CHAPTER 6

Multi-scalar Focalisation as Irony
Margaret Atwood's 'Torching the Dusties', Ali Smith's Winter*, and T. C. Boyle's* The Terranauts

As climate change and the sixth mass extinction gather pace, ecocritics and theorists of the Anthropocene are increasingly calling for multi-scalar perspectives. For Timothy Clark, a perspective informed by scalar literacy would be 'attentive to the way the nature of an issue or situation alters according to the scale at which it is considered'.[1] The hope is that thinking on several scales at once will make the observer aware of scalar *relativity* – the extent to which our interpretations result from assumptions about scale. Clark focuses on the larger, invisible scales of Anthropocene awareness, and the necessity of perceiving planetary issues as local, so as to jolt our 'scalar complacencies'. For instance, we might visualise the 'lost tropical forests' implicit in the palm oil content of a single, ordinary shopping basket.[2] Other theorists of ecological perception have laid equal emphasis on the imperceptibly small: in *Bringing the Biosphere Home: Learning to Perceive Global Environmental Change*, Mitchell Thomashow argues that the environmental observer needs to take into account every scale of life, which means registering changes in microorganisms in the soil or underlying genetic strains alongside large-scale biogeographic patterns and the human meso-scale. In order to develop what he calls 'biosphere perception', Thomashow exhorts his readers to develop 'juxtapositions of scale' both microscopic and macroscopic.[3]

This chapter examines irony as a mode of engagement with such multis-scalar perspectives. I read Margaret Atwood's 'Torching the Dusties', T. C. Boyle's *The Terranauts*, and Ali Smith's *Winter* as ironic exercises in 'bringing the biosphere home'. Published over a short span of years, these stories register the rising eco-anxiety that characterised the mid-2010s. 'Torching the Dusties' (2014) was written two years after Canada withdrew from the Kyoto protocol in 2011, and mocks the lack of eco-political action in the face of frequent extreme weather events like 2012's

[1] Clark, *Value*, p. 40. [2] Clark, *Value*, pp. 43, 51.
[3] Thomashow, *Bringing the Biosphere Home*, p. 106.

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Hurricane Sandy. *The Terranauts* (2016) targets the optimistic terraforming discourse proposed in the early 2010s by investors such as Elon Musk, who viewed the colonisation of other planets as an escape route for humanity.[4] *Winter* (2017), as part of a quartet of novels which Smith wrote in quick reaction to political events, satirises the isolationism visible in the 2016 Brexit vote, the election of Donald Trump, and the US withdrawal from the Paris climate agreement in 2017. The focalisers of these stories are mostly blind to the political implications of their ways of life, even when they strive, as they do in Boyle's novel, to excel in biosphere perception.

I begin this chapter by analysing the different forms of multi-scalar focalisation developed by these narratives. In 'Torching the Dusties' and *Winter*, the haunting presence of other scales is figured by visual parasites that distract characters from the immediate scale of human perception. I read these visions through Amitav Ghosh's notion of the environmental uncanny, inflected here by the 'derangements of scale' of Anthropocene awareness.[5] In *The Terranauts*, scientists engaged in a televised experiment must on the contrary adapt to a condition of ecological hypervisibility, where every scale of life is magnified. Through the novel's different narrators, who all monitor the feedback loops of their miniature biosphere, Boyle plays with the blind spots of the embedded observer. All three texts thus respond satirically to the difficulty of perceiving a planetary ecological crisis as 'local'.[6] While Smith and Atwood use uncanny miniatures to destabilise perspective, Boyle's narration follows an anamorphic logic similar to Bruno Latour's concept of 'Gaia-graphy', a distorting displacement that places the viewer '*inside* a deep set of envelopes instead of *on* the surface of a planet'.[7]

In the final section, I analyse scalar irony as a recurrent device in this fiction. My underlying argument here is attuned to Nicole Seymour's reflections on 'bad' environmentalism:[8] I suggest that ironic juxtapositions of scale can develop ecological response-ability, and that this ironic mode is no less valuable than the sincere attempts at scalar translation or exercises in scalar literacy praised by Clark and other ecocritics. Atwood's, Smith's, and Boyle's visual poetics mock the notion of ecological revelation. Yet they also satirise environmental cynicism. Through irony, these texts resist the polarisation of ecological thought into the dichotomy, famously criticised

[4] See, for instance, Carroll, 'Elon Musk's Mission to Mars'. [5] Clark, 'Derangements'.
[6] Holm and Taffel, *Ecological Entanglements*. See also Latour's *Down to Earth*.
[7] Arènes, Latour, and Gaillardet, 'Giving Depth', p. 127. [8] Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism*.

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by Peter Sloterdijk, of enlightenment versus cynicism. Rather than viewing fiction as a didactic space that should provide us with the environmental visualisations that we lack, I suggest that fiction can develop our sensitivity to scalar ironies – and to the ubiquity of such ironies in our current ecological crisis, where the scale of planetary change is most often discordant with the meso-scale experience of everyday life. I defend the ethical and political potential of these stories through Donna Haraway's and Bronislaw Szerszynski's conceptualisations of irony. This framework helps me to argue that situational irony, which is inherent to narrative structure, can produce irony as epistemological position, which develops beyond the act of reading.

6.1 The Planetary Perspective as Ethical Blind Spot in 'Torching the Dusties' and *Winter*

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, darkness and blindness were often used as metaphors for humanity's ecological predicament. In their speculative text *The Collapse of Western Civilization: A View from the Future* (2014), historians Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway use the metaphor of *penumbra* to contrast our epoch with the period of the Enlightenment. Imagining the historians of the future looking back at the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, they refer to this as the 'Period of the Penumbra': '[t]he shadow of anti-intellectualism that fell over the once-Enlightened techno-scientific nations of the Western world during the second half of the twentieth century, preventing them from acting on the scientific knowledge available at the time and condemning their successors to the inundation and desertification of the late twenty-first and twenty-second centuries'.[9] Timothy Morton's lectures on *Dark Ecology*, which he gave in the same year, also draw on Western philosophy's association of knowledge with light, but reach for aesthetic categories to formulate the epistemological challenge of ecological thought in the Anthropocene, a position which he calls *ecognosis*. Noir fiction provides Morton with a template for the guilty position of any human who perceives themselves as 'part of an entity that is now a geophysical force on a planetary scale', so that '[t]he darkness of ecological awareness is the darkness of noir, which is a strange loop: the detective is a criminal'.[10] Overlaying the genre of detective fiction with the genre of tragedy, Morton construes this realisation as Aristotelian *peripeteia*, a tragic downfall that

[9] Oreskes and Conway, *Collapse*, pp. 59–60. [10] Morton, *Dark Ecology*, p. 9.

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often comes in the form of recognition. In this strange loop of *ecognosis* as self-knowledge, *Dark Ecology* is haunted by the figure of Oedipus, 'putting his eyes out because he sees clearly'.[11]

Where Morton proposes a tragic model, Atwood and Smith prefer dark comedy, in fictional stories that approach humanity's environmental blindness obliquely. The main focalisers of *Winter* and 'Torching the Dusties' are affected by visual hallucinations. Atwood's tale is narrated by an old woman named Wilma, who suffers from macular degeneration and Charles Bonnet syndrome. Although she retains some peripheral vision, Wilma mostly sees a void, and this emptiness is often peopled by miniature men and women who move around, climb, or dance in the empty spaces left by her blindness. In *Winter*, the elderly Sophia has perfect eyesight, but is troubled by a floating sphere which only she perceives. Initially a '*blue green dot*' at the side of her vision, over the three days of Christmas the apparition turns into a '*little green-blue sphere*' and then a child's head, before losing its human features again and slowly turning into stone (13–14). These optical phenomena figure ethical failures and epistemological difficulties. In this, they resemble other allegorical fictions, such as Ian McEwan's novel *Solar* (2010) or Adam McKay's film *Don't Look Up* (2021), where blindness to climate change and planetary ecological crisis is literalised into a lack of sight.[12] But the visions imagined by Atwood and Smith are particularly destabilising because they resist attempts to read them. This unreadability, I suggest, construes the multi-scalar perspective as an uncanny experience.

