

Stuttering the Discontents of Civilization

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In an interview¹ dated February 11th, and prompted by the release of her new film, *Us* (*Nous* in French)², the young French filmmaker Alice Diop, who also initiated what she calls a "Cinémathèque idéale des banlieues du monde", stated that making films had kept her from going mad. She doesn't say more on this point, but we can probably relate this public confidence (is it rather a form of interpellation?) to the fact that having started filming at the age of 25, in 2005, in the context of riots provoked in the Parisian suburbs by the electrocution of two young boys, Zyed and Bouna, who were trying to escape from the police, she collided head-on with the French national narrative and the "universalist solution" that supports it. If "going crazy" can also mean experiencing an otherness without possible dialectization, being an other without an assignable identity while being assigned to this non-identity, then "not going crazy", while having been able to become so, is a way of sending back to this "universalist solution" its own message in its inverted form.

In a text published in English in 1966 and entitled "The Decolonization of Myself", Octave Mannoni already remarked that "the universalist solution is so pleasant, it opens up such an imaginary paradise of justice and happiness, that it is not easy to criticize it"³, and that in trying to do so, one runs the risk, these days, of exposing oneself to the accusation of identitarianism - that is, in the current French political context, what the republican left considers to be a sort of madness... What justifies the use of this category of identitarianism is the anxiety of having to deal with the triumph of *idios* - "oneself as a king", as the historian of psychoanalysis Elisabeth Roudinesco puts it in her latest book⁴. To construct a position of enunciation while taking into account a particular trait (whether it be being Jewish or Muslim, being lesbian or trans, being black, etc.) would amount to sacralizing identity and thus threatening the coherence of the social whole - which supposes, at least implicitly, to conceive of the nation as a whole as tending towards homogeneity. The "identitarians" can thus be qualified as narcissists, but also as communitarians and separatists... However, what is cultivated in the mobilization of this category, among those who benefited until now from the "white man's privilege"⁵, is it not rather the uneasiness caused by the disavowal of the universalist solution by those who had to support it until now, to the point of not being able to breathe, or of running the risk of becoming mad, as Alice Diop indicates ?

This is notably for questioning this point of tension, rendered particularly acute right now by the current French presidential campaign, that the autonomous Collectif de Pantin, was constituted four years ago. It was created with the hopes of building an alternative cartography of the racial issues affecting French culture in which the concepts of psychoanalysis could be used as a compass to navigate critically through a complex national terrain. This implied at the same time a move away from the more or less obvious censorship produced by the French psychoanalytical institutions on the matter, and an attempt to connect with other critical traditions, less subjugated

¹ *Libération*, 11 February, 2022, "Alice Diop, peripheral visions".

² This is a free adaptation of a book on the suburbs written in the early 1980s by François Maspero, the great anti-colonialist publisher of the 1950s-1960s, who is also an author: *Les passagers du Roissy Express*, published in 1990.

³ O. Mannoni, « The decolonization of myself », *Race*, 1966 (republished in O. Mannoni, *Clés pour l'Imaginaire de l'autre scène*, Paris, Seuil, 1969, p. 296-297.)

⁴ E. Roudinesco, *Soi-même comme un roi. Essai sur les dérives identitaristes*, Paris, Seuil, 2021.

⁵ This expression, was used as early as 1964 by a Mannoni critical of the illusory neutrality that "began to appear disconcertingly, as a privilege of the white man and seemed to be a source of difficulties-almost a symptom of their refusal [that of white men] to understand certain aspects of the situation." O. Mannoni, *Le racisme revisité*, Paris, Denoël, 1984, p. 32.

by the abstract universalism inherited from the Enlightenment and concerned with thinking locally, starting from what our patients tell us. Indeed, this is why the constitution of this international group of decolonial psychoanalysis is quite encouraging, and I thank Andréa Guerra for having taken the initiative!

