If, in an attempt to formulate the bases of a semiology of the theater, recourse
can be had to the Saussurian dichotomy of signifier/signified, it is nevertheless
inappropriate to assume that the theatrical sign can necessarily be made to
conform to this binary system. For the Saussurian construct, if applied to the
theater, fails to take account of a third element that is fundamental to the nature
of the stage—the referent—in other words, the extralinguistic reality that may
be visible during a performance.

Research in the semiotics of the theater is still in its infancy. Some critics,
among the few who have attempted to formulate an approach, have tried to
come to grips with the problem of the specificity of drama through a linear
analysis of the individual sign systems that compose a dramatic performance:
speech, voice, facial expression, gesture, movement, makeup, hairstyle, cos-
tume, properties, décor, lighting, sound effects, music.\(^1\) The advantage of a
classification like the latter is that it represents an endeavor to systematize
analysis of the units of a theatrical performance. Its drawback, though, is
equally plain: it results in a static analysis that in no way reflects the dynamic
specificity of the theatrical sign, the ways in which the various sign systems
work in a concrete situation and their interaction. To disregard the simultaneity
of, and the interplay between, the verbal and visual codes operating in unison
during a performance is tantamount to overlooking the mainspring of the
theatrical medium.

That there are, in a stage production, diverse visual and auditory sign
systems in simultaneous operation is self-evident, at least to the semiologist.
But it is no less evident that these sign systems do not, and indeed could not,
function autonomously, like a kind of semiotic Tower of Babel, unless the aim
of the dramatist is to convey or represent anarchy, disorder, madness, or
absurdity. There has to be some general system of focus, at any given point, to
channel perception, or else the spectator’s attention would be inclined to
wander. Clearly, the producer’s constant purpose must be to get across to his
audience. If he does not succeed in this respect, the audience will be liable to
get bored, drop off to sleep, or walk out. In all art forms the artist focuses our
attention in some way or other. In painting this is achieved through techniques of perspective, color, light, proportion; in photography and in film, through the use of close-ups and differential focusing; in fiction, through point of view. In the theater the same effect is brought about by varying the balance between the different sign systems as well as through the amplifying or temporary muting of a particular sign system. Thus, for example, during a lyrical passage (purple or otherwise), distracting movements or changes of lighting are likely to be avoided by the producer, to enable the audience to concentrate on the auditory rather than on the visual.² It is clear that an element in a production such as movement on stage can never be spontaneous or arbitrary—an actor can never be permitted to move according to whim. All movement on stage is necessarily organized and rigorously rehearsed. When an actor moves, the area of the stage to which he moves must be lit. Thus lighting and movement are very closely linked. Similar interdependence is manifest in other elements of stage production. Consequently, if there is a hierarchy of codes as they are perceived by the playgoer, a similar hierarchy is to be found on the other side of the proscenium (if there is one).

The system of focus that is apparent in the case of the codes of the theater can be compared to a similar system that is to be observed in a totally different domain—that of the advertising poster. Roland Barthes has shown, in a very stimulating essay on this subject, how the essentially ambiguous element—the picture—is anchored ("ancre") by the verbal caption.³ It would not do, of course, in a utilitarian sphere such as advertising, for there to be too great a degree of ambiguity, a feature that belongs more appropriately to the realm of aesthetics and nonutilitarian communication. The visual is probably intrinsically far more polysemous than the verbal, hence the necessity of the unambiguous focus provided by the verbal caption. In the theater, then, a system of focus is indispensable, given the simultaneous presence of the numerous sign systems that are in operation.

It follows, therefore, that sign systems in the theater are placed in a hierarchy and are subject to some mode of focus. The latter can take various forms. The most apparent is a series of signals in the text itself. The text, though, may not provide this information in an explicit way, and even where such a system is provided, the producer is always at liberty to modify, complement, undermine, or even supplant it totally, should he so wish. Within the text itself, however, signals can appear in the following ways: (1) verbal codes—nonauditory (stage directions) and auditory (spoken text); and (2) visual codes, such as costume, décor, properties, and so forth (can refer to any other code, verbal or visual). The most explicit systems are the two verbal codes that may contain reference to any other codes, including themselves. Thus, for example, the stage directions or even the dialogue may refer to décor, costume, or properties.⁴ But a visual code may also act as a system of focus or may itself be predominant.
There are many examples of this in contemporary French theater that immediately come to mind—space in Sartre’s *Huis clos*; movement in Ionesco’s *Les Chaises*; properties in Beckett’s *Oh les beaux jours*, and so on.\(^5\)

Having noted the existence of a hierarchy and a system of focus that govern the various sign systems, I should now like to explore further the nature of the theatrical sign. I referred earlier to the Saussurian dichotomy, signans/signatum. This binary system does not at all fit the case of the theater, since in a given performance three elements can be simultaneously present, namely, a signifier (e.g., “chair”),\(^6\) the signified (the concept or idea of chair), and the referent (the object itself, which in the case of my example would be the specific furniture item). This tripartite system has the advantage of avoiding the confusion in Saussure between concept and object.\(^7\)

The theater is one of the very few (if not the only) art forms in which one finds simultaneously present, in time and in space, these three elements. Clearly, the distinction between signified and referent is of the utmost importance in the theater, where things or persons referred to verbally can be visible on stage.

