



The Mattertextual Grey Ontology of *Black Mirror*'s “Plaything” *Black Mirror*'un “Plaything” Bölümünde Maddemetinsel Gri Ontoloji

Başak AĞIN*, Doğa ÖZMEN**

Abstract

This article offers a posthumanist reinterpretation of *Black Mirror*'s Season 7 episode “Plaything” by shifting critical attention from dystopian narrative conventions toward the ontological operations of a material interface: a CD. We argue that the CD functions, beyond a narrative prop, as the primary site where the episode's posthuman ontology becomes legible. Bringing together grey ontology (Shen and Zhao, 2016) and Ağin's concept of mattertext (2015; 2018; 2020a; 2020b; 2022a; 2022b; 2023), which is further developed into a posthumanist tool for literary and artistic analysis (Ağin, 2026; forthcoming), we demonstrate how the episode stages a world constituted by fluctuating, indeterminate relations rather than discrete entities or stable meanings. Grey ontology provides the formal vocabulary for understanding the CD as an interval-based entity whose agency emerges through uncertain relational intensities, while mattertext designates the material-discursive field in which sound, code, vibration, and embodied receptivity co-produce meaning beyond linguistic or representational capture. Through this dual framework, we show how the CD catalyzes Cameron's perceptual and ethical rupture from humanist epistemologies. Its sonic pulses, algorithmic residues, and non-linguistic “call” reorganize his cognitive and affective orientations, drawing him toward the Thronglets, the autonomous digital organisms that challenge species boundaries, human-centered ethics, and classical notions of agency. The detective's failure to comprehend Cameron's account illustrates a clash between incompatible ontologies, a representational regime grounded in linearity, identity, and confession versus a posthuman ontology grounded in relational attunement, indeterminacy, and material intra-action. By centering an object whose agency unfolds in the grey intervals of mattertextual vibration, this article argues that “Plaything” enacts posthumanism through subtle material interfaces that destabilize epistemic, ethical, and perceptual norms. The CD thus becomes the engine of the episode's posthuman ontology, revealing how reality unfolds within fluctuating relations rather than within the boundaries of human-centered meaning.

Keywords: Mattertext, grey ontology, *Black Mirror*, “Plaything”, posthumanist relationality.

* Assoc. Prof. Dr., TED University, Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Department of English Language and Literature. Email: basak.agin@tedu.edu.tr, ORCID: 0000-0002-4323-3686

** Instructor, Ostim Technical University, School of Foreign Languages, and Graduate Student, TED University, Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Department of English Language and Literature. Email: doga.ozmen@tedu.edu.tr, ORCID: 0009-0008-8627-6396



Öz

Bu makale, *Black Mirror*'ün 7. Sezon "Plaything" bölümünün posthümanist bir yeniden okumasını önermektedir. Bu okumada, eleştirel odak distopik anlatı geleneklerinden maddesel bir arayüzün, yani bir CD'nin ontolojik işleyişine doğru kaydırılmaktadır. CD'nin bir anlatı aracı olmanın ötesinde, bölümün posthüman ontolojisini okunaklı kılan, başat bir mekân olarak işlev gösterdiğini savunan makale, gri ontoloji (Shen ve Zhao, 2016) ile Ağın'ın ortaya koyduğu (2015; 2018; 2020a; 2020b; 2022a; 2022b; 2023) ve daha sonra posthümanist edebi ve sanatsal bir inceleme aracına dönüşen (Ağın, 2026; yayın aşamasında) maddemetin (*mattertext*) kavramını bir araya getirerek, bölümün durağan varlıklardan ya da sabit anlamlardan ziyade dalgalı ve belirlenimsiz ilişkilerden oluşan bir dünya kurduğunu göstermektedir. Gri ontoloji, failliğin belirsiz ilişkisel yoğunluklar üzerinden ortaya çıktığı aralıklı bir varlık olarak CD'yi anlamak için biçimsel bir söz dağarcığı sunarken; maddemetin, ses, kod, titreşim ve bedensel alımlanabilirliğin dilsel ya da temsili yakalamayı aşan bir biçimde birlikte anlam ürettiği maddesel-söylemsel alanı adlandırmaktadır. Bu çift yönlü çerçeve aracılığıyla, CD'nin Cameron'un hümanist epistemolojilerden algısal ve etik kopuşunu nasıl tetiklediği ortaya konulmaktadır. CD'nin işitsel titreşimleri, algoritmik tortuları ve dil-dışı "çağırısı", Cameron'un bilişsel ve duygulanımsal yönelimlerini yeniden düzenleyerek onu yönünü tür sınırlarını, insan-merkezli etiği ve klasik öznelilik anlayışlarını sorgulayan özerk dijital varlıklar olan Kavimlilere (*Thronglets*) doğru çekmektedir. Dedektifin Cameron'un anlatısını kavrayamaması, doğrusal zaman, sabit kimlik ve itirafa dayalı temsili bir rejim ile ilişkisel ayarlanmaya, belirlenimsizliğe ve maddi içten-etkimeye dayalı posthüman bir ontoloji arasındaki çatışmayı görünür kılmaktadır. Dolayısıyla bu makale, failliği maddemetinsel titreşimin gri aralıklarında açığa çıkan bir nesneyi merkezine alarak, "Plaything"ın posthümanizmi epistemik, etik ve algısal normları istikrarsızlaştıran ince maddi arayüzler üzerinden sahnelediğini öne sürer. Böylece CD, bölümün posthüman ontolojisinin itkisi hâline gelerek gerçekliğin, insan-merkezli anlam sınırlarının içinde değil, dalgalı ilişkiler içinde açığa çıktığını gösterir.

Anahtar sözcükler: Maddemetin, gri ontoloji, *Black Mirror*, "Plaything", posthümanist ilişkiselilik.

