

A Conversation with Andrew Benjamin

Filippo Contesi

Originally published in: *HRC Treehouse (Blog of the Humanities Research Centre at the University of York)*, 2011.

It is, I think, fair to say that many of those who have decided to, or hope to, devote their academic lives to analytic philosophy view continental philosophers and their theoretical endeavours as a bit odd and difficult to decipher. I belong to this group of analytic philosophers, combining their attitude with the scepticism of a convert who has abandoned a continental background to move towards analytic philosophy. So it wasn't with the most sympathetic attitude that I joined the seminar recently organised under the auspices of the HRC, which took the form of a conversation between Andrew Benjamin, Derek Attridge and some of York's humanities postgraduate students. Andrew Benjamin is an Australian philosopher and critical theorist, currently at Monash University, who has written on, and been influenced by, among others, Heidegger, Adorno, Lyotard and Walter Benjamin. It hardly gets more continental than that; the chances of me following the conversation for very long were slim, I thought.

Perhaps I was right – or perhaps not. The thing is that I found myself following the conversation until the very end, taking part in it and even hoping it would last longer so I could ask more questions. Initially prompted by Derek Attridge's, and then by our questions, Benjamin situated his recent book *Of Jews and Animals* within his overarching research interests and projects. He did so in such a clear and engaging way that the conversation came out rather differently from what one would expect from reading some of his famous intellectual forefathers: Heidegger, Adorno, or Derrida. He started by explaining how his long-standing interest in the cultural figure of the Jew led him to investigate its relationships with the figure of the animal. Then, step by step, following a linear process of abstraction, he arrived at sketching his most comprehensive and ambitious project to date, which is to elaborate what he calls a 'metaphysics of particularity'. The aim of such a project is to explain the fact that we understand many concepts in terms of their relations to, as it were, neighbouring concepts (e.g., the concept of *self* in terms of its relation to *other*), by grounding them in a metaphysics that is fundamentally relational.

Perhaps I was wrong to be sceptical of the promise held by a conversation with a continental philosopher. Perhaps Andrew Benjamin is the exception that confirms the rule. Or perhaps it's just that I should listen and talk to continental philosophers a lot more than I read them. Be what it may, my prejudicial expectations failed to be fulfilled and, at least this once, I enjoyed being proven wrong!