

DeLillo talk [10 mins]

Don DeLillo is arguably the United States' most esteemed living writer. Born in 1936, DeLillo is known as America's premier poet of paranoia, a prognosticator of our ever increasingly mediated realities, and a prophet of historical violence, anticipating such events as 9/11 long before they came to pass. His work may be roughly divided in two, with a late period commencing around the turn of the millennium. It is to this late period that the one act play, 'The Word for Snow', belongs. First premiered in 2007 and latterly published in a limited print run in 2012, this minor work belongs to the minimalist phase of DeLillo's career. His earlier sprawling novels explored the nightmare of history as an interwoven structure of systems, political, psychological, technological. These system-novels culminated in 1997's *Underworld*, a work that encompasses much of the history of America in the second half of the twentieth century. Expansive, densely structured with allusions and references, *Underworld* constitutes the apogee of DeLillo's postmodern maximalism. The works that would follow – *Cosmopolis*, *The Body Artist*, *Falling Man*, *Point Omega*, among others – are all novella sized, constituting discrete interventions often focused on a particular phenomenon or theme (the global financial system on a single day, in *Cosmopolis*, the 9/11 attacks in *Falling Man*, or COVID-19 in the most recent text *The Silence*).

It is, however, perhaps too easy to draw a sharp line in the sand. There is much that connects the earlier and later phases of DeLillo's oeuvre. Most famous for the 1985 novel *White Noise*, DeLillo's status as a postmodern author is now canonical. *White Noise* addresses the hyperreality of the new media age, theorizing the extent to which we have been awed to stupefaction through collective spectacles of mass observation. "Every photograph reinforces the aura. Can you feel it, Jack? An accumulation of nameless energies." In the 1991 *Mao II*, the theme of mass spectacle is employed to conjure an ominous vision of the future. The narrator tells us that all around the world:

People dangle teabags over hot water in white cups. Cars run silently on the autobahns, streaks of painted light. People sit at desks and stare at office walls. They smell their shirts and drop them in the

hamper. People bind themselves into numbered seats and fly across time zones and high cirrus and deep night, knowing there is something they've forgotten to do. The future belongs to crowds.

There are perhaps few better descriptions of alienation, and not merely the Marxist kind. Something happens to the human being in a society of mass consumption, where extraordinary wealth coincides with a poverty of value. The crowd, an image of the massification of society, threatens our existence. Foreseeing the copy-pasted individuality of the social media age, DeLillo marshals the figure of the writer – and of writing itself – as a rearguard action. A character in *Mao II* notes: 'Beckett is the last writer to shape the way we think and see. After him, the major work involves midair explosions and crumbled buildings'. In the soon-to-be manifested age of terror, the writer's ability to shape consciousness is severely jeopardized. So what about the shaping of consciousness in the age of the Anthropocene?

The reference to Samuel Beckett allows us to explore how for DeLillo the white noise we experience is not only the media-poisoned hum of the hyperreal but also the tinnitus of existence itself, the sound made by the void that lies at the heart of being. And the concern with the existential burden of life unmoored from fixed centers is no less present in his later works. 'The Word for Snow' shares aspects of both DeLillo's modernist inheritance as well as aspects of the earlier works' postmodernism. The play revolves around the dramatic scenario of a pilgrim visiting an isolated scholar to pose questions about an imminent environmental collapse. Their dialogue is mediated by an interpreter who is reminiscent of Eric Packer's chief of theory in *Cosmopolis*. The cryptic dialogue similarly recalls DeLillo's epigrammatic postmodern style. We learn from the scholar. 'People are speaking in tongues'. The pilgrim replies: 'I didn't know this. Did I know this? You mean ordinary people, at their desks, in their offices'.

As words begin to fail and lines start to form at the supermarket, a radical Beckettian linguistic scepticism starts to emerge. Such a scepticism we may trace back to the French poet Stephane Mallarmé, and to the statement famously made in his 1897 'Crisis in Poetry'. Mallarme

writes: 'I say: a flower! And...there arises musically [...] the one absent from every bouquet'. This sense that language conjures through negation, that word and world and radically separable, is foundational to Beckett's art of what he calls the unword. In DeLillo's play, such a discrepancy or gap is less a hallmark of the breakdown of meaning and more a result of the breakdown of everything. What happens when the word for snow outlives the phenomenon of snow? What happens when the void of existence confronts the ghosts of extinction? And what happens when the modernist critique of referentiality is surpassed by the digitalized degradation of all of our representational systems? 'Are you saying a thousand familiar things will be reduced to words?', asks the Pilgrim. No, the interpreter clarifies: 'Elevated to words. Lost in words'.

DeLillo's writing suggests that any theory of the word is also a theory of us. 'We can measure the present', the Pilgrim says to try to reassure the others. 'Numbers, facts, date - the evidence is clear'. But the play ends in incantation, sound trumping sense, the logic of measuring perhaps itself shown to be yet another extractive process, a way of making the world conform to us. DeLillo's sense of the Anthropocene is one where the hyperreal is no longer an epistemological condition but an ontological one, where language replaces the real in a literal rather than metaphorical sense. But things are not only reduced to words, what does it mean to be elevated to words? Perhaps here we can sense a little hope; language not only obscures or replaces but fundamentally estranges. By alienating or estranging our vision of the outside DeLillo profoundly unsettles our vision of the inside. If the Anthropocene heralds a collapse of the distinction between the human and the non-human, perhaps our task is twofold: not only to humanise, to extend the human to the non-human but, with DeLillo, to show the non-human that resides at the heart of the human.