

Overcoming Mutual Estrangement?

An Art-Historical and Media-Archeological Approach to Comics

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Despite their relevance in art history, comics have been largely overlooked in the research field. This article builds on recent scholarship that has addressed their historical marginalization in the field by focusing on Jean Dytar's graphic novel *#J'Accuse...!* (2021). The graphic novel revisits the Dreyfus Affair, a pivotal event in nineteenth-century France that marked the rise of mass media by generating an unprecedented media coverage. Drawing from art history and media archaeology, the article explores how Dytar's narrative intertwines past and present to propose a graphic theory of media and examine the notion of "historical event."

Keywords: *Comics, art history, historical event, mass media culture, print culture, the Dreyfus Affair*

Introduction

In 2008, art historian Katherine Roeder published an article titled “Looking High and Low at Comic Art,” offering insights that remain relevant despite the ongoing dynamism of comic studies.¹ She recognized that comics have acquired legitimacy and represent a flourishing segment in the publishing markets of the United States, Europe, and Japan, and sought to understand art historians’ lack of interest in the medium. Roeder noted some exceptions, highlighting figures like art historian David Kunzle, who worked with Ernst Gombrich at the Warburg Institute, and cartoonist and comics critic Robert C. Harvey, who both used from the 1960s onwards art historical approaches to analyze comics.² Dan Nadel³ also contributed to this discourse, as did Scott Bukatman⁴ and Bart Beaty, who in his book *Comics versus Art* questioned why comics were excluded from art history despite their increased presence in the institutions that shape contemporary art practice (galleries, museums, etc.).⁵ Similarly, art historian Kim Munson recently analyzed the relationship between comics and museums.⁶ Roeder also mentioned several important museum exhibitions that contributed to the recognition of comics within art history, such as *Comics and Abstraction*, held at the Museum

of Modern Art in New York in 2007. However, this exhibition did not focus on comics *per se* but rather on visual artists who used the language of comics for their paintings and installations. In France, starting from the 1960s and 1970s, Claude Moliterni, Gérard Blanchard, and Pierre Couperie mobilized art history to establish an artistic canon for comics, seeking to legitimize the medium by distinguishing them from childhood production and connecting them to “high art.” Blanchard, in particular, aimed to provide comics with prestigious ancestors, tracing a genealogy anchored in Lascaux’s parietal art, the Trajan column, and the Bayeux tapestry.⁷ Couperie and Moliterni were the two specialists behind the pioneering *Bande dessinée et Figuration narrative* exhibition held at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris in 1967.⁸

Acknowledging these seminal yet infrequent efforts, English comics scholars Maggie Gray and Ian Horton, both trained as art historians, have recently published two volumes on comics and art history, filling a gap in current research and charting stimulating new directions. *Seeing Comics through Art History*⁹ brings together contributions from authors who employ art historical methodologies to analyze comics,

1 Katherine Roeder, “Looking High and Low at Comic Art,” *American Art* 22, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 2–9.

2 Robert C. Harvey, *The Art of Comic Book, An Aesthetic History* (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1994).

3 Dan Nadel, *Art Out of Time, Unknown Comics Visionaries, 1900–1969* (New York: Abrams, 2006).

4 Scott Bukatman, *The Poetics of Slumberland: Animated Spirits and the Animating Spirit* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2012); Scott Bukatman, *Hellboy’s World: Comics and Monsters on the Margins*, 1st ed. (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1989394>.

5 Bart Beaty, *Comics Versus Art* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), 2012.

6 Kim A. Munson, ed., *Comic Art in Museums* (Jackson: online edn., Mississippi Scholarship Online, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.14325/mississippi/9781496828118.001.0001>

7 Gérard Blanchard, *La Bande dessinée: Histoire des histoires en images de la préhistoire à nos jours* (Paris: Marabout, 1969).