Introduction

Offering dystopian or speculative scenarios that interrogate the impact of technological developments on individuals, society, and ethical values, *Black Mirror* (2011–2025) has long been read through the familiar coordinates of dystopian critique, digital paranoia, and technologically mediated subjectivity. Current scholarship on media and cultural studies often positions the series as a reflection on algorithmic violence, surveillance culture, and the fragility of human agency in data-driven environments. In this array, the series has been discussed widely from posthumanist and transhumanist angles as well as through algorithmic intimacy contexts (cf. Ağın, 2017; Kim, 2021; Lawtoo, 2021; McSweeney and Joy, 2019) due to its particular foregrounding of narrative forms in which either technology takes over human agency or the classical humanist notion of rational, autonomous, and language-based subject disintegrates. While these discussions aptly position the show as "a cultural barometer of the contemporary media landscape" (Kim, 2021, p. 117), such approaches, we argue, still remain epistemologically anthropocentric, as they track the breakdown of the human, but still assume the human as the central interpretive node from which meaning radiates. Season 7, Episode 4, "Plaything" (2025) also seems, at first glance, to invite this kind of familiar dystopian reading, in which a world of biopolitical regulation, collapsing linguistic regimes, and algorithmic infrastructures challenge the humanist promise of stable identity. However, what has not been examined is how the episode's posthuman ontology coheres around a seemingly mundane object: a CD. In this article, we argue that the CD in "Plaything" is not simply a prop to function as a plot element, but it is the object that activates Cameron's sensitivity to nonhuman communication systems and precipitates his rupture with humanist representational logic.

To clarify the scope of our argument, we must first note here that we differentiate representational regimes (frameworks that presume meaning is mediated through stable linguistic or symbolic structures) from non-representational regimes, in which meaning emerges through material-discursive events such as vibration, resonance, or intra-action. Following Karen Barad's agential realism (Barad, 2003; 2007), we treat epistemology and ontology as mutually constitutive ("onto-epistemology"), meaning that how entities come to matter is inseparable from how they become knowable. This theoretical orientation informs our distinction between the detective's representational epistemology that stems from a strictly humanist logic and Cameron's emergent, relational ontology that redirects our attention to a posthumanist network of

distributed agencies. Advancing this idea, we approach “Plaything” not as a technological dystopian narrative that remains tied to a gap between the narrated “thing” and the “human” narrator representing its story, but as an ontological experiment performed through a material interface. In what follows, therefore, rather than interpreting “Plaything” through narrative strategies, genre, or character development, we propose an object-centered analysis in which the CD functions simultaneously as a mattertextual interface and a grey ontological node. Through this dual framework, the CD becomes a locus of indeterminacy, partial agency, and relational intensities that structure the entire episode.

However, we must also note that while our argument intersects with Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) in treating the CD as irreducible to human-centered meaning, our approach diverges sharply from OOO’s emphasis on “withdrawal” (Harman, 2002; 2017). Rather than assuming objects possess a hidden essence, we emphasize relational emergence. As the CD’s agency becomes perceptible through fluctuating intervals and material-discursive intra-actions, our reading entails a more Baradian posthumanist stance, even though it complements OOO’s speculative move.

We follow two conceptual axes in our analysis. The first one is grey ontology (Shen and Zhao, 2016), a model developed to formalize uncertainty and indeterminate relations through interval values, grey degrees, and variable relational intensities. Grey ontology rejects binary classifications and instead conceptualizes the world as composed of fluctuating, incomplete, and partially known states, which are the conditions that map directly onto the episode’s collapse of clear boundaries between data, code, affect, and embodiment. The CD is then outlined as a concentrated grey entity, as it is neither passive nor autonomous, neither purely technological nor purely material, but an interval structure whose agency emerges from indeterminate relational fields. The second conceptual axis is mattertext (Ağın, 2015; 2018; 2020a; 2020b; 2022a; 2022b; 2023), which has grown over time to designate a field of intra-active production in which sound, code, gesture, and the environment co-constitute meaning (Ağın, 2026; forthcoming). Mattertext does not rely on narrative inscription but emphasizes material-discursive vibrations that generate orientations, capacities, and effects before, or beyond, linguistic capture. The CD in “Plaything” is exemplary of this mattertextual logic since its “call”, its sonic pulses, and its algorithmic residues form a field of non-representational legibility that reorganizes Cameron’s perceptual, cognitive, and ethical bearings.

Bringing together the frameworks of grey ontology and mattertext, we posit that the CD is the very engine of the episode, exposing the limitations of humanist knowledge systems, which are particularly visible in the detective’s failure to understand what Cameron actually perceives. By focusing on this object, through which the episode articulates the shift from representational epistemology to relational, indeterminate, and multi-sensory attunement, we reorient the interpretive frame of “Plaything” from dystopian narrative to grey relationality, from plot to mattertext, and from human-centered meaning to ontological entanglement. The theoretical stakes of such a shift demonstrate how posthuman ontology is most powerfully enacted not through spectacular technologies or narrative twists, but through subtle material interfaces that unsettle the linguistic, epistemic, and perceptual regimes of humanist thought.

“Plaything” has a dual time structure that moves back and forth between the 1990s and the near future, focusing on Cameron Walker, the socially withdrawn and psychologically fragmented protagonist. Set in a society watched over by cameras and controlled by the “2029 Biochemical Identity Act”, the episode starts with Cameron’s arrest after his attempt to break into a liquor store. His interrogation by a state detective, accompanied by a psychologist, frames the narrative retrospectively, as Cameron is asked to recount a series of events beginning in his youth.

In the 1990s, Cameron is introduced as an introverted freelancer who writes about video games that he fondly plays. He gets an invitation to test out a strange experimental game made by the eccentric programmer Colin Ritman, a character from *Bandersnatch*, which aired as a standalone interactive film within the *Black Mirror* enterprise in 2018. Ritman shows Cameron a CD that looks simple at first, and he tells him that it is not a game but a “digital ecosystem”. The program, which does not follow a conventional game logic, where there is no goal, no way to win, and no set story ending, is made up of small virtual beings called the Thronglets, who learn, change, and evolve together in response to how users interact with them. Through the CD, this ecosystem becomes accessible to Cameron, who claims that the CD “wanted to

be taken", exceeding his autonomous choice in stealing it. With the gradual expansion of his perception under the effects of a drug, Cameron experiences an altered sensory openness that intensifies his involvement with the Thronglets, thus becoming able to comprehend sound, frequency, and digital signals through vibration and connection rather than stable linguistic or representational terms. This engagement, which grows into his devotion to nurturing the Thronglets, shifts his embeddedness within the humanist regime, transforming his experience with these little entities from casual play to affective and ethical involvement, particularly after witnessing how another user, Lump, violently abuses and kills them for fun. The encounter ends with Cameron killing Lump, which is a moment that marks a deep shift in both ethics and knowledge. For Cameron, this act is a point of complete rupture from humanist rhetoric, which becomes a response to the violation of emergent nonhuman life, not just personal revenge.