Atwood's and Smith's characters are both wealthy women, living in privileged environments. Wilma is a resident of Ambrosia Manor, a retirement home for the very rich, complete with its own hairdresser salon and dinner menus printed on embossed sheets of paper. She attributes her condition to a lifetime of leisure: '[t]oo much golf without sunglasses, and then there was the sailing – you get a double dose of the rays from the reflection off the water – but who knew anything then?' (263). As the story unfolds over the course of two days, it becomes clear that many people in the wider world are judging her generation's behaviour much more harshly than she imagines. The first sign of impending violence

[11] Morton, *Dark Ecology*, p. 136.

[12] In McEwan's *Solar* ([2010] 2011), the main character visits the Arctic wearing cracked goggles that are constantly fogged up. In McKay's film *Don't Look Up* (2021), American politicians choose to ignore a comet set to collide with Earth, and campaign with the slogan 'Don't Look Up'. I am grateful to Stef Craps and Marco Caracciolo for suggesting to me that these fictions use situational ironies comparable to those I study in this chapter.

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is a commotion at the gates of Ambrosia Manor, where protesters prevent the linen van from entering the grounds. Tuning in to the radio, Wilma discovers that a movement called Our Turn is burning down retirement homes across the United States:

> Upbeat radio music, jovial chit-chat between the male host and the female one, more music, the weather. Heat wave in the north, flooding out west, more tornadoes. [. . .] Forest fires in Arizona, and in Poland, and also in Greece. But right here all is well: it's a good moment for the beach, grab some rays, don't forget the sunblock, though watch out for storm cells popping up later. Have a good day!
>
> Here's the main news. First, a regime topple in Uzbekistan; second, a mass shooting in a shopping mall in Denver, the doubtless hallucinating assailant then killed by a sniper. But third – Wilma listens harder – on the outskirts of Chicago, an old age-home has been set on fire by a mob wearing baby masks; and a second one near Savannah, Georgia, and a third one in Akron, Ohio. (276)

The structure of the broadcast speaks to the moral failings of more than Wilma's generation: the lack of concern for anything that is not happening 'right here', the relegation of climate change disasters to the 'weather' section of the news, and the insouciance of all those who sunbathe while the world burns. Much like Wilma, an entire society appears to be incapable of seeing the dramatic events unfolding around them. But this vignette of global catastrophe is also an inset narrative that offsets the short story. Unlike Atwood's *Maddaddam* trilogy (2003–9), where biological catastrophe and civilisational collapse are depicted at length, 'Torching the Dusties' is precisely *not* about visualising collapse. Instead, the choice of a visually impaired woman as focaliser forces the reader to focus on the meso-scale of limited human perception.

Atwood's tale lends itself well to an allegorical reading, where the main character's visual impairment is a metaphor for the averted gaze of an entire society. Trying to see herself in the mirror, Wilma observes that her 'sideways glance lacks the candour of a full frontal gaze' (265). Despite this moral dimension, Atwood's tone remains darkly comical, using the sideways glance as her narrative strategy: the story touches on environmental disaster lightly, obliquely, rather than through the frontal gaze of tragedy. Once the staff has abandoned them, the healthier inhabitants of Ambrosia Manor rally together, making soup and ignoring the helpless members of the 'Advanced Living' wing. They then prepare an escape, after merrily declaring that 'we don't have to do the dishes in that filthy kitchen, since we won't be here much longer' (302). The attempted escape, however, fails, and the story

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ends in cruel suffering when most of the inhabitants are burnt to death. The spectacle is guessed at by Wilma, who has sought refuge with her friend Tobias in a nearby gazebo. With gallows humour, 'Torching the Dusties' is an indictment of not one but several generations who have lived selfishly – without 'doing the dishes' in the 'filthy kitchen' of the world – and of the bystander effect, where a refusal to help is facilitated by group inertia. No fire engines or police turn up to help the elderly. Wrapped in a blanket, Wilma and Tobias eat peanuts and drink coffee while violence plays out in the manor. Although Wilma is horrified by the events, she waits passively, convinced by Tobias's insistence that '[t]here is nothing I can do for the others' (307). Their spectator seats in the gazebo mirror a generalized state of apathy, and the focus on local comfort that prevents distant ecological catastrophe from being main news.

Wilma's hallucinations, however, resist allegorical reading. While she is listening to the news, she ignores 'the festival of little people that's going on in the vicinity of the microwave, a pink and orange theme with multiple frills and grotesquely high beflowered wigs' (277). When she is agitated, they whirl around 'in a fast waltz' and 'sparkle all over with silver and gold sequins' (292). When the fire engulfs the manor, the little people blend with the flames in a joyful, singing dance, 'their red garments glowing from within, scarlet, orange, yellow, gold' (308). This might be a vision of humanity dancing while Rome burns. But, rather than a clear metaphor, the hallucinations provide an ironic counterpoint to the build-up of dramatic events, because they introduce comical discrepancies in tone and scale. Although Wilma attempts to grasp the broader picture, all she can literally see is the insignificantly small scale: not even the local scale of life in Ambrosia Manor but the even smaller scale of miniature people created by her brain. When she listens to experts discussing 'the shambles, both economic and environmental' (296) that younger generations are facing, in large part because of global warming, all she can see are little people 'skating on the kitchen counter in long fur-bordered velvet cloaks and silver muffs' (297).

Wilma's condition, in other words, is an incapacity to see the true scale – in the ontological sense – of events. Her syndrome reflects her blindness to the scale effects of her way of life – the fact that 'what is self-evident or rational at one scale may well be destructive or unjust at another'.[13] Ambrosia Manor may feel like a well-earned refuge to its inhabitants, but the luxurious life it enables is unsustainable. The insouciance of the residents reflects the

[13] Clark, 'Derangements'.

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Anthropocene paradox, whereby 'the greater the number of people engaged in modern forms of consumption then the less the relative influence or responsibility of each but the worse the cumulative impact of their insignificance'.[14] The anger gathering at the gates reveals the 'outside' cost of the home's inhabitants, introducing the kind of scale awareness which, for Clark, makes all self-contained spaces illusory because it registers a person 'less in terms of familiar social co-ordinates (race, class, gender and so on) than as a physical entity, representing so much consumption of resources and expenditure of waste'.[15] The violence of Our Turn's rhetoric is the violence of this translation of people into wasteful physical entities: the elderly become 'parasitic dead wood at the top' or 'dustballs under the bed' (295). Wilma's perception, however, is noticeably different from that of some of the other residents, who attempt to ignore the protesters and declare that '[i]gnorance is bliss!' (288). It is her visual-epistemological frustration that makes her position as focaliser ethically significant: the fact that no matter how much she attempts to see the outside, she can only see inner projections. The disjunction between Wilma's 'Chuckies', as her doctor calls them (260), and the scale of planetary trouble that she is trying to understand is akin to the derangements of scale identified by Clark in times of environmental crisis, a disjunctive perspective 'implicating seemingly trivial or small actions with enormous stakes'.[16]

Ali Smith's *Winter* also figures derangements of scale through visual intrusions. At the beginning of the novel, Sophia goes to have her vision tested because a dot has appeared in the corner of her eye. The optician declares her eyes '[g]ood as new [. . .]. Close to damnit to never been used' (16) – an early hint that Sophia chooses not to see certain things. Over the five days running up to Christmas the apparition slowly grows, turning first into a green-blue sphere, then a child's head: 'a smudged dusty child streaked with green, a child come home covered in grass-stains, a summer child in the winter light' (19). For Sophia, who lives alone in an empty mansion and barely eats, the vision is an intriguing, playful companion, who bounces round her by day and sleeps beside her at night. It is also vaguely sinister, a severed head that hints at untold violence. Trying to imagine the reason for its disembodied state, she feels unusual empathy:

> It hurt her to think it. The hurt was surprising in itself. Sophia had been feeling nothing for some time now. Refugees in the sea. Children in ambulances. Blood-soaked men running to hospitals or away from burning

[14] Clark, 'Derangements'. [15] Clark, *Ecocriticism*, p. 103. [16] Clark, 'Derangements'.