8 Pierre Couperie & Claude Moliterni, ed., *Bande dessinée et Figuration narrative*, ex. cat. (Paris: Musée des Arts décoratifs, 1967). Interestingly, some scholars keep trying to find ancestors to comics, like Bruce Mutard, who boldly argues in a drawn essay that Giotto is the father of Western comics, following in the footsteps of David Carrier, who posited in *The Aesthetics of Comics* “that at the time of Giotto, all of the visual technology required for making comics was present”. Bruce Mutard, “From Giotto to Drnaso: The Common Well of Pictorial Schema in ‘High’ Art and ‘Low’ Comics,” in *Seeing Comics Through Art History*, ed. Maggie Gray & Ian Horton (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 269–288.

9 Maggie Gray & Ian Horton, ed., *Seeing Comics Through Art History* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).

while *Art History for Comics*¹⁰ explores how art historians have approached printed visual culture and comics since the twentieth century, outlining new perspectives for the study of comics through various case studies. Part of my goal in this article is to build upon their conclusions.

This article focuses on the historical graphic novel *#J'Accuse...!* (2021) by French author Jean Dytar (b. 1984), whose narratives draw upon his extensive expertise in art history, visual culture, and comics graphic economy. My objective is to analyze how Jean Dytar, through his narration of the Dreyfus Affair – a significant historical episode – explores the relationship between media, the construction of events, and public opinion across the past and present. In so doing, he uses graphic techniques to theorize his own comic practice and the way images operate, which is a particularly interesting aspect of his work. To analyze it, I will use a methodology that combines iconology, visual studies, media archeology, and comics studies. This hybrid approach is necessary to study this rich and complex graphic novel, which is itself part of an equally hybrid comics production. Since both media archeology and art history consider artifacts in their physicality,¹¹ they will allow me to address the materiality of Dytar's book, from its external presentation that reveals part of the narrative to its overall design and layout.

I will first analyze how Dytar reinterprets the media coverage of the Dreyfus Affair using an approach informed by media archeology. In the second section, I will focus on Dytar's attempt to

build a graphic theory on the notion of *historical event*. I will therefore address the role of media in shaping historical events, and more specifically the Dreyfus Affair, and its lasting impact over time. In the final section I will employ methodologies from art history and visual studies to examine how Dytar draws inspiration from existing visual sources related to the Dreyfus Affair, particularly nineteenth-century engravings and photographs, while elaborating on the functions and effects of these images.

Understanding the Media Coverage of the Dreyfus Affair Through Comics

The ambitious 312-page comic book *#J'Accuse...!* was released by the major comics publisher Delcourt in 2021. The story focuses on a well-known episode of French history, the Dreyfus Affair, which took place between 1894 and 1906. In 1894, Alfred Dreyfus, a brilliant Jewish captain, was accused of having sold French military intelligence to the Germans. This accusation arose in a climate of widespread suspicion and strong antisemitism following France's defeat against Germany in 1871. After many struggles, Dreyfus was eventually declared innocent and reinstated in the army, although not at his original rank. This event occurred during a paradigm shift in the press, whose economic and social influence grew to unprecedented levels at the end of the nineteenth century. Fueled by technological advancements, the press rapidly evolved from an artisanal model to mass media.¹² In January 1895, the anti-Dreyfus *Le Petit Journal* published

10 Maggie Gray & Ian Horton, eds., *Art History for Comics: Past, Present and Potential Futures* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023). The first part of the book traces the history of the relationships between art history and comics studies in a more extensive way than I can do here (11–53).

11 Arianna Esposito & Delphine Morana Burlot, eds., "Matières, matérialités, making," *Histoire de l'Art*, n. 93. Paris: Apahau, 2024.