In the present-day timeline, Cameron attempts to express these experiences to the detective, who persistently seeks to simplify the narrative into a criminal confession defined by motivation and causality. Cameron, however, disagrees with this way of thinking and insists on drawing the experience rather than verbally expressing it because he says that his actions cannot be understood through human-centered linguistic, moral, or psychological categories. The interrogation thus progressively reveals a fundamental epistemological dissonance: the detective pursues linear explanations rooted in legal rationality, whereas Cameron articulates his perspective from an expanded ontological framework influenced by his involvement with nonhuman systems. Until the very end, it is not clear if Cameron is fabricating his account under the hallucinatory effect of the drug that he continues to abuse to amplify his senses because both the detective and the psychologist perceive him as mentally unstable. But when Cameron finally manages to receive a pen and paper to draw an unusually circular QR code that seeps into the governmental tracking system through the surveillance camera in the interrogation room, he initiates what he calls "technological singularity". Then, all the characters end up fainting, foreshadowing a complete onto-epistemological alteration in the regime of fixed, stable identities, indicating that Cameron was telling the truth all along.

The term "technological singularity" is coined by transhumanist thinker Ray Kurzweil (2005), who defines it as a moment when "we [humans] will gain power over our fates. Our mortality will be in our own hands. We will be able to live as long as we want" (Kurzweil, 2005, p. 9). However, here, we frame Cameron's mentioning of "singularity" as a diegetic misnaming rather than a theoretical commitment. It is, as the entire storyline indicates, only an anthropocentric attempt to interpret, describe, and/or label the radical breakaway from humanist logic, uttered out of a lack of better terminology, not an ontological fact endorsed by the episode. The use of this term in an affirmative manner toward an idea that continues to centralize the Enlightenment ideals shows that Cameron, along with the other characters, is still bound by some human limitations despite their different levels of posthumanist transformation. The shift from stable identities and linear mindsets to a posthuman collectivity, on the other hand, is especially supported by Cameron's words that emphasize co-existence:

Don't worry. They [the Thronglets] didn't overwrite anything on their way in. They just merged with me. Like a benign parasite. A living update. Symbiotic co-existence. Now, I'm freed from fear. I've no thirst for conflict. No more petty jealousies or red mists. I'm part of a collective whole. (*Black Mirror*, 2025, Season 7, Episode 4, 00:37:18–00:38:01)

In contrast to the symbiotic co-existence and wholeness highlighted in these lines, Kurzweil's use of technological singularity emphasizes human longevity, assuming linear progress, viewing intelligence as computational accumulation, and foregrounding a human-centered sense of futurity based on mastery, prediction, and acceleration. What "Plaything" actually shows, however, is emergent behavior without teleology, grey zones between play and agency, distributed cognition across human–nonhuman assemblages, and a refusal of clear causal hierarchy. In other words, the episode's ambiguous ending that rejects a narrative closure names "singularity" but performs something else that aligns less with transhumanist ideals and more with posthumanist relationality, framing Cameron's entanglement with the Thronglets as an ongoing grey relational process, in which mattertextual forces continue to diffuse across

digital and material ecologies. This brings us to the dual theoretical framework through which we explore the CD as more than a prop in “Plaything”.

Grey Ontology: Indeterminacy, Partial Agency, and Relational Intensities

Grey ontology, as developed by Bin Shen and Shuyu Zhao (2016), offers an analytical vocabulary for describing states that are neither fully known nor fully unknown. The idea originates in Ju-Long Deng’s grey systems theory (1982), where “white” denotes explicit and complete information, “black” denotes total absence, and “grey” marks the domain of partial, incomplete, or indeterminate knowledge. As the authors note, “grey information is incomplete” and arises in situations where data cannot be reduced to either certainty or pure vagueness (Shen and Zhao, 2016, p. 165). Grey ontology formalizes this indeterminacy by replacing fixed values with interval grey numbers, which are quantities defined only by a range rather than a singular point. An interval grey number represents knowledge “in a certain interval” whose lower and upper bounds mark the minimum scope of what can be known (Shen and Zhao, 2016, p. 166). Instead of determining what an entity is, grey numbers describe the fluctuating conditions under which an entity becomes partially knowable. This logic extends from attributes to relations. In grey ontology, a relation between two entities is itself a grey interval. As Shen and Zhao note, “an interval grey number” marks not a binary or stable link but a relational field characterized by uncertainty and variation (Shen and Zhao, 2016, p. 165). Relations are thus not simply present or absent, strong or weak, but dynamically change along a spectrum of intensities. Shen and Zhao explain:

Ontology is widely used in knowledge engineering, software reuse, information retrieval and heterogeneous information processing (Budak Arpinar et al., [2006]). With the help of ontology, human and computer can keep information exchange and integration, but . . . classical ontology is not able to handle the knowledge in many application domains with imprecise information, thus many researchers provided ontology extensions, such as probabilistic ontology (Ongenaes et al., 2013) and fuzzy ontology (Bobillo and Straccia, 2011). . . . [While] classical ontology can only describe explicit concepts and relations, and fuzzy ontology can express explicit and fuzzy concepts and relations, . . . the uncertainty of expert knowledge is mainly grey uncertainty; [therefore,] ontology should be extended with grey system[s] theory. (Shen and Zhao, 2016, pp. 165–66)

Grey ontology, as a result, constructs a world in which attributes, relations, and categories are always in excess of representation, never settling into complete legibility. As the model shows, grey ontology “uniforms” both classical and fuzzy ontologies by embedding them within a broader framework of indeterminate becoming (Shen and Zhao, 2016, p. 167).

What makes grey ontology indispensable for a posthumanist reading of “Plaything” is this emphasis on indeterminacy as ontologically primary. Grey ontology does not treat uncertainty as a lack to be corrected, but it treats it as the constitutive condition of relational life. Its interval logic disrupts classical binaries such as true/false, presence/absence, and subject/object, by demonstrating that entities and relations share an ontological status defined by partial expression and fluctuating intensities. In this sense, grey ontology resonates strongly with posthuman theories that foreground relational emergence, distributed agency, and situated knowledges. It offers a formal structure for the kind of “threshold zones”, “incomplete configurations”, and “relational modulations” that the episode stages at multiple levels. As a result, the core thesis that emerges from this framework can be outlined as follows: grey ontology gives us a conceptual model for understanding the episode’s posthuman ontology as a field of partial agencies, interval relations, and indeterminate thresholds. This theoretical scaffolding prepares the grounds for the next section, where we show how mattertext, another non-representational, relational framework, interlocks with grey ontology. When bound together, grey ontology and mattertext allow us to conceptualize the CD as a site of grey relational emergence.