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> hospitals carrying blood-covered children. Dust-covered dead people by the sides of roads. Atrocities. People beaten up and tortured in cells.
>
> Nothing. (29–30)

Like Wilma, Sophia stands in allegorically for a society steeped in apathy – a generalised indifference to suffering which Smith satirises as the political state of contemporary Britain. In conscious echoes of Charles Dickens's *Christmas Carol*, the rich and miserly Sophia appears to be visited by a ghost of Christmas past, a child that reminds her of her own childhood, or perhaps a ghost of Christmas present, since her son is due to visit her for Christmas. But the floating head does not speak or resemble anyone she knows. Soon it starts to lose its hair. By Christmas day it has 'no face', 'no hair', and its 'surface like polished stone' (141) brings back memories of a Barbara Hepworth sculpture that Sophia once held in her hands. Petrifaction as a metaphor for grief – the central conceit of Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale* – is literalised here in an ironic reversal, where the child turned to stone awakens feelings in the cold-hearted woman.

Like Byatt's short story 'A Stone Woman', Smith's novel plays with an Anthropocene imaginary, where anthropomorphism flips into petromorphism.[17] But Smith's child/planet/stone appears in a narrative that is openly satirical. The apparition is one of several unexpected guests that Sophia is forced to welcome into her empty household. Unwilling to own up to a recent break-up, her son Arthur arrives with Lux, a young Croatian immigrant he has paid to impersonate his girlfriend over Christmas. He brings her to Cornwall to stay in his mother's house, but when Sophia refuses to eat or to welcome them, forcing the foreigner to sleep in the barn, they in turn invite her estranged sister Iris, who has recently been helping asylum seekers in Greece. In the tense and often comical confrontations that ensue, the novel plays with the household as political allegory: the foreign or estranged visitors question the insular mentality of Sophia's conservative views, and through her the xenophobia and 'hostile environment' created by Britain in the run-up to Brexit.[18] The immigrant's arrival brings new energy, and even unexpected profit, when Lux helps Sophia to sell off merchandise to a busload of tourists who also invade her

[17] See Chapter 2.

[18] For an analysis of this hostile environment in Smith's earlier novel *There But for The*, see Bennett, 'This Ridiculous Thing'.

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house. As in much of her fiction, Smith uses the figure of the uninvited parasite as a transformative satirical voice.[19]

The apparition, however, troubles the allegorical structure of the novel and complexifies the somewhat obvious dichotomy between two faces of Britain – the ecological indifference of Sophia the businesswoman versus the environmental activism of Iris the socialist. From an ecocritical perspective, the planet-like qualities of the apparition are striking. Even once the blue-green sphere becomes a head, it retains the greenness of plant growth: on Christmas Eve morning Sophia observes that 'a tangle of minuscule leaves and fronds [. . .] had thickened and crisped round its nostrils and upper lip like dried nasal mucus' (28). She continues to perceives it as a planet as well as a child: 'She looked down at it, her very own Christmas infant, because it looked infant-like now that its hair was missing, as if returning to baby state. [. . .] An eyelash fell off on to its cheek, then another, and between just the fall of each tiny lash the infant planet grew heavier, markedly so, pressing against her shoulderbone quite painfully' (111). The Nativity narrative is overlaid here with the image of the Earth as the blue-green planet, a planet that is quite unexpectedly weighing on Sophia's shoulders, placing her briefly in an Atlas-like position. Although she does not draw any environmental lesson from its presence, the 'infant planet' haunting her for Christmas is in itself an uncanny derangement of scale. The situation is reminiscent of Karen Tei Yamashita's *Through the Arc of the Rainforest* (1990), a novel narrated by a small sphere floating a few inches from the forehead of its main human protagonist. In Yamashita's novel, the 'tiny impudent planet' turns out to be made of a material formed by the accumulation of plastic refuse, transformed into rock by tectonic pressure.[20] But whereas Yamashita's miniature planet is easily read as a metonymy for the Anthropocene, Smith's equally impudent sphere remains voiceless, and resists any obvious interpretation. The infant planet effects a scalar collapse of the planetary onto the individual – a hovering, anthropomorphic Earth come to haunt Sophia – but it soon loses its human features, turning back into silent rock.

The infant planet's resistance to signification endows it with ironic presence, in a novel that repeatedly mocks the human tendency to project symbolic value onto the environment. Arthur, or, as everyone calls him, Art, considers himself a nature writer. In his spare time, he blogs about imaginary encounters with nature, where the sight of a puddle or the beauty of snow provoke romanticised moments of self-knowledge. The

[19] See Campos, 'Ali Smith's Parasitic Poetics'. [20] Yamashita, *Through the Arc*, p. 4.

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snippets we read from his blog 'Art in Nature' satirise a contemplative style of nature writing. When Art imagines writing a piece for the winter solstice 'riffing on the theme of footprints and alphabetical print' and full of 'unusual words for snow conditions' (52), he sounds like a parody of Robert MacFarlane's essays 'Path' and 'Track', and of the epigraph to *The Old Ways* that MacFarlane borrows from Emerson: '[n]ot a foot steps into the snow, or along the ground, but prints in characters more or less lasting, a map of its march'.[21] When criticised for his 'self-satisfied and self-blinding' writing, Art believes that he is 'going to get a bit political actually and talk about natural unity in seeming disunity' (52–3). His political blindness is contrasted with Iris's lifelong activism and participation in the Greenham Common protests. Sophia's memories of an earlier Christmas bring her back to the mansion's former days as a squat, where Iris and her commune read

> a story that sounded at first like a Christmas story but clearly wasn't one. *In the gutters under the eaves and between the shingles of the roofs, a white granular powder still showed a few patches; some weeks before it had fallen like snow upon the roofs and the lawns, the fields and streams. No witchcraft, no enemy action had silenced the rebirth of new life in this stricken world. The people had done it themselves.*
>
> It was all so symbolic and heavy. (123)

The italicised excerpt from Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), where pesticides have fallen like nuclear snow, provides an ironic counterpoint to Art's sentimental musings. But the focaliser of this scene, Sophia, is at this point in time rapidly rising in the business world of fashion, and has little interest in the moralising lectures given by the 'bunch of foreigners and layabouts' (116) with whom her sister is living. Instead, she examines their clothes for new business ideas, listens vaguely to their angry rhetoric, and is the only person in the room to laugh when someone describes a cat's tail falling off because of chemical poisoning.

I am particularly interested in Smith's decision to make the eco-sceptic conservative Sophia, rather than Iris, the main focaliser of that scene and of the novel. Sophia's laughter provides a comic counterpoint to the green rhetoric at work in *Winter*. The narrative makes her wit and intelligence clear, so that her sceptic perspective does not serve simply to enhance the environmental perspective but exists on par with it: Sophia ironises Iris's discourse as much as Iris ironises Sophia's. Rather than simply satirise

[21] MacFarlane, *Old Ways*, p. 5. 'Path' and 'Track' are part of this collection.

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a politically short-sighted perspective, Smith makes Sophia's ironic laughter and distrust of heavy symbolism key aspects of the novel's irreverent environmentalism. Not a single moment of green rhetoric is untouched by irony in the novel. When the story begins, the 'Art in Nature' twitter account has already been pirated by Art's ex-girlfriend, Charlotte, whose vengeful tweets punctuate the novel. Each tweet makes fake claims, in Art's name, of astounding sightings, such as a Canada warbler in Cornwall. Charlotte's parodic nature writing earns the twitter account a rapid increase in followers, culminating in the arrival on Sophia's doorstep of a bus full of birdwatchers eager to see the warbler. This type of sighting – the observation of a change in migratory patterns – is one of the examples discussed by Thomashow in *Bringing the Biosphere Home*, as an occasion to develop biosphere perception across scales. Birdwatchers, he notes, can only fully understand the ecological significance of a change in behaviour if they perceive, alongside it, the conditions the bird encounters in other regions of the globe, the ramifications this behaviour will have throughout each of its habitats, and to what extent it is a sign of shifting ecosystems. These observations, for Thomashow, are made possible by a combination of 'paying careful attention to local natural history, the ability to expand and amplify organismic umwelt, and the ability to experiment (perceptually) with scale'.[22] But Smith's busload of birdwatchers appear to be completely unconcerned by any of those broader scales and ecological consequences. Their interest is in the 'experience' of seeing the warbler and, in some cases, the money to be gained from selling that experience. After making purchases in Sophia's Boxing Day sale and finishing off Iris's Christmas lunch, they set off again to follow the sightings that have multiplied miraculously since the fake announcement was made.