In the interview I have already quoted from, Alice Diop also questioned a phenomenon I wish to take up again, one which indirectly concerns the complex question of the superego, in its relations with civilization and its discontents: I want to talk about stuttering. The filmmaker herself makes metaphorical use of it. Noting that there were already films which dealt with exactly the same problems she wishes to tackle today – notably *Losing Ground*, by Kathleen Collins, a figure of the civil rights movement in the USA –, Diop wonders why these films have, in fact, remained inaccessible to wider audiences. The result is that "we are condemned to stutter all the time... We would be further along in the cinema if we didn't have to trample to find something that already exists. I wonder about the political meaning of this interrupted transmission." One could be tempted to trivialize this remark by underlining, not incorrectly, that the transmission of culture is never guaranteed nor integral, and that more or less each generation reinvents a little differently its cultural inheritance, often by ignoring the cultural baggage the preceding one had built. If I don't want to give in to this temptation of trivialization, it's because this remark also echoes the feeling of uneasiness regularly expressed by activists, but also by critical theorists of race, or by our patients. In the case of questioning race and racism, it is always necessary to repeat, as if it never really fits, as if we had to start from scratch each time, as if the "universalist solution" always masked and covered up the discontent in culture produced by the question of race. There is something here that is not metaphorical, and that we would be well advised, it seems to me, to take literally: stuttering discreetly inscribes and makes legible in language itself, the coordinates of a discontent in culture which also needs a history. Before coming to this point, starting from stuttering, I will first discuss the superego in relation to civilizational discontents as discussed not just by Freud but also by Lacan.

Stuttering

The very idea of such a discontent has its origin in the immense disappointment caused by the First World War (also a confrontation of imperialist powers for hegemony) for those like Freud, who had considered the work of civilization as a possible promise of peace. When he published his *Unbehagen in der Kultur* some fifteen years later, in 1930, he had given up on peace, but not on the notion of civilization - although he had reduced its scope to the fragile and precarious balancing of the drive forces under the pressure of the superego. Drive repression appears as the joint cause of discontent and civilization - which can also be read as follows: there is no Western culture without discontent, and there is no culture which does not confront those it civilizes with the possibility of a resurgence of violence, invalidating the sacrifice made for the triumph of culture over supposed savagery. The universalization of this Western cultural model can therefore act as a protection against this always latent anxiety, as a possibility to actively ignore the fragility of the operation on which it is based.

Surprisingly enough, this fragility can be highlighted by the modest phenomenon of stuttering. When the voice starts to stumble on syllables, repeating them an incalculable number of times, a double operation is at stake. On the one hand, speech loses its symbolic agency, since the resumption of the syllable separates from its meaning the word that cannot be said, so that speech replays its pulsional anchoring in the repetition, and even finds itself overwhelmed by pulsionality. On the other hand, the stuttering makes the function of the Other appear in its ambiguity, which is double: the Other is the place of invocation or address of the subject, which allows him or her to speak by supporting language as a shareable symbolic law, and yet the Other is at the same time the untraceable guarantor of this law, the senseless reverse of this imposition of meaning that language promotes. This ambiguity is very clearly materialized in stuttering: the meaning undone on the speaker's side in the repetition of syllables calls for an interpretative activity on the

interlocutor's side - the word left in suspense must be completed, the prevented meaning must be constructed. But this guessing exercise on the interlocutor's side can obviously lead to the production of another meaning than the one projected by the speaker, and this is the point of vacillation where the interlocutor finds his or her function of Other: there is no fixed and univocal meaning, there is no guarantee of language as a symbolic law in the language itself, any more than there is an outside or above (no Other of the Other). What stuttering lays bare, and which concerns every "speaking being" (*parlêtre*), is thus this founding mechanism situating the Other as the impossible place of the signifying gift, as the impossible place of the stabilized construction of meaning. Yet, and this is paradoxical, it is precisely this disappointed expectation - that the Other would speak without being able to speak "for real", to give meaning once and for all - that makes the interlocutor pass to the status of Other.