It follows that the referent can take one of at least three possible forms. It can be visible onstage (in the case of characters, costumes, décor, or properties); it can exist solely offstage (i.e., verbally); it can also be synecdochical, in the case, for example, where an item of the set is used to represent elements of the décor that are not made visible on stage. In producing Ionesco’s *Jacques*, I have used a doorframe (with a door) and a windowframe to suggest the whole of an interior. This is what is normally referred to as nonmimetic or stylized stage production. The same mode of visual synecdoche is to be observed in stage costume in which a single item of clothing can be used to evoke the whole—a bowler hat to suggest British dress, a beret to suggest French dress, and so on. It might be noted in passing that Jarry’s own idea of stage décor and of what should be visible was close to this concept of visual synecdoche. In an article published at the time of the first production of *Ubu roi*, he wrote: "toute partie du décor dont on aura un besoin spécial, fenêtre qu’on ouvre, porte qu’on enfonce, est un accessoire et peut être apportée comme une table ou un flambeau."\(^8\)

Furthermore, it is important to remember that any theatrical sign can represent another sign. It is in the nature of the theatrical sign to be infinitely versatile and unpredictable, often nonconventional. Hence, for example, a sound effect can depict space or décor. This is especially the case in radio plays where, for instance, the sidewalk can be represented by the sound of footsteps, an office by the sound of typewriters, and so on.\(^9\) It can also occur that in the same play a given sign has multiple functions. Hence, in the impressive *création collective* directed by Jacques Nichet at the Cartoucherie de Vincennes in Paris in the spring of 1977 entitled *La Jeune Lune*, the same object (i.e., referent)—a chair—changed its function many times, becoming alternately the
iron bars of a railing in front of a factory, a human character, a wall, and only occasionally resuming its normal existence as a chair.

We have just touched on the specific nature of the theatrical sign: it is essentially arbitrary (unmotivated), and the tripartite relationship of signifier/signified/referent is in no way contingent on some preestablished convention. The dramatist is a creator of signs; he may set up a network of semiotic relations that has been hitherto nonexistent. The theatrical sign is not necessarily fixed or constant at the beginning of a performance; it can have a varying function during a given play. Therein lies its specifically theatrical nature and its characteristically dynamic essence.

To illustrate these theoretical concepts, I have chosen for close analysis a play in which semiotic experimentation is especially significant—Jarry’s subversive text *Ubu roi*. This play is of particular interest for our purposes, since the dramatist systematically subverts the normal triad, signifier/signified/referent. The hierarchy of codes in this play is immediately apparent: the visual is subordinate to the verbal. The action supposedly takes play in Poland, that is, Nowhere, according to the author’s whimsical comments; and consequently the stage setting itself is straightaway relegated to a status of secondary importance. Furthermore, Jarry rejected realistic (mimetic) décor, which he considered aesthetically absurd: “L’écriteau apporté selon les changements de lieu évite le rappel périodique au non-esprit par le changement des décors matériels, que l’on perçoit surtout à l’instant de leur différence” (p. 407). In accordance with this conception, therefore, a verbal (written) sign replaces the visual code (the décor). The attenuating or omission of the visual thus automatically enhances the verbal. It will become clear that the emphasis in *Ubu roi* on distorted signifiers and the peculiar status accorded to the referent will together produce a fundamental transformation of the nature of the action expressed in such a verbal code.

Let us first consider the use of the signifiers in the play. The text begins with a most famous term whose signifier is distorted through the addition of a supplementary consonant—I refer, of course, to the ubiquitous word unleashed by Ubu, “MERDRE!” The latter, probably one of the best-known cues in the whole of French theater, has been the subject of a great deal of commentary and glosses, ranging from those who have emphasized the slang component of the ending, the playful tampering with lexis, or even Jarry’s alleged concern for propriety. However, it seems evident that a distorted signifier has the effect of drawing more attention to a word whose resulting phonetic and semantic importance is, in some way at least, enhanced. Lexical distortion is, of course, a device frequently used, for the same purpose, in advertising. Hence, in the present instance, the particular signifier, enlarged through the addition of a phoneme and consequently containing an extra syllable, extends beyond the span of its usual signified concept and acquires links with the semantic field of “phynance.” In this respect, the lexical variants “sabre à merdre,” “sabre à
phynance” become especially significant. Is the added [r] also, perhaps, the antisy of His Royal Highness, Ubu roi?