12 Dean De La Motte & Jeannene Przyblyski, eds., *Making the News: Modernity & The Mass Press in Nineteenth-Century France* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999). On this subject, see also Dominique Kalifa, et al., eds., *La civilisation du journal. Histoire culturelle et littéraire de la presse française au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Nouveau Monde éditions, 2011). About the specific relationship between comics and the press, see Alexis Lévrier & Guillaume Pinson, *Presse et bande dessinée, une aventure sans fin* (Bruxelles: Les Impressions Nouvelles, 2021).

the emblematic image of Captain Dreyfus being expelled from the army, a reference point in Dytar's work.¹³ At the time, the journal had a circulation of around 2 million copies a day.¹⁴ The Dreyfus Affair was the first event to receive such extensive media coverage and to deeply divide society.¹⁵ Dytar's *#J'Accuse...!* can be described as a historian's comic. It is based on a writer-reader contract that commits to historical accuracy, drawing on primary visual and textual sources, secondary bibliography, and employing specific comics techniques to present the event as authentically as possible.¹⁶ Nevertheless, Dytar's *#J'Accuse...!* is not an academic historical study. Instead, he uses the creative tools of a comics author to narrate history, employing techniques such as anachronism or pastiche, for example, to establish correspondences draw parallels or highlight differences between past and present cultural practices.

The format of the book itself is unique: a black-and-white volume printed on thick recycled paper, packaged in a rigid cardboard box, which we will return to later. Rather than beginning *in medias res*, Dytar uses visual and literary threshold effects, echoing Gérard Genette's famous paratext theory.¹⁷ Upon opening the book, the reader is greeted by a series of introductory pages that mimic a computer screen. First, a desktop appears with a folder labeled "Jean Dytar". A manicule – a hand-shaped typographical symbol already in use in medieval manuscripts to draw attention – points to it,

like the cursor when hovering over a hypertext link on a computer. Inside the folder, the reader finds a sub-folder containing all of Dytar's books and opens the file *#J'Accuse...!*. At this point, the first page of the narrative appears: the front page of an online newspaper called "Hourra" (a reference to the search engine Yahoo). The reader is then prompted to "click" on an article, again guided by a manicule. This article introduces the beginnings of the Dreyfus affair, with Alfred Dreyfus's arrest recounted by his brother, Mathieu Dreyfus, in a pseudo-filmed interview. As the narrative progresses, the reader realizes the level of complexity of Dytar's approach, which requires a high level of attention and comics reading skills. To retrace the Dreyfus Affair, Dytar studied a substantial amount of written and visual materials of the time. He selected and incorporated newspaper articles, memoirs, trial reports, and correspondence without altering or adding a single word. Each page features an imitation of a URL bar at the top, indicating the source of the quoted text. Through this method, Dytar creates a polyphonic graphic narrative entirely composed of texts written by key actors of the Dreyfus Affair. The story is told through the perspective of first-hand witnesses, like Mathieu Dreyfus (who published his account in 1978), and through the media lens of the time.

Dytar further complicates his project by setting the nineteenth-century cultural and media production within the framework of twenty-first-century "new media," such as Internet and TV, using anachronisms. As a result, Émile Zola, author of the famous open letter *J'Accuse...!* (1989), which gave Dytar's book its title, is depicted strolling around Rome taking selfies and posting them on X/Twitter. Meanwhile, Mathieu Dreyfus sends text messages, experts discuss the Dreyfus Affair on talk-shows, and the politician Georges Clemenceau films himself for a YouTube video. These modern media elements are filtered through the visual culture and semiotic language of the end of the nineteenth century, drawing from press, phonograph, photography, print,

- 13 Jean Dytar, *#J'Accuse...!* (Paris: Delcourt, 2021), 31.
- 14 Christophe Charle, *Le siècle de la presse (1830–1939)* (Paris: Seuil, L'univers historique, 2004).
- 15 Philippe Oriol, *Histoire de l'affaire Dreyfus de 1894 à nos jours*, 2 vols (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2014).
- 16 Pascal Ory, "Historique ou historienne?" in *L'histoire... par la bande. Bande dessinée, Histoire et pédagogie*, Odette Mitterrand & Gilles Ciment, eds. (Paris: Syros, 1993), 93–96.
- 17 Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