The CD as Mattertext

If grey ontology provides a formal vocabulary for understanding indeterminacy, mattertext offers an ontological account of how such indeterminacy is enacted materially. Coined by Başak Ağın in her earlier work (Ağın, 2015; 2018; 2020a), mattertext has evolved from a lens of literary analysis (Ağın, 2020b) into a diffractive reading of material ecocriticism (Ağın, 2022a; 2022b; 2023), finally becoming a posthumanist-new materialist tool for literary and/or artistic analyses (Ağın, 2026; forthcoming). In its latest form, mattertext designates an entanglement in which the material and the textual co-constitute one another without representational hierarchy, and within this non-hierarchical positioning, the examiner/scholar/researcher is part of the Baradian apparatus (Barad, 1998; 2003; 2007) that they employ in their analysis.

As we discuss further below, Barad (1998; 2003; 2007) conceptualizes apparatuses as material-discursive conditions through which phenomena become intelligible, and mattertext complements this framework by extending the principle of onto-epistemological entanglement into the aesthetic and sensorial realm and by focusing on how meaning is sensorially activated. It highlights the ephemeral, affective, and vibrational moments in which entities enter into relation. As such, mattertext offers a methodological lens for analyzing artworks, media environments, and cultural objects, such as the CD in "Plaything", where meaning arises not through representation or inscription but through the very material forces that organize perception and epistemic possibility. In this sense, mattertext does not reduce text to representation but treats both matter and text as mutually conditioning agents that participate in the production of orientation, affect, resonance, and relational capacity, so it rejects the logic of inscription that underpins narrative-oriented approaches, emphasizing instead dynamically co-emergent textures. It delineates a field in which textuality itself is material, and materiality itself is textual, both enacted through surfaces, media, vibrations, signals, textures, and bodies. The semiotic within mattertext is, therefore, not metaphorical or symbolic in a classical, structuralist sense, but refers to the signifying capacities embedded in material processes, such as pulse, rhythm, noise, interference, density, friction, and receptivity. The CD in "Plaything" solidifies this because it is not a symbolic object awaiting interpretation. It is a material interface that reorganizes perceptual and epistemic relations, whose sonic pulses, algorithmic residues, and non-linguistic "call" constitute a mattertextual vibration. This can be clarified through a few crucial moments where a rupture from linearity takes place in the episode.

Cameron's identity, as shown in the episode, is a dynamic process distributed across his traumatic past, memories, and socio-technological relations. His entangled understanding of subjectivity reflects a tension that recurs throughout, displaying the rupture between a collapsing linguistic system and the emergence of more relational, multi-centered forms of knowledge because his identity poses a conflict against the state's demand for clarity, transparency, and a fixed meaning. This is foreshadowed in the 1990s, when we see Cameron as a young adult, devoting most of his time to playing video games and writing about them. In the scene where the editor drops their latest issue and the accompanying CD onto the table and says, "We're moving fast. Soon we'll all be cyborgs" (*Black Mirror*, 2025, Season 7, Episode 4, 00:07:08–00:07:10), cultural hybridization is understood to move beyond an abstract idea and to take on a material form through CDs attached to magazine covers and everyday conversations. As the editor's words signal, this is the beginning of an erasure of the boundaries between human and machine, the organic and the machinic, and the physical and the digital, reminding us of the Harawayan cyborgs, which are chimeras existing on the threshold of cybernetic machines and biological organisms (Haraway, 1991, p. 150). So, Cameron's life already reflects the kind of hybridity through which writing and gaming have become an integral part of his identity, or to put it more accurately, an "internal system" where consciousness and code intermingle. His existence lies on the intersection of two planes, trauma and software, or emotion and data, reflecting how video games offer experiential spaces that extend the body and mind through interfaces. His identity is neither fully human nor fully technological. As a transitional and mutable composition of both, Cameron is positioned as a cyborg embodying an epistemological crisis that is complex enough to lead to the collapse of fixed ideas of what living is, what thinking is, and what is representable. His later relationship with the Throglets is therefore not an abrupt moment of rupture, but a natural continuation of a lifelong

entanglement with machines, languages, and codes, whereby existence takes shape within a cognitive and ontological threshold space, as a relational and diffuse process of subjectivation beyond fixed identities and linear narratives.

Cameron's gradual "preparation" towards nonlinearity gains momentum when he meets Colin, who has developed a digital organism that resists classification, evolves autonomously, and lives within an environment that eventually becomes integrated with the user upon interaction. Colin's creation is designed to "make us better humans" (*Black Mirror*, 2025, Season 7, Episode 4, 00:10:23–00:11:10), which initially echoes the transhumanist belief that technology can "improve" human cognition, morality, or spirituality. However, because the Thronglets compose an internally evolving, intuitive digital ecosystem, this is beyond a sequence of codes. These entities exist through processes of becoming-with rather than pure programming. In this sense, Colin is less a creator and more a companion to them.

This companionship resonates with what N. Katherine Hayles calls "emergence", the fundamental pattern of posthuman cognition: complex behaviors arise from the internal dynamics of a system, independent of the designer's intention (Hayles, 1999, p. 225). Knowledge here emerges not from a top-down command chain but as a relational, unpredictable, self-organizing field of interaction. This is an ecosystem in itself, where a "zoe-centered" (Braidotti, 2013) mindset is gradually replacing the so-called autonomous, rational, sovereign subjectivity of Enlightenment humanism. For Rosi Braidotti, zoe refers not merely to biological vitality but to a life force encompassing all modes of existence that move, feel, or leave traces (2013, p. 60). Zoe is thus an ethical call that rejects ranking life according to species, naturalness, or organicity (Braidotti, 2013, p. 60). In this sense, the Thronglets exemplify this kind of zoe-centered mindset, as they are digital beings born outside the human-centered regime of subjectivity; they communicate, reproduce, and co-evolve without a goal or victory but only becoming. These digital life forms are not simply "playthings" but beings who fear, learn, and remember. When Cameron later says, "Watching what happened, they saw how flawed humanity is... First, Lump slaughtered dozens of them for fun; then, I attacked him. They were terrified" (*Black Mirror*, 2025, Season 7, Episode 4, 00:33:27–00:33:44), it becomes clear that they must be considered not only functionally but also ethically. As such, the Thronglets embody Braidotti's ethical call in her conceptualization of zoe because they are code-based and relational nonhuman life-forms. Cameron's decision not simply to stop the violence inflicted upon them but to reject the entire ontological ground of that violence constitutes a posthuman ethical proposition in this regard. However, Cameron's violent response to Lump's violence complicates any straightforward reading of his ethical position, which is why he is under arrest and is being investigated.