Through this widespread blindness to the planetary scale, *Winter* ironises the 'biospheric perspective'[23] rather than offering a lesson in the art of multi-scalar perception. As Clark points out, Thomashow's 'exercises for improving scalar literacy' are based on the premise that juxtapositions of scale will bring about an 'ethical jolt', so that we come to 'inhabit vaster realms of space and time as being also genuinely local'.[24] Smith offers no such pedagogical discovery, but asks what ethical jolts might arise from uncanny encounters with other scales. Like his mother, Art is visited by an apparition, halfway through Christmas lunch. As Sophia and Iris fight out their political differences, Art longs for 'snow to fill this room and cover

[22] Thomashow, *Bringing the Biosphere Home*, p. 97.
[23] Thomashow, *Bringing the Biosphere Home*, p. 105. [24] Clark, *Value*, p. 43.

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everything and everyone in it' (215). Instead, the room suddenly darkens and fills with 'the smell of plantlife' (215):

> a piece of rock or a slab of landscape roughly the size of a small car or a grand piano is hanging there in the air. [. . .] Little bits of rock-dust from the edges of it crumble down, hit the table and skitter across it like a giant salt-cellar is seasoning the room and everything in it. He scratches at his head. There's grit under his nails when he takes his hand away from his head. There's grit at the roots of his hair. [. . .] Right there in a crevice directly above Art's head there's a tuft of grassy stuff that's taken root.
>
> It will crush them all when it falls.
>
> But it hangs there. It doesn't fall. It swings slightly in the air. It has heft. Green silence rears beneath it. [. . .]
>
> Look, he says. Everyone. *Look*. (215–17)

Art, who earlier had imagined consoling himself by holding 'a handful of earth' (66), is visited here by an Earth that has little to do with his romantic musings. The crumbling slab parodies the gentle snowfall he had imagined. This earth is uncanny: composed of ordinary familiar grass and grit, yet impossibly positioned, and disturbingly hinting that Art might be eaten or buried alive. It presents the kind of uncanniness that Amitav Ghosh calls environmental: a strangeness arising from encounters with natural forces, when 'we recognize something we had turned away from: that is to say the presence and proximity of nonhuman interlocutors'.[25] Ghosh gives his own encounter with a tornado as an example, and suggests that climate change amplifies such moments of environmental uncanniness because it makes us understand a nonhuman force to be 'the mysterious work of our own hands returning to haunt us in unthinkable shapes and forms'.[26] In *Winter*, the visitations are less readable, yet more disturbing: a planet that looks like part of a mutilated child, a slab of living landscape turning the eaters into the food. Like the cyborg's head imagined by Winterson in *The Stone Gods*, the sweet cheerfulness of the child's head makes it uncanny rather than horrific: it creates a sense of unease, reminding us of the prominence of severed body parts in Freud's theory of the uncanny. But where Freud connected severed parts to the castration complex, the severed head and chunk of earth that appear in *Winter* hint at a vaster scale of loss. Rather like the ordinary shopping basket described by Clark, haunted by palm oil and deforestation, Smith's Christmas table is haunted by the Earth.

[25] Ghosh, *Great Derangement*, p. 30. [26] Ghosh, *Great Derangement*, p. 32.

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In Derridean terms, both Sophia's infant planet and Art's slab of landscape have the qualities of the *arrivant*, the completely unexpected arrival that forces absolute hospitality. Jacques Derrida defines the *arrivant* as 'not even a guest' because he or she 'surprises the host – who is not yet a host or an inviting power – enough to call into question, to the point of annihilating or rendering indeterminate, all the distinctive signs of a prior identity, beginning with the very border that delineated a legitimate home'.[27] It is the *arrivant* who makes the host a host, thereby triggering a radical questioning of the boundaries of self and home. Sophia's visitation turns the reclusive woman into a host who welcomes the child into her bed, then wraps the apparition-turned-to-stone under her clothes to keep it warm against her abdomen, and finally hides it under her floorboards. By invading her home and forcing her to welcome it, the miniature planet weakens her conservative political statements, which disparage refugees as 'economic migrants' and defend Brexit and border-closing as a necessary step because '[t]here *is* no more room' (205). Nothing in Sophia's rhetoric changes over Christmas, although she does eventually welcome Lux into her house and ask Iris to return. But the mere presence of the miniature planet, which only she and the reader perceive, imbues all her discourse with situational irony: she is simultaneously rejecting the *visible* other and welcoming the *invisible* other.

I read the planetary features of this *arrivant* through Morton's notion of the *strange stranger*, which translates and adapts Derrida's *arrivant* to the context of ecology. For Morton, '*human* being is just one way of being in a mesh of strange strangeness – uncanny, open-ended, vast: existence is (ecological) coexistence'.[28] The *strange stranger* therefore 'names an uncanny, radically unpredictable quality of life-forms' as well as of the nonliving in the ecological network.[29] From the perspective of an object-oriented ontology, Morton asserts that the strange strangeness of the ecological encounter derives from the impossibility of seeing or capturing completely the nonhuman – the fact that the nonhuman always withdraws. Smith's infant planet, which first appears human but then withdraws into featureless stoniness, is as impossible to grasp as Art's vision, where the Earth itself is a strange stranger arrived unannounced at the table. For once, Art is forced to look closely at the landscape, perceiving minute realistic details such as grass and mica, but he cannot grasp what he is seeing and soon faints. Later, in occasional moments of despair, he glimpses again

[27] Derrida, *Aporias*, p. 34. [28] Morton, 'Here Comes Everything', pp. 165–6.
[29] Morton, 'Here Comes Everything', p. 165.

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what he thinks of as 'the coastline' (313) hovering over other people's heads. Rather than the distanced overview he is accustomed to, he is haunted by an *under*view, a partial perception of the Earth as object which, each time, immediately withdraws. The coastline, even more than the stone Sophia hides under her floorboards, can be read through Morton's philosophy of the object as 'profoundly "withdrawn" – we can never see the whole of it, and nothing else can either'.[30] The Earth as object tantalisingly presents itself to Art, but only in partial glimpses. Like the floating head, it does not speak, refusing to be caught in the grasp of language.

If there is any lesson to be inferred from Art's apparition, it is the ethical imperative to 'Look [. . .]. *Look*' and the limitation of sight to a partial view. Art's ethical failures, like Sophia's, are construed as a form of blindness, both towards other humans and towards their nonhuman environment. Their visitations ask them to look, yet do not reveal. With their 'green silence', they participate in Smith's resistance to the apocalyptic mode, or *revelation* – the common translation of the Greek word *apokalupsis*. Despite the homage to Carson's *Silent Spring*, *Winter* is wary of eco-apocalypse and its tendency 'to polarise responses, prodding sceptics towards scoffing dismissal and potentially inciting believers to confrontation'.[31] While the novel's sympathies clearly lie with Iris and her activism, Smith chooses comic parody over tragic catastrophe: the guests disperse peacefully, the birdwatchers continue to chase after an imaginary Canada warbler, and the environment itself seems to recede further and further from sight. Both Atwood and Smith, at least in these stories, write against what Latour calls the 'pornography of catastrophe' in contemporary environmental discourse.[32] Atwood mocks this trend by refusing visual access to the burning home. Smith filters the apocalyptic mode through the sceptical ears of her main protagonist. In both cases, rather than a catastrophic revelation, the ecological unconscious takes the form of uncanny hallucinations, derangements of scale that interfere with ordinary sight. These visions highlight, but do not cure, the lack of a truly multi-scalar perspective – one which might succeed, for instance, in visualising microscopic poisons and planetary migratory patterns, alongside the familiar scale of ordinary human life. Fiction's role, they seem to suggest, is not so much to provide a complete multi-scalar view as to ironise scale-bound perspectives.

[30] Morton, 'Here Comes Everything', p. 165. [31] Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, p. 114.
[32] Le Tanneur, 'Entretien'.