Stuttering thus symptomatically brings to light this vanishing point of the structure, which is precisely the one that Lacan situated in the seminar on *The object relation* as being the stump of the superego (*La relation d'objet* (1956-1957), Paris, Seuil, 1994, p. 175): "What the subject incorporates is (...) the object of need, not insofar as it is itself the gift, but insofar as it is the substitute for the defect of the gift." This Lacanian conception of the superego, rarely mobilized, brings out this ambiguous function of the Other, who gives what it cannot give in the form of a substitute that indicates what it makes up for⁶, a structural defect, therefore. There is a sort of trick here, since it is a question of producing a drive satisfaction by regression to the object of need in place of an expectation of a completely different order, an expectation of knowledge - herein we see that the Lacanian conception of the superego seeks to distance itself very early on from its Freudian meaning. In a certain way, stuttering seeks to produce a counter-trick: to replay repetitively, in the register of the pulsional, the attempt to obtain from the Other this signifying gift, in a rather specific form consisting in forcing the Other to ask. The signifying gift that there is not is inverted into a demand, and thus concealed as such. "Are you finally going to say what you have to say...?" : this is the position in which the stuttering voice traps the Other, forcing this question. Now, as early as his first seminar, *Freud's Technical Writings* (1953-1954), Lacan had emphasized not only that the superego is "nothing other than a linguistic function", which the seminar on *The Psychoses* (1955-1956) then made it possible to specify (thanks notably to the analysis of the voice that interpellates the subject in the auditory hallucination): it is the function of the "you", that of the second person.

Situating the superego

This apparent dialectic of gift and demand that stuttering sets up makes it possible to mask the fundamental dissymmetry which is in fact at stake here between the "I" and the "you". By disclaiming itself as "I", as the subject of enunciation, the stuttering voice makes the function of the "you" appear in hollow for what it really is, an attempt to fix the Other at a point of signification. The situation produced by the stuttering reveals the structural failure of this "hooking" from which "I" intends to operate on the Other: what returns from the Other thus interpellated in "you" cannot be anything other than a counter-interpellation, or a "counter-you", where the request turns into a threatening imperative - "Speak!" This imperative is all the more powerful in that it is without content, and sends the subject back to the dilemma brought to light by stuttering: to speak, but to say what? Compared to the stuttering speech, which never stops interrupting itself, the Super Ego imperative is itself structured by its interruption: it is precisely without meaning. It functions as a "You are..." which content in floating. This is what returns to the subject of enunciation from this killing "you" (*"un tu tuant?"*), that is to say, this "you" that is in fact not a person but a function, this

⁶ One will recognize here a paradoxical foundation of "Lacanian love"... which consists in particular in giving what one does not have to someone who does not want it. In this case, even if the subject does not know it, he cannot want a univocal and stabilized meaning: this would in fact prevent him from speaking, since it would cause the Other to fall in its function of Other as I have developed it, so that there would no longer be an Other to whom address oneself. On this subject, see Jean Allouch's book, *L'amour Lacan*, Paris, Epel, 2009.

Other that is a kind of "we" ("on" in French), as Lacan notes in *The Psychoses* on June 13, 1956. The a-significance of the "you" is precisely what makes the superego an irresistible organ of power, which makes the "I" available to any social pressure or interpellation. Seen from the (super ego) "you", this a-signifying function necessary to be able to situate the "I", the subject of the enunciation is no longer oneself except as another. The stuttering voice knows this in spite of itself in a particularly cruel way: each time it makes itself heard, the subject of enunciation and the subject of the "énoncé" are immediately put into conflict - there is a saying and a said whose disjunction is not veiled.