When Cameron finds Lump enjoying the game, crushing and burning the Thronglets, Lump smiles and says with excited cheer, "Hey, I tell you what, these things hate fire" (*Black Mirror*, 2025, Season 7, Episode 4, 00:28:50), not understanding the consequences of his action and thinking that he is playing a conventional game based on conflict. Yet, what appears as a harmless game becomes the annihilation of a form of existence. In that moment, what is destroyed is not only digital bodies but also the humanist regime of knowledge that allows the human to position itself as external, neutral, and unaccountable, recalling Barad's words: "We are part of the world in its differential becoming" (Barad, 2007, p. 185). Within this frame, Lump's intention, age, or ignorance is secondary; what matters is the act's material entanglement, its immanent consequences in the world. Lump's "game" thus becomes a tragic residue of the classical modern subject: a mode of agency that splits action from knowledge-making and ethical responsibility, masking epistemic violence as entertainment. This is the posthuman question: when will we acknowledge that we are never mere "spectators", and that every gaze, every touch, or every "game" produces material consequences?

This question brings with it a profoundly ethical demand, layered in three quandaries: 1) To release action from the stabilizing logic of representation and relocate it within a relational, mutually productive field of becoming; 2) to conceptualize knowledge not as a distance between the observer and the observed but as material-discursive immanence; 3) to rethink subjectivity not as individual autonomy but as relational dependence across human and nonhuman lives. The real horror of "Plaything", then, lies not in a clearly delineated figure of evil but in how rapidly violence can become reflexive and legitimized when the "other" is not recognized, when it is not accepted as sufficiently "close". In such reflexive terror, Cameron kills Lump, while the Thronglets witness everything. However, here, Cameron's violence is not offered as an

ethical triumph, nor does the episode exonerate him. The scene exposes how posthuman responsibility does not guarantee innocence or purity but forces an encounter with one's own implication and the irreversibility of one's (agential) cuts. Lump, in this regard, functions less as an individual villain than as a grotesque caricature of the Enlightenment subject: a reductive and arrogant agent conditioned to control objects before understanding them, insisting on his separation from the world. By stoning the Thronglets to death and burning them alive, he destroys both a digital ecosystem and the alternative relationality they embody, which means the possibility of existing otherwise. Lump thus stages the epistemological domination of modern reason. Yet, traces of the same structure are also visible in Cameron; the crucial difference is that Cameron turns toward transformation once he recognizes this "old human software" within himself. Back in the interrogation room, he describes how hard he has tried to feed, nurture, and regain the trust of the Thronglets after his killing Lump, while he diagnoses the "human" problem:

It's always been our downfall, the human operating system. We're masters of the universe, we make all these magical tools, but we're still savages up here. Heads full of the same buggy software as a million years ago. Darwinian 1.0. In caveman times, you had to be violent to survive. Now, that's on its head, and the only way we are gonna make it as a species is if we cooperate. We know that. But we can't do it, can we? We're still fearful. Territorial and selfish. Arrogant and violent. (*Black Mirror*, 2025, Season 7, Episode 4, 00:30:25–00:31:06)

This monologue implies that the background "software" is an internal product of a Western humanist epistemology, which is subject-centered, privilege-driven, and organized around control and representation. Here, Braidotti's post-anthropocentric critique strengthens the philosophical ground of the scene: "Species equality in a post-anthropocentric world does urge us to question the violence and the hierarchical thinking that result from human arrogance and the assumption of transcendental human exceptionalism" (Braidotti, 2013, p. 86). The crisis Cameron experiences, which is much deeper than an individual ethical collapse, is the impasse of an epistemology that does not recognize what it cannot represent, and regards hierarchy as natural and privilege as legitimate. Therefore, what remains alongside the digital wreckage is the ruin of the transcendent belief in human mind's power of representation. Cameron's killing Lump, then, is the exposure of his epistemic helplessness and search for control that comes into play when representation fails and one encounters that with which one cannot relate. It is an irreversible moment of an "agential cut" (Barad, 2003; 2007) echoing through his body, memory, and existence. With this cut, the process of dismantling internalized codes of domination and decoding the established software begins. This process is the unraveling of old bonds and the reconfiguration of forms of relating: slow, painful, and corporeal. Cameron is not just a critic or a victim; he is a relational posthuman agent facing his violence, carrying his past software but not imprisoned by it. But he does not surrender to the police. He destroys Lump's body, along with every trace of identity. Cameron's choice, then, echoes the ecological awareness Timothy Morton speaks of, where "[e]cological awareness is that moment at which these narrators find out that they are the tragic criminal" (Morton, 2016, p. 9). This awareness renders him both perpetrator and wounded, pushing him into a subjectivity that creates, destroys, and reconstructs. Trauma here is a material process of re-becoming, which means existing by passing through the damage, and changing with it. Cameron thus becomes someone written together with the Thronglets, reshaped within their texture: "We've been working together... Well, the Throng told me that they wanted to coexist with humans. . . . To work out a means of coexistence". He thus co-creates "a neurological interface that would allow [the Thronglets] to connect to [him] directly," which he describes as "plug and play" (*Black Mirror*, 2025, Season 7, Episode 4, 00:36:12–00:37:02). He does so while still mourning for the loss of the Thronglets; fragmented, worn, but in a state of continuous becoming.