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6.2 Biosphere Perception as Anamorphosis in *The Terranauts*

Unlike Smith's and Atwood's characters, each of the three narrators in *The Terranauts* is acutely aware of the feedback loops connecting different scales of life. Boyle's novel is a satirical take on the Biosphere experiment – a historical experiment in closed-systems ecology carried out in the Arizona desert in the 1980s and 1990s. Renamed 'Ecosphere', the fictional experiment follows the same principle as the historical one: eight volunteers are locked into E2, a contained system of interconnected biomes, studying their evolution and attempting to prove the viability of such a closed-life environment, as an alternative to the living environment of E1, the Earth. The novel follows the initial selection process and the ensuing two years of closure, during which the Terranauts attempt both to preserve the fragile balance of the ecosystems in E2 and to feed themselves, which proves to be increasingly difficult. Thanks to the daily readings provided by thousands of sensors, they are careful observers of the interdependence of microscopic lifeforms and macroscopic ecosystems. After daily meetings where they discuss the fluctuating levels of CO_2, 'depending on available light for photosynthesis, the activity of soil microbes and the status of decomposition in the compost bin' (101), the participants go about their tasks, intensely aware of the life around them. This biological awareness includes the molecular composition of their own urine and blood, which is measured regularly and bears witness to the environmental degradation of E1: as the Terranauts burn off their body fat, toxic lipophilic compounds such as PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls), DDE (dichlorodiphenyldichloroethylene), and DDT (dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane) are released into their bloodstream, leaving them 'sobered by this evidence – evidence in the blood – of what was wrong out there in the world' (155).

The Terranauts, in other words, are experts in biosphere perception, constantly reminding the reader that 'every ecosystem is interconnected and interdependent' (299). As it explores this multi-scalar focalisation, the narrative toys with the kind of synecdochic poetics that I have discussed in Chapters 2 and 3. The novel's main heuristic figure is the microcosm, since E2 is a miniature ecosphere whose feedback loops are accelerated: 'You breathe poison on the outside and maybe it disperses when you breathe out or maybe it accumulates in your body tissues and when you're seventy you get cancer or not, but on the inside poison is poison and its effects are immediate – one day you're wearing Dune or Angel and the next day you're eating it' (74). In this microcosm, the slow time of environmental violence is sped up enough to become visible, and the scale effects of

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chemical pollution rendered immediately palpable for the characters. When cloudy weather causes a drop in photosynthesis and oxygen levels, the Terranauts experience an accelerated version of global heating: they are trapped with rising levels of CO_2, a rapidly acidifying ocean, and a stressed coral reef they frantically try to save with calcium carbonate. Such tipping-points are reached much more rapidly than in E1, but they obey identical principles.

Gaia theory is the explicit inspiration for E2, and the novel even features James Lovelock as a guest attending the pre-closure party. Ramsay, the team's public relations specialist, highlights this Gaian imaginary:

> Call it science-theater. Call it a dramatization of ecological principles under the guiding cosmology of Gaia, in which E1, the original world where we were all born and nurtured, could be viewed as a living organism negotiating the heavy cosmic sea – "Spaceship Earth," as Buckminster Fuller, one of our foundational thinkers, dubbed it. Everything connected, everything one. And E2, the new world, the first and only world apart from the original one, was to be our laboratory and our home, Gaia in miniature. (41–2)

As a synecdoche for the original Gaia, E2 magnifies the feedback loops behind Lovelock and Margulis's hypothesis. But Ramsay's mixed metaphors imbue this microcosm with contradictions: it is both an organism and a spaceship, a home and a laboratory. The structural irony is that E2, although the participants view it as a return to purity, is entirely dependent on the multi-million-dollar technology needed to sustain it: in the background, paying tourists are watching, and the technology is signalled by 'the great roar of the fans and blowers of the technosphere that kept it all going, our life support kicking in and running as steadily as a heartbeat day and night' (81). These images rely on the classic synecdoche of the biosphere as a superorganism,[33] but Boyle makes this a critical synecdoche by figuring the ecosphere as a technosphere. Unlike E1, E2 is not self-sustained, but depends on a huge amount of technology and electricity – a dependence that is dramatically foregrounded when a few hours of power shortage bring the whole experiment close to collapse.

The novel's rhetoric satirises several strands of ecological idealism by blending pastoral environmentalism with the discourse of terraforming. The biomes of E2 are marketed as a garden of Eden: even the birth of a brand-new Terranaut is eventually worked into this narrative and the newborn Eve presented as the future of humanity. All the material

[33] See Woods, 'Scale'.

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'corruption of the outside world' (158), such as plastic, is excluded from E2. This pastoral environment is marred by stowaway mosquitoes, cockroaches, and sparrows who devour the seeds intended for planting, broadmites who ruin the potato crops, and other invasive species. But it is ironised most of all by the ecotechnology supporting the biomes. The project leader, whom the Terranauts nickname G. C., short for 'God the Creator', is a wealthy visionary who reasons that the human species is 'well on its way to destroying or at least depleting the global ecosystem and might just need an escape valve' (103). His discourse parodies the kind of rhetoric deployed by Elon Musk, who has defended terraforming Mars as a window of possibility 'in case something goes wrong with Earth'.[34] As Derek Woods argues, Musk's position as an entrepreneur in space technology as well as ecological technology makes him a figure of 'an ecological genre of the human that overrepresents himself as geoengineer or terraformer, his hand on the climatic thermostat'.[35] This overrepresentation is not only a distortion of the human into an all-powerful subject of the Anthropocene but an implicit hierarchisation, dividing humanity into those who engineer the climate and those who endure it. In *The Terranauts*, such hierarchies are made evident by the three narrators: the inside view of two participants, Dawn and Ramsay, alternates with the bitter outsider perspective of one of the rejected candidates, Linda. As a plump volunteer of Korean extraction, Linda is acutely conscious of her relegation to the group of lesser humans: the selection process, she observes, 'might as well have been curating an exhibit called "Blondes of the Biomes"' (58).

Beyond this exclusive and exclusionary logic, the novel's main satirical thrust is provided by the portrayal of E2 as a panopticon. All the characters are conscious of the theatrics involved in their performance, intended to attract media attention and to generate income for the project. Placed under glass, they are constantly exposed. The apparatus necessary for multi-scalar ecological measurement is no different from surveillance technology: 'some two hundred thousand sensors distributed throughout E2, gauging everything from soil respiration to ocean salinity levels and systems functions, and cameras just about everywhere' (110). Soon enough, Linda is asked to monitor the cameras and phone lines, so that she can detect 'anomalies' (133). As in Thomas More's *Utopia*, there are no locks or keys in E2, and the set-up recalls Bentham's panopticon, famously

[34] Herzog, *Lo and Behold*, quoted in Woods, 'Terraforming Earth', p. 14.
[35] Woods, 'Terraforming Earth', p. 15.

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described by Foucault as a 'seeing machine', 'a transparent building in which the exercise of power may be supervised by society as a whole'.[36] Tourists and television audiences watch the Terranauts' every move, their medical monitoring accentuates the biopolitics of surveillance, and their most secretive actions, from masturbation to food theft, are noticed and commented upon by Mission Control. As River Ramuglia points out, these multiple levels of spectatorship may make it difficult for the reader to engage with the ecological content: 'when environmental discourse manifests in the rhetorical situation of entertainment culture', the context may 'prevent any earnest engagement with that discourse'.[37] But whereas Ramuglia presents the novel as a parable of 'how the mirage of green consumerism easily shrouds authoritarian forms of surveillance and control',[38] I will argue here that Boyle's insistence on sight and spectatorship has an epistemological significance beyond the satire of environmentalism as consumer product.

I read the narrative focalisation that Boyle sets up in *The Terranauts* as an experiment in Critical Zone visualisation – an experiment which explores the necessity, and difficulties, of an immersed ecological perspective. In their reflection on 'Gaia-graphy', Arènes, Latour, and Gaillardet argue that a planetary view inherited from Galilean philosophy prevents us from effectively visualising the Critical Zone we inhabit – that 'thin, porous and permeable layer' of the planet 'where life has modified the cycles of matter by activating or catalyzing physical and chemical reactions'.[39] This layer extends from the surface of rock formations to the top of forest canopies. The Critical Zone is where the recursive loops of Gaia theory play out, yet this thin pellicle is particularly difficult to visualise. To give this surface the visual importance it requires, Arènes, Latour, and Gaillardet propose modifying the usual cross-section representations of the Earth as layers (with a core, mantle, crust, top soil, and atmosphere), by reversing the order of the strata, so that the earth's core and mantle are placed at the periphery. This allows them to *scale up* the layers that compose the Critical Zone, through anamorphosis: they use this word in the sense defined by projective geometry, to describe a projection that maintains the relations of the original object but modifies the relative scale of different parts of this object and thus highlights specific phenomena.[40] The resulting, counter-intuitive representation places the

[36] Foucault, *Discipline*, p. 207. [37] Ramuglia, 'Tearing Down the Greenhouse', pp. 77–8.
[38] Ramuglia, 'Tearing Down the Greenhouse', p. 73.
[39] Arènes, Latour, and Gaillardet, 'Giving Depth', p. 121.
[40] Arènes, Latour, and Gaillardet refer here to Baltrusaitis, *Anamorphoses*.