If the "you" is indeed considered by Lacan from his first seminar as "the speech itself", the commandment "of which only the root remains", to the point of becoming "something inexpressible at the limit"⁷, it is at once identified as the superego : with a discordant, inadmissible, un-integratable utterance, which acts as a blind and repetitive instance. At the end of the 1950s, Lacan moved towards a clarification dissolving the ambiguities of the Freudian conception by distinguishing, in *The Ethics* (June 29, 1960), the law from the internalization of the law that occurs only by means of forms of abolition of the subject - where one may well feel that one is going to go mad, as Alice Diop said in her interview. But before coming to that, he will have clarified how the internalized law that is the superego is the structural effect of the law itself misunderstood, by returning twice to the case of a Muslim patient (in "The Freudian Thing" and in *The Ego in Freudian Theory...*): the patient under analysis had developed a marked hostility towards Koranic law, which stipulates that thieves be punished by having their hands cut off. The patient's civil servant father had lost his job as a result of a theft charge - but had not had his hand cut off. The statement of traditional punishment, in its inadmissible horror for the son, has been separated from the rest of the law - this has the effect of preserving both the law and the father, but it is paid for with a symptom that somehow restores a possible meaning to this statement in the background, which is no less compelling for being unintegratable. It is the son who is affected by a tenacious writer's cramp, and who cannot use his hand to write; it is him therefore who takes it upon himself to locate somewhere (in his own body), in an attempt to neutralize it, this obscure and cruel part of the law which spared his father but which nevertheless continues to exist... I propose to consider the example of this Muslim patient as constituting precisely the other side of the famous Togolese patients about whom Lacan reported in *L'Envers de la psychanalyse* that they had exchanged their unconscious for the Oedipus of the colonizer, so that their childhood was retroactively lived in "our" family categories. If the Freudian scenario derived the superego from the decline of the Oedipus complex, making its imposition possible wherever the law of Western civilization was exercised, the Lacanian perspective of a superego thought to exist outside the Oedipal framework allows us to envisage it as the means by which elements that contest its hegemony persist within the Western cultural framework - after all, Lacan's Muslim patient is indeed lying on the couch in the rue de Lille, but what he testifies to through his symptom is his fidelity (painful, of course) to what the law supports which does not belong to the law. Could we go so far as to hypothesize that the process of internalization of the law, which is thus homogeneous to the superego, is inseparable from the production of a residue, which in 1970s Lacanian terms can be situated as belonging to a psychic economy articulated by the capitalist model such as can be envisaged from the Marxian critique of surplus value? Lacan produces by homonymy what he calls "*plus-de-jouir*": that is, what is produced by the law itself (the necessity of its internalization, which is never completely realized), but exceeds it (in its unconscious effects that lead the subject to enjoy "paradoxically" his symptoms), and which must nevertheless be recovered by the law in one way or another for it to retain its power?

Thus how can we understand Lacan's March 10, 1971 assertion in *On a Discourse that is not a semblance*: "The only thing I have never dealt with is the superego"⁸, when it is quite easy to realize

⁷ J. Lacan, *Les écrits techniques de Freud*, 10 March 1954 (Seuil, p. 119).

⁸ J. Lacan, *D'un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant*, 10 March 1971.

that the super ego is in fact present almost in every seminar, and since the beginning – even if often marginally. I see two possible ways of taking this into account. One possibility is that Lacan considers that the superego remains a Freudian concept which is not treatable in Lacanian terms, (although it was indeed in this same 1971 seminar that the paradoxical injunction of the superego – in elaboration since the seminar *Anguish*, the first approach to the *object a*⁹ and the properly Lacanian focusing on *jouissance* – was reaffirmed: "What the superego says is - *Jouis!*"¹⁰). The other possibility, which seems more interesting to me, consists in considering that what Lacan is saying here is in fact that there is something untreatable in the superego, and that this untreatable aspect has something to do with what he calls in his mature work "absolute knowledge" (1977), that is to say a knowledge that is "insofar as it is in the Real". For what characterizes absolute knowledge in his eyes, paradoxically, is "that it does not speak at all costs. It is silent if it wants to be silent"¹¹. This is precisely what the Real is in its difference from the symbolic: what can be silent, or what cannot speak and escape the regime of signification to locate knowledge elsewhere, in the order of the absolute. This becomes conceivable once the voice has been isolated as *object a*, in 1963, as such incorporated as the otherness of what is said, and has thus made the void that is the void of the Other resonate – that which refers precisely to the absence of the signifying gift which I have been speaking earlier. In other words, if the Real speaks, it is to tell the truth about what the Real is. It even says only that (that's what absolute knowledge is): not only that the Real is *jouissance*, but that the Real is an imperative of *jouissance* - "*Jouis!*", where the mark of the superego, which never ceases to cultivate the disjunction between knowledge and power, is recognized¹². At the same time as the Real states the imperative of *jouissance*, it does not necessarily speak (that's also what absolute knowledge is): the stammering voice calls for the speech of the Other, but above all makes its emptiness resound. The silence that is drawn is the other face of the superego, by its connection to the death instinct (one of whose Freudian characteristics is that it can operate silently).

It is the discordance proper to the Lacanian superego in its 1970s version that it disjoins power and knowledge. When it really (absolutely) knows, it doesn't necessarily speak. Correlated to this and indicating that the superego is the real support of the unconscious, the very locus of alienation to the Other which figures and twists the unconscious unfolds, when it wants to speak, it can't (the subject is always more or less stammering). Thus we could take up the *vel* of subjective alienation as Lacan considers it since the Cogito, rather from the superego, considered as the keystone of a discontent in civilization that I would dare call "Lacvanized": where you can speak, you don't know; where you know, you can't speak.