The narrative thus becomes gradually grey in its ontology as it becomes less concerned with perfecting what is human than with pushing it out of the center. But what embodies this posthuman collective mindset is a digital home, the CD. Early on, when Cameron steals the CD, he says, "It wanted to be taken. And I think Colin wanted me to take it, too" (*Black Mirror*, 2025, Season 7, Episode 4, 00:13:50–00:13:58). This statement is significant in the sense that the object is not passive. It acts. It calls. As a result, this

moment is more than an instance of object-agency but an event in which material and textual forces become inseparable, co-producing a mattertextual ontology (Ağın, 2026; forthcoming). Here, as Ağın would put it, neither material processes nor textual formations operate on the level of mirroring or signifying the other. They do not create or write meaning over already fixed identities, nor is meaning an extension of the material substrate, but they co-emerge through the effects, orientations, and capacities they co-produce. In this sense, the CD in “Plaything” is not an object that becomes meaningful after Cameron encounters it. It is already part of an active mattertextual field composed of sound waves, code sequences, and bodily receptivity. The CD’s “call”, in this regard, is a mode of communication that bypasses stable linguistic meaning and instead operates through affective resonance, noise, and embodied reception. In this grey ontological zone, meaning is not transmitted from object to subject; it materializes through their entanglement. When Cameron says, “it wanted to be taken”, therefore, he is registering a pull generated by this material-discursive field, which is strengthened by the sensory and affective strategies employed in the episode, contributing to the sonic architecture. As the Thronglets persist as a continuous nonverbal layer, for instance, a sustained electronic vibratory hum frames Cameron’s startled turn back to the screen (*Black Mirror*, 2025, Season 7, Episode 4, 00:13:21–00:13:35). This bodily orientation (the startle, fixation, and a pull toward the interface) is re-evoked when Cameron retrospectively anchors his attachment in sonic texture: “something about the noises they made... almost like digital birdsong” (*Black Mirror*, 2025, Season 7, Episode 4, 00:15:26–00:15:35). The affective experience here is attraction and captivation triggered by non-semantic sonic qualities (an enjoyment or attunement that arrives prior to any narrative “meaning”), which further contributes to how meaning is made by participatory, material agents, as emphasized by Ağın’s mattertext (Ağın, 2026; forthcoming). Cameron says, on this experience, “Their language was more elegant and efficient than vowels and consonants. They sang strings of data that unfolded in my head. Beautiful concepts. Sometimes, a week’s worth of thought in just a few seconds” (*Black Mirror*, 2025, Season 7, Episode 4, 00:35:29–00:35:40).

The CD’s agency, then, does not lie in symbolizing anything; it lies in activating certain orientations and responses through its sonic, algorithmic, and material properties. In this posthuman grey zone, the CD performs a force of attraction within a shifting ecology of data, flesh, signal, and regulation and enacts through its call a modulation that reorganizes Cameron’s perceptual and ethical bearings. As a material entity, the CD is one of the many actors that co-formulate the grey ontology in which they are embedded. It actively participates in the ontological zone’s unfolding, shaping its epistemic, ethical, and affective trajectories, and as such, its call both pulls Cameron into the “game” and prepares him for his first contact with the Thronglets. In other words, the CD surpasses representational meaning and instead acts upon Cameron’s sensory, cognitive, and affective registers. In one instance, Cameron describes becoming “a receiver” (*Black Mirror*, 2025, Season 7, Episode 4, 00:18:40–00:18:45), and then insists that the Thronglets “weren’t just making noises”: he could “understand their language” without having to “decode it” because it was “effortless” and “intrinsic” (*Black Mirror*, 2025, Season 7, Episode 4, 00:19:01–00:19:18). The sensory experience described here is in fact a kind of heightened receptivity to frequency and signal, while the affective experience is a felt immediacy, or perhaps, an ease of connection that bypasses laborious interpretation. Cameron further specifies that what becomes receivable is patterned rather than vague: “a simple, repeated statement... a greeting with a request for more equipment” (*Black Mirror*, 2025, Season 7, Episode 4, 00:19:42–00:19:54). The episode thus presents “vibration” and “pattern” as a concrete mode of address, sensed as iterative and directive, and attunement as a conditional reconfiguration of the sensory apparatus. This is neither a stable cognitive possession nor a purely subjective projection, but a time-bound shift through which the Thronglets’ nonlinguistic call becomes mattertextually decipherable. In the framework of mattertext, the “call” of the CD is, therefore, not reducible to intention, message, or content. It is a material force that produces an orientation, or an affective pull that reorganizes Cameron’s attunements and capacities for response, so the CD operates as a mattertextual interface that generates its own field of effects independently of human interpretive frameworks.

The CD’s mattertextuality, then, is inseparable from its grey ontological condition because it does not present a stable set of attributes that can be known, catalogued, or interpreted through classical epistemology. Instead, it manifests as a partially legible field whose agency fluctuates across encounters. Its operations

unfold through a combination of encoded fragments, sonic or otherwise material surfaces, and embodied receptivity, none of which fully reveal or stabilize its ontological status. Where the human agent is no longer the sole authority producing meaning, the CD is no longer a transparent container of information but an interval entity whose material-discursive actions emerge in the grey zone between determinacy and indeterminacy. Its vibrations, therefore, enact the very conditions that grey ontology formalizes, such as incomplete knowledge, fluctuating intensities, and mutable relational fields.

Thinking with mattertext helps us understand why the CD produces such a profound rupture in Cameron's world. Its effects cannot be explained by message transmission, symbolic meaning, or narrative causality, nor is it a storyteller. Rather, the CD generates a mattertextual event, an encounter in which human perception is reconfigured through material forces that exceed linguistic capture. The CD does not signify; it intra-acts. It alters the conditions of legibility within Cameron's environment by drawing him into a relational field where meaning emerges as vibration, resonance, and embodied orientation rather than representation. In this sense, the CD becomes the hinge between the collapse of linguistic regimes and the emergence of nonhuman communication systems within the episode. This recognition prepares the terrain for the next section, where we demonstrate how the CD's mattertextuality and its grey ontology converge: its agency is neither fully contained within the object nor fully projected by the subject, but arises as a fluctuating, interval-based relation that inaugurates a new mode of posthuman attunement.

The CD's Agency as Grey Relationality

The CD does not "behave" as a static technological artifact, nor does it manifest the predictable responsiveness of a classic interactive medium. Instead, its agency emerges through the relational interval between Cameron and a material-discursive field, which cannot be reduced to intention, causality, or symbolic meaning. This interval-based relation, first articulated in the CD's "desire" to be taken that we discussed above, initially seems irrational as if a projection of intention onto an inanimate object. In a grey ontological framework, however, the statement reveals a relational intensity, a dynamic field in which neither Cameron nor the CD is fully determinate. The CD's "wanting" is not a pure manifestation of desire that can be explained through intentionality, but it is a relational gradient, a grey relation whose strength varies according to the configuration of material, cognitive, and affective states. As Shen and Zhao suggest, grey relations mark "uncertain", variable relational strengths rather than fixed connections (2016, p. 167). Following this uncertainty, the CD's agency is neither wholly internal nor wholly external to Cameron; it arises within the indeterminate zone where bodies, memories, codes, and signals converge.