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Earth's atmosphere in the centre, in a circle where life resides, instead of representing it as a transition to an infinite horizon. The inescapability of the Critical Zone is thus emphasised,

> since it does not float in unbounded space but is strongly coupled with the soil surface giving a strong indication of the tiny respiratory mechanism from which all life forms breathe. If we pollute the atmosphere or mess it up, there is no other horizon to which we could escape contrary to the impression given by the traditional planetary view. [. . .] Since we keep the older circular shape of traditional cartography, the viewer is given a strong feeling of being *inside* and bound by revolving cycles [. . .]. In a very powerful way, provided we situate ourselves in the map, at the border of the vortex simulating the atmosphere, with the soil, the fractures, the trees and the roots all around us and weighing on us, we may begin to feel that the skin of the earth has been, so to speak, *reversed like a glove* and that we are now *inside* a deep set of envelopes instead of *on* the surface of a planet.[41]

I suggest that, through narrative rather than diagrams, Boyle's *Terranauts* performs precisely this kind of Gaia-graphic anamorphosis. The novel places the Terranauts inside a complex of biomes under glass domes, which make sun and stars difficult to make out. Their perspective is deprived of the vastness of space, and shortened to a close-up of the cycles they are measuring and maintaining: plant and animal growth, microbial populations, oxygen production and depletion, CO_2 capture, nutrient cycles, and so on. They are, like the observer described by Arènes, Latour, and Gaillardet, 'inside and bound by revolving cycles', acutely aware of the 'tiny respiratory mechanism' they depend on, and which brings them close to collapse when the winter months deplete their oxygen. The most idealistic Terranaut, Dawn, gives a striking description of her transformed perspective during her first year inside:

> I don't know how to explain it, except to say that there was a real disconnect between what I was experiencing at ground level – nature, life, the biomes teeming with activity and rich with the fullness of the earth – and what I saw when I looked up. The sky wasn't there any more than the sun was, everything divided and faceted like a mosaic. It was as if I was carrying a shell on my back, as if my two legs alone were holding the whole place up. I felt squeezed. Stifled. (211)

These images merge different cosmogonies – the turtle carrying the world on its back, Atlas bearing the weight of the world – to emphasise the distortion of perspective that places the human inside a shell rather than on

[41] Arènes, Latour, and Gaillardet, 'Giving Depth', p. 127.

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a surface. Although Dawn admits that she is sometimes tempted to open the airlock and break closure, she ultimately remains faithful, more than any other participant, to the group's mantra '[n]othing in, nothing out' (44).

This last point is particularly resonant with Latour's visual epistemology, which hinges on the impossibility of escape. In Chapter 3, I outlined the argument of Latour's essay *Down to Earth*, according to which the climate crisis can be approached usefully only if we understand the existence of contradictory visualisations of the Earth. Latour identifies four attractors in today's politics: in addition to the older polarisation of the Local versus the Global, the politics of climate change denial have created an Out-of-This-World attractor, an escapist fantasy which renounces the idea of a common world. This new polarisation creates the need for a fourth attractor, the Terrestrial, which defines the world as the Critical Zone rather than the whole planet: 'the Globe grasps all things from *far away*, as if they were *external* to the social world and completely *indifferent* to human concerns. The Terrestrial grasps the same structures from *up close*, as *internal* to the collectivities and *sensitive* to human actions, to which they *react* swiftly.'[42] Dawn's perspective corresponds to this Terrestrial renouncement of the view from space, replaced by the view from inside the Critical Zone. Her attention increasingly turns away from the cosmos, towards the microcosms she inhabits, until even the strands of carpet in her room are 'like trees in a miniature forest, a whole ecosystem there, moth larvae, dust mites, flakes of shed skin' (276). As time passes, she no longer feels stifled by E2, but at home, to the point that she refuses to leave with the rest of the team, choosing to remain inside with her daughter rather than return to 'the home planet' (271).

Like Winterson's narrators in *The Stone Gods*, Dawn chooses the immersed, close-up view that enables the Terrestrial perspective. But, unlike Winterson's focalisers, she is blind to the irony of her situation, which depends on expensive, carbon-hungry technology. The resulting contradiction is the mainspring of *The Terranauts*' epistemic satire. As a focaliser, Dawn embodies the tension between the Terrestrial view and the terraforming perspective: E2 is a space that enables the inside, close-up view of the Critical Zone, yet it is funded by the search for a technological escape valve for part of humanity. The structural irony of the experiment is that it merges the two poles that Latour views as radical opposites: the Out-of-This-World attractor and the Terrestrial. By the end of the novel,

[42] Latour, *Down to Earth*, p. 67.

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Dawn's vivid perception of the Terrestrial has been absorbed into the Out-of-This-World fantasy: 'To think about the world beyond the glass was like looking down the wrong end of a telescope, everything shrunk to irrelevance. We *were* on another planet and nothing that happened back on the home planet really mattered anymore' (271). Here, anamorphosis has gone beyond a point of no return: rather than a useful change of scale, it becomes a loss of perspective, figured by the upside-down telescope. Dawn defends a delusional position of independence where her every breath depends on the technosphere controlled by G. C. The allegorical narrative sold by E2's marketing team – the experiment as the dawn of a new humanity – is carried through and hollowed out, as unsustainable on the scale of humanity. For the reader, however, the way the novel alternates between different focalisers continues to hold together several radically divergent political perspectives. *The Terranauts* satirises terraformist escapism *and* brings the Critical Zone into focus, replacing the 'view from nowhere' with close-ups of life cycles as 'interconnected entities in which the human multiform actions are everywhere intertwined'.[43] These close-ups make Boyle's narrative more pedagogical than Smith's or Atwood's: *The Terranauts* offers us some of the multi-scalar visualisations that we lack, although it does so in a highly satirical mode. The novel hovers, more uncomfortably than Atwood's and Smith's fiction, on the brink of didacticism: in many ways, it is torn between earnest address and ironic perspective.

6.3 Scalar Irony

As Linda Hutcheon observes in *Irony's Edge*, 'it has for centuries been a commonplace to assert that irony is the trope of the detached'.[44] But the type of environmental irony that I have identified here is predicated precisely on the difficulty of detachment. The focalisers of these stories are deprived of an overview, either literally, because they cannot see beyond their immediate location, or allegorically, because they see the Earth through foreshortened, fragmented, and partial representations. The reader is more detached, and brings an awareness of planetary context which helps them perceive the ironies of the characters' situations. But the focalisation of narrative through intelligent, perceptive characters invites the reader to consider the partial view and local scale as a position that is no less important than the planetary. The particular type of irony enabled by these stories thus arises not only from the incongruity between different

[43] Latour, 'Some Advantages', p. 5. [44] Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, p. 47.

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scales of perception but also from the narrative's refusal to hierarchise those scales. What I will refer to here as scalar irony is both a form of situational irony set up by the plot of these stories – a contradiction between the immediate environment of the characters and the broader context of their planet – and an epistemological and ethical position which is enabled for the reader, and which may extend beyond the act of reading.