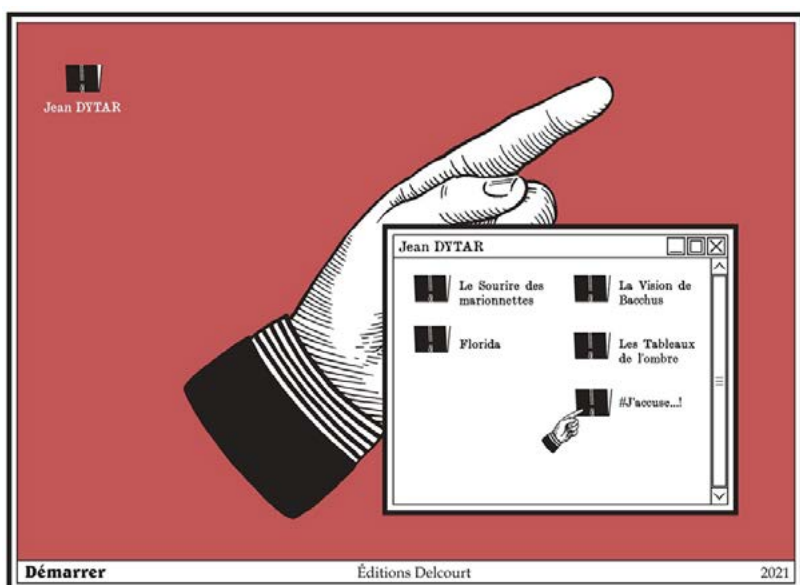
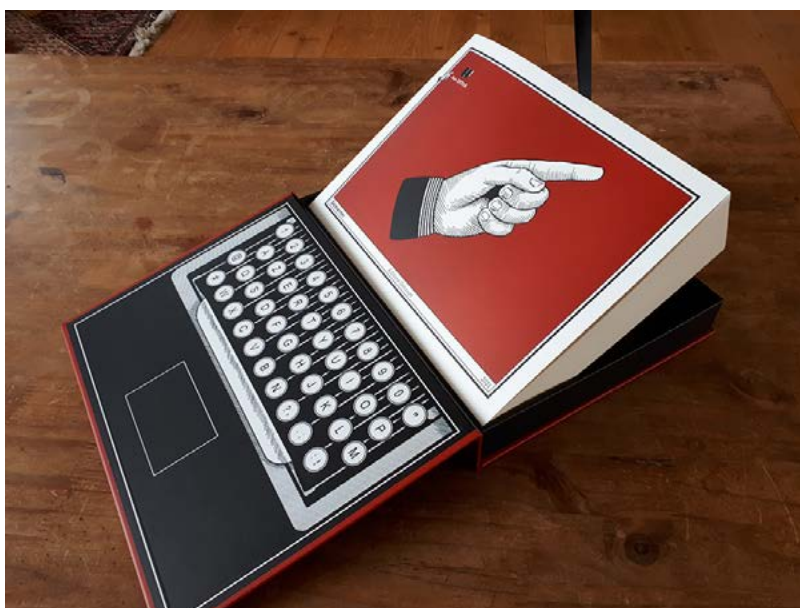


Image 1. Dytar, Jean. *#J'Accuse...!* Paris: Éditions Delcourt, coll. Mirages, 2021. Image source: Jean Dytar's personal website, all rights reserved. <https://www.jeandytar.com/jaccuse/genese-du-projet/>

Image 2. A page from Jean Dytar's book *#J'Accuse...!*. Paris: Éditions Delcourt, coll. Mirages, 2021, n. p. Image: Éditions Delcourt, 2021 – Dytar, all rights reserved.