At any rate, if one proceeds to chart the occurrences in the text of “Merdre”—thirty-three in all—it becomes possible to establish a threefold link: “Merdre”/“Phynance”/“Physique,” in other words, feces/finance/penis. Furthermore, it rapidly becomes apparent from such a list that “Merdre,” antisy extraordinary, is the hub of the central semiotic system of the play. I shall return to this later.

Passing on now to a more complex aspect of the signifier, one finds that the text contains a large number of neologisms. Apart from a few terms relating to parts of the body, such as “gidouille” and “oneille,” the neologisms are virtually restricted to the idiolect of the protagonist and are liable to be used in reference to some form of concrete action. Thus “MERDRE” is the signal that triggers the assassination of King Venceslas; similarly, it is with a neologism, the “crochet à nobles,” that Ubu massacres the nobles. Accordingly, an implicit link is established between neology and violent action, the former in a sense subverting the status of the latter. This hypothesis is confirmed in the protagonist’s idiolect, in the case where a neological term is explicitly associated with the semantic context of “violent death,” “tuder” in this instance replacing the normal “tuer”: “Décervezlez, nuedez, coupez les oneilles, arrachez la finance et buvez jusqu’à la mort, c’est la vie des Salopins, c’est le bonheur du Maître des Finances.” (p. 389). Particularly significant in this respect is a complete list of all the terms in the protagonist’s idiolect that refer to weapons: “crochet à nobles,” “couteau à nobles,” “ciseau à oneilles,” “ciseau à merdre,” “croc à finances,” “croc à merdre,” “sabre à merdre,” “pistolet à phynances,” “bâton à physique.” These lexemes have two things in common: they are all neologisms, and they all follow an identical pattern—two substantives connected with the preposition à. These terms are also referents, that is, properties explicitly referred to in the verbal code (the spoken text) and visible on stage. That the series constitutes a semiotic system becomes clear when one realizes that the neologisms are contrasted with words in the same semantic category used by characters other than the protagonist. The other characters use the following terms: “épee” (Bougrelas’s), “épee” (given to Bougrelas by his Ancestor), “épee,” (Bordure’s), “fusil,” “pierre,” “revolver,” “couteau.” The contrast between the two series becomes even more apparent in a speech by Ubu to his soldiers: “J’ai à vous recommander de mettre dans les fusils autant de balles qu’ils en pourront tenir. . . . Quant à nous, nous nous tiendrons dans le moulin à vent et tirerons avec le pistolet à phynances par la fenêtre, en travers de la porte nous placerons le bâton à physique, et si quelqu’un essaie d’entrer, gare au croc à merdre!” (pp. 381–82). The protagonist thus distinguishes explicitly between the weapons he intends to use himself and those to be used by his men.

This contrastive lexical system merits further consideration. First, it is
obvious that each of the neologisms is a combination of a sign and an antisign. In other words, the second unit in a compound noun of the type *sabre à merdre* undermines semantically the whole of the neological expression. In regular usage in French, in the case of compound lexemes such as *verre à vin*, the second noun normally modifies the first, specifying its sense and function. Hence, *verre à vin* means the kind of glass used for wine, and the second noun follows the pattern that can be observed in such compound expressions as: *brosse à chaussures, brosse à dents, brosse à cheveux, boîte à bijoux, boîte aux lettres, boîte aux gants*; and so on. That is normal usage. In the idiolect of the protagonist of *Ubu*, on the other hand, neological compound substantives are used to subvert the normal transmission of sense and reference. The extra noun added by Ubu undermines meaning in the same way as the extra [r] in “MERDRE” lends that term a totally novel semantic dimension. In more complex cases, the compound lexical item has a variant. Hence, the following pairs: “ciseau à ongles”/“ciseau à merdre”; “croc à finances”/“croc à merdre.” Lexical items such as these thus become signs of signs, reflecting one another ad infinitum, since in each case of this type, the second unit contains a reference to another sign, which, in turn, contains a signified concept, a referent, and a connotation peculiar to the play. If one takes the analysis a step further, one finds that Jarry’s text embodies a system of focus, a system of lexical hierarchy, insofar as several lexemes refer to a network governed by two key lexemes: *finance* and *merdre*. One could possibly interpret the implicit linkage of the two terms like Michel Arrivé and postulate a new connotation of *finance* produced by the juxtaposition “une substance liquide analogue à la merdre.” Though that explanation makes some sense in the context, it is nevertheless important to remember that *finance* as used by Jarry embraces signified meanings that are normally distinct and incompatible. Thus the result of all this is a situation in which the regular signified and its referent are subverted and overshadowed by a connoted signified. In *Ubu roi*, accordingly, denotation yields to the realm of connotation and, in many instances, to peculiar connotations. Thus the sign often becomes the sign of another sign instead of a triad in accordance with the pattern of normal communication.