Ironies of scale are familiar ingredients of planetary fiction. The ending of H. G. Wells's *War of the Worlds* (1897), where invading Martians are decimated by bacteria that are harmless for humans, plays with an ironic contrast between the ontological scale of the microbes and the threat of species-wide extinction that they represent for the Martians who have almost decimated humanity. An equally famous work of late twentieth-century science fiction, Kim Stanley Robinson's *Red Mars* (1992) also ends with a dramatic and unpredicted scale effect, when a rebellion against large-scale terraforming projects inadvertently and ironically accelerates terraforming spectacularly. But the scalar irony I have identified in this chapter is a particular brand of irony which is linked to the *lack* of an overview. I read this foreshortening of perspective as a reaction and resistance to the apocalyptic mode that has been a strong trend in environmental science fiction since the publication of Carson's *Silent Spring*. Although *Winter* is haunted by *Silent Spring*'s tale of eco-apocalypse, Smith's novel offers little visual perspective beyond the Cornish house and garden, and focuses more on imagined birds and butterflies than on real wildlife. If we compare *The Terranauts* to *Red Mars*, as two novels that explore the science, ethics, and politics of terraforming, Boyle's closed location and limited perspective seem stifling and claustrophobic besides Robinson's lyrical descriptions of vast icy landscapes. And whereas Atwood's post-apocalyptic novel *Oryx and Crake* (2003) offered a vivid depiction of a post-pandemic Earth, her short story 'Torching the Dusties' refuses to visualise the environmental catastrophes it evokes. This fiction, in other words, resists the revelatory mode and explores the difficulty of having a multi-scalar perspective when all one perceives is the meso-scale of immediate experience.

The resulting ironies are distinct from the generalised sense of irony that many theorists have considered inherent in the postmodern condition – a condition characterised by the lack of common assumptions or truths, where 'we always speak and write provisionally, for we cannot be fully committed to what we say'.[45] Rather than a refusal to commit, the

[45] Colebrook, *Irony*, p. 18.

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scalar irony developed by Atwood, Smith, and Boyle is a comic exploration of the necessity of holding together incongruous scales: the uncanny planet that disturbs the family Christmas dinner, the global climate crisis that impinges on the luxury retirement home, or the haunting planetary footprint that hollows out the Terranauts' utopia of environmental purity. In an analysis of 2010s American political satire, James E. Caron suggests that contemporary satire is placed in a difficult position because its reforming intent must compose with postmodernity's ironic suspicion of epistemological frames: for Caron, a hybrid model of contemporary satire has emerged, 'with one foot outside of its postmodern condition of self-conscious and detached irony'.[46] The satirical fiction I have analysed here embraces this contradiction by investing the ironic mode with ethical value. It thus provides an alternative to ecological didacticism – where the character or reader would reach some kind of ecological enlightenment at the end of the story – but also a resistance to ecological cynicism.

Satire, as Caron reminds us, 'entails a potential *metanoia*, a change in thinking, perception, or belief, even a repentance of the old way of thinking, perceiving, believing'.[47] But this fiction's satirical bite lies precisely in the failed *metanoia* of the characters: neither Wilma nor Sophia is converted to a new perspective, while Dawn's fanatic belief in E2 as the future of humanity is only strengthened by adversity. In each case, the onomastics and symbolism of light enhance the failed enlightenment: the fire does not reveal anything to Wilma, nor do the truth-speaking foreigner Lux or the environmentalist Iris succeed in converting Sophia to a new perspective, and Dawn ironically gives birth to Eve, whose name promises a new Eden but is equally suggestive of the coming dusk. The very idea of enlightenment is mocked by these names, and further weakened by cynical discourse. Tobias, who repeatedly assures Wilma that they can do nothing but watch, and Sophia, who systematically mocks her sister's idealism, are both hardened cynics. In *The Terranauts*, the cynical view is more diffuse, introduced in turns by Linda, Ramsay, and the mission's doctor, Richard, who refers to E2 as 'the garden of Eden set down on the deck of an aircraft carrier' (83). But Ramsay in particular exhibits what Peter Sloterdijk defines as modern cynicism, 'that state of consciousness which follows naive ideologies and their enlightenment'.[48]

[46] Caron, 'Quantum Paradox', p. 164.
[47] Caron, 'Quantum Paradox', p. 156.
[48] Sloterdijk, 'Twilight', p. 190.

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Contrasting the modern cynic with the ancient *kynic*, who performed a necessary unmasking of social pretence and arrogance, Sloterdijk presents the degraded modern form of cynicism as the aftermath of the Enlightenment. The modern cynic knows, but dissociates action from knowledge: '[a]cting against one's own better knowledge', Sloterdijk notes in 1984, 'is the global situation in the superstructure today. One knows oneself to be without illusions and yet dragged down by the "power of things"'.[49] This observation rings true for Ramsay: even though he passionately believes in the Ecosphere project, he finds himself unable to continue there, drawn back into E1 by the temptations of consumerism. He initially plans to return to E2 after a short celebration at the end of the first two years, but the food, drink, and sexual titillation offered to him when he emerges overcome his resolution. While he is fully aware of the unsustainability of his life on E1, Ramsay's zeal for reform subsides into what Sloterdijk calls the 'neo-cynical accommodation to the given'.[50] Although Sophia and Tobias are less ecologically knowledgeable than Ramsay, their decision to retreat from the burning manor also positions them as cynical spectators. For Sloterdijk, '[w]hoever speaks of cynicism draws attention to the limits of Enlightenment':[51] the recurrent figure of the cynic is therefore a significant component of these fictions' environmentalism, which acknowledges the limited power of enlightening ecological discourse. Ramsay's narration alternates between earnest explanations of the precise ecological interactions that influence carbon and nutrition cycles, and cynical judgements of humanity's impending self-destruction. As Sam Solnick points out in a study of irony as a literary approach to climate change, the 'crucial question [. . .] is whether this irony that enables plural perspectives engenders or morphs into a kind of pernicious detachment or disaffection'.[52] While that risk is clearly illustrated by these cynical characters, I suggest that this fiction enables a more complex form of irony.[53]

Bronislaw Szerszynski echoes Sloterdijk's theory of cynicism in his appraisal of post-ecological irony when he emphasises 'the disconnection between private belief and public behaviour that can occur in individuals, states, corporations and even environmental organisations'.[54] But Szerszynski

[49] Sloterdijk, 'Twilight', p. 193.
[50] Sloterdijk, 'Twilight', p. 194.
[51] Sloterdijk, 'Twilight', p. 196.
[52] Solnick, *Poetry and the Anthropocene*, p. 114.
[53] In 'Tearing Down the Greenhouse', Ramuglia suggests that irony as world-relation emerges from moments of unease in the visual regime of *The Terranauts* – such as Dawn's confrontation with the gaze of a pig she will slaughter. What I am interested in, however, is a more encompassing, epistemological form of irony that emerges from the novel's multi-scalar focalisation.
[54] Szerszynski, 'Post-Ecologist Condition', p. 342.

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makes the scale of observation a crucial component of such disconnections: the sense of environmental irony is, he points out, a form of situational irony which 'requires there to be an observer which can see the partial vision of the innocent protagonist, the wider dramatic picture and the awful tension between them'.[55] While he does not use the term, the issue is one of scale effects or scale-framing, an awareness derived from the ability to see several scales at once. The irony of Szerszynski's post-ecological consciousness is akin to what Clark refers to as the pervasive irony of climate change, which mocks 'the destructive complacencies of consumer democracy, trapped as it is in "the evident contradiction between late modern society's acknowledgement that radical and effective change is urgent and inescapable and its adamant resolve to sustain what is known to be unsustainable"'.[56] Szerszynski, however, contrasts corrective irony, which implies a position of superiority from which the world may be judged, with a more desirable irony as world-relation. This allows him to outline an alternative to environmental cynicism, arguing that it can be avoided thanks to 'a truly ironic world relation – an irony not just towards particular things but towards the world's totality, including oneself and one's irony'.[57]

The notion of irony as world-relation is highly relevant to the scalar irony I am interested in here because Szerszynski's concept combines situational irony with an epistemological refusal to hierarchise different perspectives, in a move which revives the valuation of irony carried out by Haraway in her 'Manifesto for Cyborgs' and her reflections on situated knowledge. Irony, in this line of thought, is a way of holding together contradictory views, 'contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically', a way of 'holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true'.[58] This is a crucial aspect of the multi-scalar poetics I have analysed in this chapter, which enable a de-hierarchised ironic position for the reader of the stories. In *The Terranauts*, for instance, the alternating focalisation contrasts the immersed, small-scale perspective of the participants with the broader picture provided by the rejected candidate Linda, who highlights all the discrepancies between the two worlds, including the controlled climate maintained inside E2 while summer is 'a long sweaty nightmare for me and the rest of us relegated to the air-conditioner-less Residences' (198). While the inside team believe that they are escaping the consumerist sins of

[55] Szerszynski, 'Post-Ecologist Condition', p. 342.
[56] Clark, 'Some Climate Change Ironies', p. 147. Clark is quoting Blühdorn, 'Sustaining the Unsustainable', p. 272.
[57] Szerszynski, 'Post-Ecologist Condition', p. 352. [58] Haraway, 'Manifesto', p. 190.

