforms can systematically exploit this fact by analyzing user data to microtarget content that selectively activates our pre-established atmospheric associations, thereby "pulling our strings" to influence us in desired ways. They can thus operate as dark DJs, playing specific content in specific situations

to manipulate users' behavior in an atmospheric way. On various content and social media platforms, algorithm-driven and often AI-supported decisions are continuously made about which content will be displayed to a consumer at a given moment, and these selections are frequently tailored toward particular forms of behavioral influence and affective engagement (Epstein and Robertson 2015; Kremer et al. 2014). As whistleblower Sarah Wynn-Williams describes regarding the manipulation of affective states of users, Instagram and Facebook "monitor teenagers' posts, photos, interactions, conversations with friends, visual communications, and internet activity on and off Facebook's platforms and use this data to target young people when they are vulnerable," especially "when they feel 'worthless,' 'insecure,' 'stressed,' 'defeated,' 'anxious,' 'stupid,' 'useless,' and 'like a failure.'" (Wynn-Williams 2025, page 333). One frequently cited example she gives is that "Facebook does work for a beauty product company tracking when thirteen-to-seventeen-year-old girls delete selfies, so it can serve a beauty ad to them at that moment" (Wynn-Williams 2025, page 335). Although it is reasonable to assume that such strategies were already effective back in 2017 (for evidence for emotional contagion effects via social media, see Kramer et al. (2014)), with the help of *large language models* (LLMs)—trained and calibrated using individual and collective user data—in situ atmospheric exploitation nowadays already takes on entirely new dimensions (Afsar et al. 2022; Cai et al. 2023). Whereas classical recommender systems mainly predict which content is likely to be selected next (see also Picard 1997, page 235), LLMs are particularly capable of modeling non-explicit semantic and associative structures because they are shaped by large-scale distributional patterns in training data, allowing them to encode patterns of association, contiguity, and contextual salience without these relations ever being explicitly represented or symbolically articulated. Modern, LLM-powered applications are thus much better equipped to track and manipulate what Goetz—regarding the DJ example—describes as the "multiple dimensions of the transitory rules governing the public's reaction *that are here and now momentarily in force*" (Goetz 2020, page 81 [my emphasis, TP]). Moreover, like real DJs, these applications are not limited to isolated interventions; instead, an advanced system could compose extended atmospheric content sequences, arranging content to orchestrate specific atmospheric or dispositional effects over longer periods.

25 This orchestration points to a more profound, arguably even more troubling form of background exploitation that is described here as *background entrapment. Background entrapment* exploits the fact that our backgrounds themselves can be transformed and recalibrated through experience, exposure, and habituation. It is a form of "long-horizon manipulative behavior" (Carroll et al. 2023) that can be brought about through algorithm- and AI-driven systems that aim toward recalibrating the background of users in a targeted and lasting way. Whereas *background hijacking* exploits pre-existing background structures *in situ*, *background entrapment* consists of their *gradual recalibration over time*, thereby reshaping the conditions through which events, situations, and objects are atmospherically experienced. In this way, applications are no longer only *pulling our strings*, but increasingly capable of *modifying the very strings that can be pulled.* An example of *background entrapment* regarding behavior is the way in which users are gradually accustomed to routine uses, hand gestures, etc., by their devices and applications, so that at some point they feel *intuitively at home* in their technical ecosystem and *foreign* in others. It is the kind of manipulation that Searle has in mind when he says that the "real disaster produced by television is not that children waste so many hours watching it, but that it alters their Background. It alters their whole mode of sensibility" (Searle 1998, page 11). However, when one-to-many mass media still dominated the dissemination of information in society, such targeted recalibrations of the background could only be exerted in a relatively unfocused and homogeneous manner. In today's digitalized world, where social media is increasingly moving toward personalizing and orchestrating the content shown to users based on individual and accumulated user data, it becomes increasingly possible to recalibrate the background of individual users in a targeted manner. Here, for the reasons already cited above, LLM-driven applications appear particularly capable of gradually reshaping the associative structures of users' backgrounds through targeted, repeated exposure, thereby recalibrating the pre-reflective background conditions through which situations, objects, and actions are experienced. There are already empirical indications that several commercial platforms are in this way "switching to optimizing long term metrics" (Carroll et al. 2023; see also Hansen et al. 2021; Afsar et al. 2022; Cai et al. 2023), and background entrapment seems to be one promising path to reach this goal. Background entrapment that is specifically aimed at recalibrating the background regarding the atmospheric dimension of experience—i.e., the appresented horizons and clouds of anticipations and associations that are intuitively linked to behaviors, objects, and situations—is here referred to as *atmospheric background*

entrapment. Think, for example, of the specific atmospheres associated with highly polarized subcultural milieus and the corresponding content that propagates these atmospheres and ingrains them into users' backgrounds. Another example is the gradual drift through which users move from initially mainstream forms of doubt to more radical content. This logic of gradual recalibration applies directly to atmospheric background entrapment: for example through targeted, continuous exposure, a cheerful person may be gradually driven into a darker, more aggressive, or more insecure mindset (Kramer et al. 2014; Jain et al. 2025).