The disjunction between knowledge and power and the discontent in civilization

As we can see, Lacan is at this point able to give another scope to the paradox produced by Freud in his *Civilization and its Discontents*, and to the idea that the moral law, too heavy to bear

⁹ It was in the wake of the seminar on anguish that the only session of the seminar entitled "Les Noms du père" took place (unpublished; for a critical version, see https://www.linstancelacanie.com/_files/ugd/463098_9bbe10f5daf44ceb85247843138ec392.pdf)

The seminar was interrupted by Lacan's decision to leave the French Society of Psychoanalysis, which had decided to ratify the IPA's decision to exclude him from the list of didacticians. However, Lacan precisely develops the relationship between the object a, the voice and the superego: "The voice of the Other must be considered as an essential object. Every analyst will be called upon to give it its place and to follow its most diverse incarnations, both in the field of psychosis and, at the most extreme end of the normal, in the formation of the superego. By locating the source a of the superego, perhaps many things will become clearer."

¹⁰ J. Lacan, *D'un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant*, 16 juin 1971.

¹¹ Seminar of February 8, 1977, "L'insu que sait de l'ubévue s'aile a mourre". It is curious that Lacan seems to personalize the superego here, whereas he had already in 1958, in *The Formations of the Unconscious*, very clearly denounced expressions tending to make the superego a person. But he nevertheless made it a subject - and this is undoubtedly how we should understand things here: "It functions within the subject as one subject behaves in relation to another subject," for "a relation between subjects does not imply the existence of the person." (March 19, 1958, *Le Seuil*, p. 290).

¹² One does not know how to enjoy, but one cannot do otherwise than enjoy.

for the human being, is an evil made necessary by the death instinct and its silent but irresistible violence, which triumphs in the superego (as the study of melancholy has shown), so that the remedy participates in the illness. If the dead-end character of this moral law was exhibited in its radicality by Freud, the disjunction between knowledge and power brought out by the Lacanian conception of the superego through the mobilization of the concepts of *object a*, of the Real and of *jouissance* opens up another perspective for considering the specificity of discontent in Western culture.

In the entry "Imperialism" of *The Marx through Lacan Vocabulary*¹³ co-edited by David Pavon-Cuellar, Livio Boni highlighted the way Lacan distinguished two regimes of governmentality in history, from which we can draw (still rather roughly) the contours and the logic of modern imperialism, where we can see this disjunction and its consequences in culture¹⁴. On the one hand, we are dealing with the ancient form of Empire (*Emporium*), which corresponds to a political rationality inherited from ancient metaphysics, where the concern for the One as the cornerstone of the harmony of the world prevailed (there is no discontent here, then, but no Western civilization either: this form of the Empire existed in China, for example). Ideal knowledge takes the form of rational calculation, of which the principal actor, the ancient imperial figure embodied in the master, is also the guarantor of the sociopolitical order, since he himself is the ultimate point of harmonization between counting and authority. To put it simply, in this configuration, the one who has power is the one who knows how to count. But in this system, counting is not the same thing as accumulating. It is from this point of differentiation that we can consider, on the other hand, a form of Empire (*Imperium*) which will make possible an exercise of power of a capitalist type, one no longer based on a "simple" mode of slave production consisting of using the labor power of the defeated, but on a "complex", "indirect" or "modern" mode of production, also mobilizing slavery, but oriented by accumulation of wealth based on dispossession and inseparable from both colonial conquest and the establishment of unequal development. In this *Imperium*, it is no longer necessary to know in order to have power. To be in the position of the master (and this is a different "race" of master than that to which the ancient master belonged), it is enough to have accumulated, to have capital. If capital is indebted to a strict counting, starting from the surplus value that must be reintegrated into it, the logic from which it derives places the counting on the side of power and no longer on the side of knowledge. In this configuration, the master is not the one who knows but the one who can, and the one who can does not necessarily need to know, there are others who are there for that¹⁵. His function as master is thus modified: he can no longer sustain himself as the guarantor of harmony, or of the One, since he himself produces the disjunction from which he founds his power by separating knowledge and power.

