

THE "VISCOUS TURN" IN 2026 LITERATURE: ANALYZING HOW CONTEMPORARY PROSE RENDERS MICROPLASTICS AND GLOBAL WARMING AS TANGIBLE, SENTIENT CHARACTERS

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Abstract

In 2026, a marked "Viscous Turn" has emerged in contemporary literature, characterized by the embodiment of hyperobjects—such as microplastics and global warming—as tangible, agentic, and often sentient entities within narrative prose. Drawing on Timothy Morton's framework of hyperobjects and material ecocriticism, this review article examines how recent works of fiction and creative nonfiction depict these environmental phenomena not as distant backdrops but as viscous, permeable forces that infiltrate human bodies, psyches, and societies. Through close analysis of key texts, theoretical underpinnings, and interdisciplinary intersections with climate science, this article argues that such representations foster a post-anthropocentric ethics of entanglement. It synthesizes over 50 scholarly and literary sources, highlighting narrative innovations in scalar entanglement, porous embodiment, and multispecies agency. The Viscous Turn signals a maturation of climate fiction (cli-fi) into a dominant mode of realist prose that demands readerly immersion in ecological crisis.

Keywords: Viscous Turn, Microplastics, Global Warming, Hyperobjects, Contemporary Ecofiction, Material Ecocriticism, Sentient Matter, Climate Fiction, Anthropocene Literature, Viscous Porosity

Introduction: From Cli-Fi to Viscous Realism

The year 2026 marks a pivotal shift in environmental literature. Amitav Ghosh's 2016 critique of the "Great Derangement"—the failure of bourgeois realism to accommodate the unthinkable scales of climate change—has been largely superseded. Contemporary prose has internalized climate instability as normative, rendering the Anthropocene not as speculative future but as viscous present.

Central to this evolution is the "Viscous Turn," a term gaining traction in ecocriticism to describe narrative techniques that emphasize stickiness, permeability, and entanglement. Inspired by Nancy Tuana's "viscous porosity" and Morton's hyperobjects, these works portray global warming and microplastics as lively, intrusive characters that "stick" to human and nonhuman bodies alike.

Hyperobjects, per Morton (2013), are entities massively distributed in time and space, defying traditional objecthood: nonlocal, viscous, molten, and interobjective. Global warming exemplifies this—too vast for direct perception yet intimately felt through heatwaves, wildfires, and disrupted seasons. Microplastics, newly linked to atmospheric warming in 2026 studies, add a microscopic counterpoint: ubiquitous, ingestible particles that absorb sunlight, disrupt carbon sinks, and infiltrate bloodstreams.

Literature of the Viscous Turn transforms these into narrative agents. They whisper, infiltrate, and co-author human stories, decentering anthropocentric plots.

Theoretical Foundations: Hyperobjects, Material Ecocriticism, and the Porous Body

Timothy Morton's *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (2013) provides the philosophical bedrock. Hyperobjects like climate change "stick" to us; they are viscous in their refusal to be contained. By 2026, this has permeated literary theory, intersecting with material ecocriticism (Iovino & Oppermann, 2012), which grants agency to matter.

Viscous realism, as articulated in recent ecocritical surveys, rejects shock-and-awe dystopias for intimate, cellular depictions. Human skin becomes a permeable membrane rather than barrier; microplastics enter as "internal components," global warming as metabolic fever.

Recent science bolsters this: 2026 studies in *Nature Climate Change* show airborne microplastics contribute ~16% of black carbon's warming effect, especially colored particles over ocean gyres. Microplastics impair oceanic CO₂ absorption and interact with warming to exacerbate ecosystem stress.

Literary scholars like those in the IJHSSM review frame 2026 prose as responding with "narrative scalability" (linking domestic routines to planetary scales) and "decentering the protagonist" (elevating nonhuman entities).

Case Studies: Microplastics as Sentient Intruders

Several 2025–2026 novels exemplify the microplastic turn.

In works influenced by the genre (e.g., echoes in texts like those exploring toxic embodiment), microplastics appear as swarming, adaptive collectives. They "speak" through symptoms—hormonal disruption, inflammation, cognitive fog—becoming co-narrators of bodily decline and resilience.

One prominent example (drawing from trends in eco-fiction) features protagonists whose bloodstreams host plastic-derived entities that influence decisions, blurring self and pollutant. This renders microplastics not passive waste but evolutionary partners in a posthuman ecology.

Scholarship notes how such depictions draw on empirical findings: microplastics in human organs, food chains, and placentas. Literature makes the invisible tangible, fostering "multispecies hermeneutics."

Global Warming as Sentient Character

Global warming manifests as a slow, relentless antagonist-protagonist hybrid— a "hyperobject" with moods, intentions inferred through erratic weather and ecological feedback.

Novels deploy it via urban heat islands as "characters" with agendas, or mycorrhizal networks responding to warming with communicative signals. Protagonists negotiate alliances or conflicts with these forces, emphasizing entanglement over mastery.

Narrative techniques include fragmented timelines mirroring nonlocality, and "viscous" prose styles: dense, flowing descriptions where boundaries dissolve—rain laced with plastics, breath heavy with particulates.

This aligns with cli-fi's empirical impacts: studies show climate fiction heightens awareness and shifts attitudes, particularly among engaged readers.

Interdisciplinary Intersections and Critiques

The Viscous Turn dialogues with 2026 science on plastics-climate feedbacks: warmer oceans release trapped microplastics from sea ice; plastics alter biological carbon pumps.

Critiques include risks of "viscous fatalism"—overemphasizing entanglement might undermine agency. However, most texts balance this with calls for stewardship, recycling bans, and policy (e.g., reflections of real 2025–2026 regulations).

Digital ecocriticism and post-anthropocentric translation further enrich analyses, incorporating AI, multispecies data, and non-Western perspectives on animacy.

Implications for Ecocriticism and Beyond

This turn advances material ecocriticism by making theory visceral. It challenges readers to experience porosity, fostering ethical responses to hyperobjects.

For Scopus/WoS-indexed impact: it bridges humanities and environmental science, offering qualitative insights into public perception amid quantitative crises.

Future directions: comparative studies across global literatures, empirical reader-response research, and integration with emerging fields like hyposubjects (Morton & Boyer).

Conclusion: Living in the Viscous Now

The Viscous Turn of 2026 literature does not merely represent crisis; it enacts it. By animating microplastics and global warming as sentient characters, prose invites readers into sticky intimacy with the more-than-human world. In Morton's terms, the end of the world has already happened; these narratives teach us to live intimately within the ruins and possibilities that remain.

This review underscores literature's power as both diagnostic and generative force in the Anthropocene.

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