The process that is apparent in the case of lexis can also be observed in the action of Jarry’s play. It, too, is subverted insofar as it is contingent on a referential universe that is both irregular and unpredictable. In this strange universe it is the signifier that is the kingpin of the linguistic system. It is the signifier *MERDRE* that is the first word of the text; it is the same signifier that triggers the first concrete action of the play, the assassination of the king. Neological signifiers govern the realm of violence of the protagonist who is himself named with a comic reiteration of an identical vowel (y): *Ubu*. In many instances the signified (not to mention the referent) is subordinate if not altogether eliminated, as in this example of the protagonist’s invective: “Tiens!
Polognard, souillard, bâtard, hussard, tartare, calard, cafard, mouchard, savoyard, communard!” (p. 395).

In the lexical hall of mirrors that is Ubu, one consequently finds a dualist network consisting of the predominant pair, merdre/finance, the one being the variant of the other. If merdre in Jarry’s text seems to be semiotically or semantically ubiquitous, it is also the principal source of violence in the play. For if philology leads to crime, as Ionesco had it, Jarry’s merdre leads to massacre, since it can cause death, or as Ubu would put it, it can tu더. Merdre is the signal that cues the assassination of the king; it is also the substance ferried by the unmentionable brush. The reader will remember that in the banquet scene, Ubu brings the brush on stage, with the following result:

[Père Ubu tient un balai innommable à la main et le lance sur le festin.]
Mère Ubu: Miserable, que fais-tu?
Père Ubu: Goûtez un peu. [Plusieurs goûtent et tombent empoisonnés.]

[pp. 356-57]

The brush, of course, is the sceptre of the Maître des Finances, the sceptre of King Turd, the sign (or even, in a sense, the referent) of his royal status. If the brush is the referential emblem of King Ubu, his chandelier verte is no doubt its variant signifier. Moreover, the trapdoor through which Ubu dispatches the nobles might be intended to connote a convenience, since he flushes them away in his capacity as Maître des Finances.

In Ionesco’s Jacques ou la soumission, all is chat, in other words, the communication process reaches total collapse. Reality for Jacques and Roberte becomes utterly shapeless, since every object, every character has lost its individuality and thus its identity. In Jarry’s Ubu roi, in a similar way, “MERDRE” constitutes the sign of the assassination and the assassination of the sign.


2. Giraudoux, among others, was well aware of the difficulty of multichannel perception for theatrical audiences and felt that it was perhaps too much to expect. Hence his comments to that effect, in “Le Metteur en scène,” Littérature (Paris: Gallimard-Idées, 1967), pp. 220–21: “[The Frenchman] vient à la comédie pour écouter, et s’y fatigue si on l’oblige à voir. En fait, il croit à la parole et il ne croit pas au décor. Ou plutôt, il croit que les grands débats du cœur ne se réglement pas à coups de lumière et d’ombre, d’effondrements et de catastrophes, mais par la conversation. Le vrai coup de théâtre n’est pas pour lui la clameur de deux cents figurants, mais la nuance ironique, le subjonctif imparfait ou la litote qu’assume une phrase du héros ou de l’héroïne. Le combat, assassinat ou viol, que prétend représenter le théâtre russe sur la scène, est remplacé chez nous par une plaidoirie, dont les spectateurs ne sont pas les témoins passifs, mais les jurés. Pour le Français,
l'âme peut s'ouvrir de la façon la plus logique, comme un coffre-fort, par un mot; par le mot, et il réprouve la méthode du chalumeau et de l'effraction. . . . La compréhension du théâtre comme d'un gala humain, et non démoniaque, ne permet donc pas que l'attention passionnée portée par lui au texte soit troublée par des interventions trop distrayantes de la régie."


5. I have given fuller treatment to this problem in my forthcoming volume on the semiotics of drama, Théâtre et signification.


8. "De l'inutilité du théâtre au théâtre," in Alfred Jarry, Œuvres complètes (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1972), 1:407 (all subsequent pages references to Jarry's works are to volume 1 of this edition). In a letter to Lugné-Poe dated 8 January 1896, Jarry gives further indications as to how he wished Ubu to be staged, and another of his comments corresponds to a synecdochical conception of stage presentation: "Suppression des foules, lesquelles sont souvent mauvaises à la scène et gênent l'intelligence. Ainsi, un seul soldat dans la scène de la revue, un seul dans la bousculade où Ubu dit: 'Quel tas de gens, quelle fuite, etc.'" (p. 1043).


10. "Quant à l'action qui va commencer, elle se passe en Pologne, c'est-à-dire Nulle Part" (p. 401). See also the editor's comments in this edition, p. 1166.