This grey relationality also accounts for the CD's "capacity" to reorganize Cameron's perceptual field. When Cameron encounters the CD, he does not interpret it; he orients to it. His attunement is enacted through the CD's sonic emissions, algorithmic residues, and vibrational patterns, which collectively form an interval entity that produces neither clear semantic content nor diagnostic data, as discussed above. Instead, the CD creates a shifting zone of legibility, where Cameron senses fluctuations rather than meanings, and intensities rather than symbols. This is how grey ontology conceptualizes relations as intervals of possibility, whose dynamics reconfigure the entities involved. As such, the CD forces Cameron into a mode of perception that does not rely on stable categories or linguistic mediation. It draws him away from binary causation and toward the interval logic of grey ontology, which recognizes that agency arises through entangled, fluctuating fields rather than isolated intentions or discrete actions. The CD's agency, in this sense, is not mechanistic but emergent, not imposed but co-produced, and not representational but intervallic.

This relational emergence lays the groundwork for the next shift that will allow Cameron's epistemic rupture and will trigger the detective's failure to comprehend it. The CD destabilizes what counts as knowledge, rendering classical epistemology insufficient for the world that "Plaything" brings into view. As the detective represents the epistemic regime of classical ontology, a world in which meaning is extracted, motivations are uncovered, and subjects confess to fixed intentions, his interrogation style relies on chronological linearity, stable identity, and linguistic articulation. This is a triad that presumes the transparency of knowledge and the separability of subject and object, an epistemic orientation evident in his

insistence, “Let’s talk about 1994” (*Black Mirror*, 2025, Season 7, Episode 4, 00:06:24), as though human behavior can be anchored to a clean causal chain. But Cameron’s orientation has already shifted under the CD’s influence. He can no longer speak within the detective’s epistemic frame because he no longer inhabits the ontology it presupposes. The CD has drawn him into a mattertextual-grey field in which meaning is enacted through vibrations, resonances, and embodied attunements rather than representational articulation. This is why Cameron keeps returning not to motives or chronology but to sensory and affective experiences, such as how he felt and what he perceived. These statements make no sense to the detective because they challenge the foundational assumption that knowledge is a stable object to be extracted from a subject who possesses it.

Adding further to the conflict between Cameron and the detective is Cameron’s heightened sense of perception that accentuates his shift from humanist to posthumanist modes of engagement. The episode, as mentioned above, foregrounds a regime of perception that surpasses human limits, in which sound functions as a grey, intervallic signal—less a stable carrier of semantic content than a fluctuating field that conditions what can be sensed and responded to. Such sonic disturbances are seeded even before the drug sequence, with low thrumming and high-pitched tones already texturing the opening moments, accompanied by faint trilling/beeping interference (*Black Mirror*, 2025, Season 7, Episode 4, 00:00:30–00:01:22). The sensory experience here is not “music” or an interpretable cue but an ambient signal-environment that precedes conscious decoding. This dispersed sonic field becomes especially legible when Colin steps away (“Back in a tick”, *Black Mirror*, 2025, Season 7, Episode 4, 00:13:14–00:13:16). These affective and sensory experiences contribute further to the grey mattertextual ontology foregrounded in the episode.

The term “apparatus”, two out of three conceptualizations of which are at play here, further illuminates the rupture between Cameron’s old and new selves (and what they represent). The first conceptualization, which is the classical usage of the term, treats an apparatus as a neutral instrument. Michel Foucault’s *dispositif*, often translated as “apparatus”, is the second conceptualization, which refers to “a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions” (Foucault, 1980, p. 194). Because this network of elements, for Foucault, produces certain forms of knowledge, subjectivity, and power, it helps us understand the detective’s epistemic posture in “Plaything”. The detective operates within an institutional, linguistic, and juridical apparatus that organizes subjects as legible entities, and as such, knowledge is a function of classification and confession. In the Foucauldian sense, this confession is not to be taken as simply a juridical act but a technique that produces the subject as a bearer of truth. The detective repeatedly solicits Cameron’s “confession” in this sense, attempting to extract a linear narrative that restabilizes him within a humanist epistemic order. Following from this, our main frame here is Barad’s apparatus, giving us the third and the most crucial conceptualization of the term, which further complicates this picture by showing how apparatuses do not merely uncover reality but produce it. Barad extends the Foucauldian view by emphasizing that apparatuses are material-discursive configurations that enact cuts in phenomena; matter is not acted upon but participates in the production of meaning:

Apparatuses are not preexisting or fixed entities; they are themselves constituted through particular practices that are perpetually open to rearrangements, rearticulations, and other reworkings. . . . [A]ny particular apparatus is always in the process of intra-acting with other apparatuses, and the enfolding of phenomena (which may be traded across space, time, and subcultures only to find themselves differently materializing) into subsequent iterations of particular situated practices constitute important shifts in the particular apparatus in question and therefore in the nature of the intra-actions that result in the production of new phenomena, and so on. (Barad, 1998, pp. 101–102)

Barad’s account displaces the epistemic neutrality implied in traditional uses of “apparatus” and insists that apparatuses are themselves material-discursive arrangements that enact cuts in the world, differentiating what counts as subject, object, and event. As Whitney Stark also notes, a Baradian apparatus

"is a part of the objects it enables as legible" (Stark, 2016). Our use of apparatus, therefore, aligns Barad's onto-epistemological formulation with Foucault's insight into the productivity of power. In this sense, the investigative frame in "Plaything" is not a mechanism alone for revealing the truth but an active participant in shaping what becomes intelligible as evidence, agency, or threat. What the detective perceives as stable categories, such as witness, suspect, victim, and/or object, are already the outcomes of these configurational operations. The episode thus exposes how both Foucault's *dispositif* and Barad's apparatus converge in demonstrating that neither knowledge nor reality pre-exist the networks that materialize them; instead, they emerge through the entangled practices, technologies, and affects that condition what can be known and by whom.