In an address closing a colloquium of the Paris Freudian School in October 1967, Lacan prophesized about the segregating effects produced by this modern imperialist organization in this way - in a way that all the more anticipates the later prophecy about the "bright" future of racism¹⁶ since the two are fundamentally linked: "Men are entering a time that is called planetary, where they will be informed of what arises from the destruction of an old social order, which I will symbolize by the Empire as its shadow still loomed for a long time in a great civilization¹⁷, to be replaced by something quite different and which does not have the same meaning at all, the

¹³ *The Marx through Lacan Vocabulary: A Compass for Libidinal and Political Economies*, Routledge, 2022.

¹⁴ Lacan produces a twist in the use of the terms Emporium and Imperium, which allows him, in the seminar *D'un Autre à l'autre*, May 7, 1969, to inscribe the disjunction as an imprescriptible horizon: "The horizon of what is happening here - and this is the excuse for this public discourse, for this something that I continue despite the fact that it is in principle addressed only to psychoanalysts - is this, to which time bears witness by something that the wise do not want to see, which is already no longer a prodrome at all but a patent tearing, is that the discordance bursts between knowledge and power."

¹⁵ This is what Lacan makes visible in his theory of the four discourses by distinguishing the discourse of the master from that of the academic (whose horizon is the progress of science).

¹⁶ Last words of the seminar ... *On pire*, June 1972.

¹⁷ It is alluded here to the Chinese Civilization.

imperialisms, whose question is the following: how to make the human masses, confined to the same space, not only geographical, but on occasion, familial, remain separate¹⁸. In this respect, there is a "1967 moment", and even an "October 1967 moment": in parallel to the prediction stated here that "as far as our universe extends, we will have to deal, and always in a more pressing way, with segregation" which he identified in his "October 1967 Proposition"¹⁹. What is this universe which remains our own? The extension of which has been ensured by capitalist imperialism: "Our future of a common market will find its balance in an increasingly hard extension of the processes of segregation"²⁰. If the common is based on the market, that is to say on the principle of production of surplus value, then it only endures insofar as it makes it possible to pursue accumulation, that is to say the exercise of a power that implies the dispossession of "others" - to whom something remains, precisely the knowledge of this dispossession (in its very title, this is what *Subaltern studies* says - or stutters...).

The discontent in Western - that is to say imperialist - culture outlined here is more radical - undoubtedly also more desperate - than in its Freudian understanding: it is not simply a matter of renouncing the impulsive satisfactions that an individual agrees to make in the general (and largely hypothetical) interest of lowering the level of social tensions, or even to avoid the war of all against all. It is now a question of being able to think with Lacan not how we will (perhaps) avoid the Third World War, a radically destructive conflict, but rather what infernal circularity makes possible the more discreetly destructive culture of segregation - that is, in the perspective in which I situate myself, the properly Lacanian name for discontent in civilization. In order to last, imperialisms rely on the existence of an instance ensuring the disjunction between knowledge and power and its constant revival - the superego; and this disjunction, to which the superego feeds its own power, imposes *jouissance* as a means of silently enduring. Racism finds there its indissociably psychic and political function: *jouissance*, made necessary by the disjunction between knowledge and power that it also serves to mask, simultaneously feeds the process of a ramified segregation inscribing the political counterpart of this disjunction in racialized societies - I know very well that race does not exist, but I cannot do without it to assure myself of my place in imperialist culture, even if discontent is the price to pay for it...

To return finally to Alice Diop and her intuitive use of stuttering - which I have tried to describe in psychoanalytic terms - I would like to hazard a hypothesis that follows from the points just discussed. When racism imposes itself as a "cultural theme" that can no longer be avoided in public debates, then we can only stutter. Stuttering thus becomes the very symptom of discontent in Western culture, exposing in our language the particular historical anchorage which is its own: the disjunction between knowledge and power ensured by the superego within modern imperialisms.

¹⁸ J. Lacan, « Allocution sur les psychoses de l'enfant », in *Autres écrits*, Paris, Seuil, 2001, pp. 362-363.

¹⁹ This proposal consisted precisely in trying to prevent the psychoanalytical institution from reproducing the imperialist forms of power in its own functioning. A hindsight of more than fifty years should allow us to analyze quite precisely the reasons for its failure...

²⁰ J. Lacan, « Proposition d'octobre 1967 », *Autres écrits*, *op.cit.*, p. 257.