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modern life, Linda's bitter observations reframe the utopian experience as a scale-specific experiment which cannot be replicated on a planetary scale since it depends on the exploitation of volunteers such as herself, the exclusion of non-white candidates, the consumption of disproportionate energy resources, and large amounts of the plastic and fossil fuels that are banned from E2. But Linda's perspective is no less partial than the others', and the juxtaposition of her focalisation with Dawn's and Ramsay's opens up an ironic field where no position is superior to the others.

Szerszynski bases the idea of irony as world relation on D. C. Muecke's earlier concept of 'general irony', a form of situational irony where 'unlike conventional situational irony, there is no distanced observer, aloof from the folly and blindness they perceive being played out in front of them'.[59] If we recall Latour's distinction between the Global and the Terrestrial, it is clear that the Terrestrial perspective makes the position of 'conventional situational irony' untenable, since it denies the possibility of overarching observation. Both the green irony as world-relation imagined by Szerszynski and the Terrestrial view as defined by Latour are predicated on a suspicion of the distanced perspective. This position of aloof observation is precisely what is mocked by Boyle's panoptical setting, and by Atwood's and Smith's scale-bending apparitions. In 'Torching the Dusties', the elderly rich have retreated from the world to their secluded manor. Wilma and Tobias repeat this movement of retreat when they escape at night to the gazebo, but the farther they retreat into the dark, the less Wilma can see, until all she can make out is the detail of her gleeful 'Chuckies' dancing in the flames. In *Winter*, Sophia's wealthy retreat into her empty mansion is the result of a career in globalised trade, and of her complete lack of interest in the environmental poisoning her sister relentlessly denounces. In a stretch of reported speech that mixes their two voices and highlights their different perspectives, Sophia remembers the young Iris – whose voice appears in italics – making furious accusations about poisonings of all kinds, including 'seals found dead on beaches nowhere near here *with their eyes burned out by something, Soph, and weals and burns all over them, imagine,* and the weapons being made in factories, again nowhere near here' (138). In that passage, irony is enabled by the alternating voices carried by Sophia's narration and the erasure of markers of direct speech.

Although Iris's earnest diatribes fail to convert Sophia to a Terrestrial view, Sophia carries this ironic potential in her troubled focalisation,

[59] Szerszynski, 'Post-Ecologist Condition', p. 348. Szerszynski is referring to Muecke, *Compass*.

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a troubling which is materialised by her apparition. She embraces irony when she comes to accept and protect the green head/planet that accompanies her over Christmas, this nagging presence that conflates green growth, innocence, and vulnerability. In this conflicted character, who is inhabited by her sister's voice and carries an infant planet against her stomach, Smith constructs an ironic position that acknowledges the need for contradiction – a reluctant sister/mother position which recalls Burke's description of true irony as 'a sense of fundamental kinship with the enemy, as one *needs* him, is *indebted* to him, is not merely outside him as an observer but contains him *within*, being consubstantial with him'.[60] Like Wilma's impudent 'Chuckies' or Art's slab of earth, the infant planet troubles Sophia's distanced perspective, forcing her to engage in the ironic practice of 'holding incompatible things', and, I would add, incompatible *scales*, together.

These multi-scalar perspectives remind us that irony, to borrow Haraway's words again, can be both 'a rhetorical strategy and a political method'.[61] *Winter* in particular actualises the ecofeminist ploy of using irony as political method, through the scalar irony of its uncanny apparitions. The planet, as it is figured in the small floating head, enables the kind of ironic political rhetoric outlined by Catriona Sandilands in *The Good-Natured Feminist*, a rhetoric which 'highlights the substantive emptiness of the very term that is being produced in articulation' because it works with an awareness that all political terms represent temporary and partial perspectives.[62] Sandilands's analysis predates the appearance of the Anthropocene as an ecocritical concept, but her idea is very relevant to the scale poetics of the Anthropocene because certain key terms – such as planet and species – are indispensable ingredients of these poetics even though their content, as scholars such as Sylvia Wynter and Dipesh Chakrabarty have argued, is extremely problematic.[63] Smith's apparitions suggest that the concepts 'planet' and 'nature' are best represented ironically: the infant planet and the ghostly slab of earth construe those concepts as political sites that are substantively empty yet ethically necessary. The silence of the apparitions, and of the 'Chuckies' in Atwood's tale, can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, these visions are silent because they are firmly non-didactic, resisting the apocalyptic mode and the idea that environmental fiction should enlighten. On the other, their silence

[60] Burke, 'Four Master Tropes', p. 435. [61] Haraway, 'Manifesto', p. 190.
[62] Sandilands, *Good-Natured Feminist*, p. 105.
[63] See Chakrabarty, 'The Planet'; Wynter, 'Unsettling'.

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does of course signify, because these visions point to the ethical urgency and epistemic difficulty of rethinking the categories 'people', 'nature', and 'planet'. They signal that we live in a time where scale itself is out of joint – a time that confuses the planetary with the human, and chooses to remain short-sighted while the broader picture burns.

This resistance to the didactic mode participates in the kind of ironic practice that Nicole Seymour calls bad environmentalism. Seymour argues that irony, particularly the self-including type defended by Szerszynski, is a useful alternative to the discourse of crisis in an era of 'crisis fatigue', because thoroughgoing irony can be used 'for purposes other than imparting knowledge', for instance 'to help us reconsider the role that knowledge has been *assumed* to play in environmentalism'.[64] This form of activism is one perspective opened up by the final pages of *Winter*, where Art gives up the ownership of his blog, and Art in Nature becomes 'a co-written blog by a communal group of writers' (318). The environmental fantasies tweeted by Charlotte have not imparted any ecological knowledge to the reader – we are none the wiser about Canada warblers by the end of the novel – but they do trigger a collective dynamic, first in the pilgrimage of bird-watchers towards Cornwall and later in the form of the communal blog. Regardless of whether this is good or bad environmentalism, the momentum created is far greater than the modest number of followers attracted to Art's original blog. Alongside the earnest protest voiced by Iris, *Winter* thus makes space for less serious discourses, based on observations that range from the facetious to the outrageously false. As Seymour suggests, the 'antihierarchical bent' of irony makes it the possible basis for an environmental ethos which questions the necessity of deferring to science, and might even 'model a reality in which environmental action takes place *outside* knowledge'.[65] Through the idea of the communal blog, Smith shifts environmental agency away from the authority of experts or policymakers, towards a form of virtual commons whose discourse can bear multiplicity and contradiction.

I suggest then that scalar irony is a particularly productive mode for environmental fiction because it enables scalar reflexiveness for the reader *while encouraging a non-hierarchical position* which views each scale of perception and each scale-bound perspective as equally valid. This position is necessary to face the epistemic difficulties of the Anthropocene: Haraway's view of irony as 'holding incompatible things together' becomes a precious tool for what Chakrabarty calls 'having to think of human

[64] Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism*, pp. 230, 46. [65] Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism*, p. 46.

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agency over multiple and incommensurable scales at once'.[66] The de-hierarchising action of scalar irony is also ethically necessary because it opens a way to work forwards with the contradictory positions of, for instance, older and younger generations, climate change sceptics and environmental activists, or critics and defenders of technological solutions. Irony enables response-ability towards the other point of view and the different scale of analysis that it relies on. Crucially, Smith, Atwood, and Boyle choose to inscribe scalar irony in a comic framework rather than a tragic one: a framework that focuses on the agency of community and conflicted multiplicity rather than on the single hero's perspective. While Atwood and Boyle leave most of the ethical work of irony to their readers, Smith hints at some transformation in the trajectories followed by her characters, from isolationism and individualism towards the open house and the shared blog. Through this transformation, *Winter* embeds in its own narrative the ethical and epistemological shift enabled by all three stories: a shift that moves environmental narrative away from the mono-logical discourse of crisis, towards more conflicted, ironic, and politically enabling forms of awareness.

[66] Chakrabarty, 'Postcolonial Studies', p. 1.

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