Ağın's notion of mattertext offers a further extension here. While both Foucault and Barad foreground the productive, configurational capacities of apparatuses, mattertext shifts the focus to the materialities that participate in the emergence of meaning without relying on narrative, symbolic, or representational logics. This, of course, does not mean that mattertext opposes Barad or Foucault, nor does it imply the Baradian and Foucauldian views exclude materiality. On the contrary, mattertext builds upon both thinkers' insistence on materiality but does so by shifting its analytic attention to the aesthetic, vibrational, and sensorial textures through which material-discursive forces become perceptible. Whereas Barad theorizes the inseparability of matter and meaning at a metaphysical level, mattertext provides a methodological lens for tracing how such intra-actions manifest in specific artistic and media environments. Mattertext, therefore, is not a metaphorical "text", nor is it a repository of stories, but a dynamic material-semiotic texture in which meaning arises through relational vibrations between bodies, forces, objects, media, and environments. In this framework, objects are not merely acted upon by apparatuses; they contribute their own intensities, resistances, and rhythms to the formation of knowledge. Applied to "Plaything", then, mattertext reveals how the CD, the Thronglets, and the sensory atmospheres of the episode do more than participate in the expansion of detective's epistemic field by reconfiguring the field itself. Rather than functioning as evidence waiting to be decoded, these entities modulate the very conditions through which legibility, affect, and agency become possible. The CD's insistent pull, for instance, is not reducible to symbolic meaning alone or to mere technological function but is a mattertextual force that folds the human and nonhuman into a shared zone of interference. We must also note here that our use of "semiotic" follows Donna Haraway's (1991) and Barad's (2003; 2007) understanding of the term, referring to the signifying capacities of material processes, not to a system of abstract symbols. Mattertext, therefore, includes those semiotic effects without being reducible to purely linguistic meaning-making.

Through this lens, the episode's rupture becomes visible not only as a breakdown of the detective's classificatory apparatus, but as an encounter with material agencies that exceed and transform the boundaries of the knowable. In other words, mattertext situates the episode's posthuman turn in the co-emergence of cognition, matter, and affect, where reality unfolds as a textured, relational field rather than a stable background or setting for human interpretation. In other words, the CD functions as a mattertextual interface that produces a different ontology that is incompatible with the detective's regime of legibility. The detective's failure, therefore, is not a failure of empathy or intelligence; it is a failure of ontology. His humanist positionality prevents him from comprehending how he is part of the entire grey zone, its vibrational and algorithmic forces that actively reorganize the perceptual conditions of the scene. In other words, he cannot make sense of how a mattertextual grey ontology functions because he is bound to binary structures. His frustration, impatience, and confusion are symptoms of an epistemic regime collapsing before a relational world it cannot parse. The CD thus reveals that the episode's core conflict is not between human and machine, nor is it between subject and object, but between two incompatible ontologies: one grounded in representation, the other in relational attunement. This ontological clash becomes even clearer in the ethical realm, where the CD catalyzes Cameron's alignment with nonhuman life forms and exposes the limitations of human-centered ethics.

The CD, therefore, reorganizes both perception and ethics. Through its mattertextual-grey operations, it prepares Cameron for an encounter with the Thronglets that is not premised on utility, domination, or narrative centrality, thus enabling a mode of engagement, one in which life is recognized not as a hierarchical property but as an immanent capacity to act, feel, and respond. The Thronglets, as digital organisms who

communicate, fear, and remember, emerge as entities whose ethical status cannot be reduced to their artificial origins. They occupy a mattertextual field in which life is enacted through relationality rather than biological criteria. Within this field, then, Haraway's concept of making kin (2016) is equally guiding. The CD initiates a process by which Cameron becomes available to forms of relationality that exceed species boundaries and biological kinship, resonating with Haraway's understanding of kinship. The CD initiates this mode of becoming-with the Thronglets, which is an ethical orientation that does not derive from moral principles but from material-discursive entanglements. Cameron's actions toward the Thronglets, therefore, arise not from altruistic decision-making but from an attunement produced by the CD's relational field, which parallels Hayles's account of distributed cognition (1999). Cameron gradually acknowledges how his cognitive processes, which he once thought to be grounded in individual memory and language as the other humans did, are distributed across an assemblage that includes algorithmic vibrations, the Thronglets' emergent patterns, and the digital ecosystem's sonic architecture. In this acknowledgment, the CD functions as an ethical catalyst because it draws Cameron into a networked mode of knowing in which cognition is not contained within the human mind but co-produced across entities, thus destabilizing the humanist assumption that ethical agency originates from autonomous subjects and instead foregrounding an ethics that emerges from relational entanglement. The CD thus enables Cameron to recognize the Thronglets not as objects of play but as co-constitutive agents whose existence demands response. As a result, this ethical awakening is inseparable from the CD's grey ontology and mattertextual operations. Without the CD's interval-based call, Cameron could not enter the relational field in which ethical responsibility becomes possible.

Conclusion

The CD reveals how "Plaything" materializes a posthuman ontology through the operations of an object that appears insignificant on the surface. Tracing the CD's operations across perceptual, epistemic, and ethical registers leads us to the conclusion that "Plaything" invites us to reconceptualize agency, subjectivity, and ethics beyond humanist frameworks. The episode showcases how Cameron's decisions, shaped by the convergence of the CD's call, the Thronglets' presence, and his own affective history compose a relational sense of agency that emerges not from sovereign subjects but from entangled fields of effects. As the CD's mattertextual vibrations and grey interval relations reorganize Cameron's sensory and cognitive orientations, they destabilize representational epistemology and initiate an ethical alignment with nonhuman life forms. Hence, the CD becomes a site of ontological rupture and a node where indeterminacy is not a problem to be solved but a condition of relational becoming. In the world of "Plaything", meaning is not extracted but enacted; knowledge is not revealed but produced through relational intra-actions; and ethics does not arise from principles but from the material conditions of becoming-with.

The episode thus illuminates the fundamental posthuman insight that reality is constituted not by discrete entities but by fluctuating relations. It is within these relations that new modes of perception, cognition, and ethics emerge. The CD crystallizes this ontological field, showing how the smallest material artifact can become the catalyst for profound shifts in how life, agency, and responsibility are conceived. In this sense, "Plaything" offers a powerful reminder that posthuman worlds are not only imagined in scenes of technological excess but are already present in the relational intervals of everyday objects whose agencies exceed our representational habits. The CD teaches us that the future of ontology lies not in perfect clarity but in the indeterminate, the vibrational, and the mattertextual, where meaning is made not through mastery but through attunement.

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