26 The general potential for manipulation and exploitation in the context of generative AI has been the focus of many contemporary debates (Floridi 2024; Weber-Guskar 2024; Klenk 2024; Carroll et al. 2023; Ienca 2023). However, current accounts tend to emphasize forms of exploitation, where AI-powered applications influence the current beliefs or emotions of their users *in situ*, which fall under the broad notion of *background hijacking*. In her influential book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, Shoshana Zuboff highlights how the current form of digital and data-driven capitalism focuses on the "means of behavior modification" (Zuboff 2019, page 292) to better control, predict, and exploit the behavior of users. Under the three forms of behavior modification she identifies, "tuning" (the subtle modification of behavior via cues and nudges given in situ) and "herding" (the modification of behavior by influencing the context of behavior through enabling or foreclosing action alternatives) fall under this notion of background hijacking. Against that, background entrapment is related to what Zuboff, following Burrhus Frederic Skinner, describes as the third form of behavior modification in surveillance capitalism, namely the "conditioning" of behavior (Zuboff 2019, page 293).

27 However, the focus on background and atmospheric experience developed in this paper takes a more fundamental approach in that the manipulation of the background affects not only our *behavior*, but also, more fundamentally, *the way we experience situations, events, and objects in the first place*. Furthermore, the focus on the atmospheric dimensions of background hijacking and background entrapment complements an aspect central to our experience and, while clearly located on the "feeling" and "intuition" side of our experience, lacks the concreteness of emotions or beliefs.

28 As we have seen, AI-supported content platforms can, in a targeted manner, transform and manipulate our backgrounds to an unprecedented extent. Thereby, AI-supported microtargeting seems able to realize the slogan "If you are not paying for the product, you are the product" in a way we were not prepared for. It is no longer merely that we surrender our private data and thereby become a product for tech-companies so they can sell advertisements more efficiently; rather, these companies—and other actors operating in adjacent domains—may increasingly *produce the way we pre-reflectively experience* by intentionally shaping our backgrounds. One need not agree with every detail of the critique of the "culture industry" formulated by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* to endorse their claim that culture industry increasingly assumes a task Kant had, at least according to them, still attributed to the subject as an "active contribution," namely "that they should, from the first, relate sensuous multiplicity to fundamental concepts" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, page 98). According to Horkheimer and Adorno, the culture industry preschematizes sensuous multiplicity for consumers, thereby providing easily digestible content. Through atmospheric background entrapment, however, today's culture industry appears capable of fulfilling this task not only with greater precision but also on a much deeper level: by shaping consumers' backgrounds, it shapes the very conditions through which experience itself is mediated and schematized. Digital ecosystems already rely on having formed their users' backgrounds in ways that make migration from one ecosystem to another difficult—a lock-in effect that is not only behavioral but also deeply atmospheric.

29 A final, anecdotal illustration can underline that the atmospheric dimension analyzed here is increasingly and explicitly recognized by actors operating at the intersection of data-driven prediction, AI, and behavioral influence as a central and particularly effective lever for the targeted manipulation of experience and behavior. Several figures close to the influential AI company Palantir—early Palantir employee Ryan Podolsky, current Palantir chief technology officer Shyam Sankar, and investor Christian Garrett—raised funds for a film production company, *Founders Films*. In the words of Shyam Sankar, the stated goal of this company is "to make content to make you proud to be an American. Not Pravda, entertainment" (Sankar 2025). As he puts it, what matters is "that there is a sense of heroism. It's not just about war movies. It's about what is the American spirit. And I like to say that, as a 5-year-old, I knew *what it felt like to be an American* before I knew civics, or political philosophy,

or history" (Sankar 2025). The target of influence here is thus neither explicit belief nor the mere dissemination of narratives, but the targeted transformation of people's pre-reflective, atmospheric experience.

30 If the previous reflections are correct, then the challenge posed by atmospheric background exploitation via AI cannot be met by the classical gestures of critique alone—by ever sharper reflection, demystification, or exposure of its mechanisms. Social media and content platforms now operate as unsolicited dark DJs, intervening not merely in situ but also through the slow, targeted recalibration of our backgrounds, thereby shaping the very world and atmosphere we immediately find ourselves in. What is at stake is thus no longer only the manipulation of current beliefs and emotions, but the targeted modification of the very air through which situations, events, and things appear to us. This demands a different kind of resistance—one less a matter of reflexive insight than of *cultivating new habits of atmospheric attention*: an ecological ethos of heightened awareness toward the socio-medial *oikoi* we inhabit and that shape not only *who*, but also *how* we are. With Musil, we may thus have to relearn how to perceive not only what is manifest, but also to refine our sensibilities toward the "invisible" and the "nonexistent" that silently shape the ways we find ourselves in the situations we encounter.

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