and painting. Dytar adapts pictograms and standards of style used by the press of the time. For example, the YouTube sound icon is reimagined as a stylized phonograph, while Twitter/X's logo becomes an engraved nightingale singing on a branch. At the same time, all characters wear period-appropriate late nineteenth-century clothes and hairstyles, and the story unfolds in environments true to the era – train stations with locomotives, with typical bourgeois interiors, and streets filled with horse-drawn carriages. Even in the talk-show scenes, characters sit in Louis-Philippe style armchairs, a popular design

of the time. From this point of view, Dytar's comic is a creative illustration of what media archeology is, an approach intrinsically connected to visual studies and art history. Media critic Geert Lovink describes media archeology as “a hermeneutic reading of the ‘new’ against the grain of the past, rather than telling of the histories of technologies from past to present.”¹⁸ As a result, Dytar navigates both past and present

18 Geert Lovink, *My First Recession: Critical Internet Cultures in Transition* (Rotterdam: Nai Publishers, 2004), 11.



Image 3. A page from Jean Dytar's book *#J'Accuse...!*. Paris: Éditions Delcourt, coll. Mirages, 2021, 1. Image: Éditions Delcourt, 2021 – Dytar, all rights reserved.

media landscapes, reflecting on their uses and evolutions. Through this lens, the “new” contemporary modes of communication are viewed “against the grain” of past forms, while the older modes appear in their contextual and historical specificity. This interplay highlights the friction between the two eras, using the past to better understand the present.

In so doing, Dytar artistically embodies the aim of media archeology as articulated by Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka:

Identifying ways in which media culture relies on the already known is just as essential as determining how it embodies and promotes the never before seen. [...] The new is “dressed up” in formulas that may be hundreds of years

old, while the old provide “molds” for cultural innovations and reorientations.¹⁹

Dytar’s work effectively identifies these dynamics through his exploration of effects and possibilities of intermediality,²⁰ which encompasses “all the phenomenon occurring between media, at their crossing.” He specifically engages with one form of intermediality, the “media combination, which emphasizes the semiotic hybridization

19 Erkki Huhtamo & Jussi Parikka, *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications, and Implications* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 14.

20 Irina O. Rajewsky, “Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on Intermediality,” *Intermédialités/Intermediality* no. 6 (2005): 43–64, <https://doi.org/10.7202/1005505ar>



Image 4. A page from Jean Dytar's book *#J'Accuse...!* Paris: Éditions Delcourt, coll. Mirages, 2021, 205. Image: Éditions Delcourt, 2021 – Dytar, all rights reserved.

of at least two medial forms.”²¹ Dytar uses the language of comics to blend various media, such as television, Internet video platforms, the press, and social networks – all of which are regarded as means of expressing both individual and public opinion. This process adds depth to his creative reflection on media, as he transposes printed signs of the past into the modern medium of comics. By doing so, he uses the full range of comic-book techniques to “reactivate” historical words and images, notably through visual elements such as speech bubbles that quote texts published in the nineteenth century. In this

21 Elsa Caboche & Désirée Lorenz, ed., *La bande dessinée à la croisée des médias* (Tours, Rennes: Presses Universitaires François-Rabelais, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, Iconotextes, 2015), 9–10. Translated by the author.

way, Dytar traces the shared dynamics between textual, visual, and oral practices in public discourse. His work goes beyond a mere playful exercise, offering a graphic demonstration of how some features of public expression – and even some discourses – persist across time.

Moreover, Dytar’s reflection on media and history is evident in the materiality of his book. Like a media archeologist, he “rummages textual, visual, and auditory archives as collections of artifacts, emphasizing both the discursive and the material manifestations of culture.”²² This connection between discourse and materiality is another important characteristic of Dytar’s graphic novels, and an often-neglected aspect

22 Huhtamo & Parikka, *Media Archaeology*, 3.

in comics studies, as noted by comics scholar Ian Hague and historians Sylvain Lesage and Bounthavy Suvilay.²³ #*J'Accuse...!* is presented as a book enclosed in a cardboard box that blends the design of a typewriter keyboard with that of a computer pad. This tactile and visual experience has been carefully crafted by Dytar, in close collaboration with his publisher, Delcourt:

I had a book-computer-journal object in my mind from the start. For the paper, I wanted something similar to a newspaper in color and texture – although newspapers have a finer, smoother paper than the one we finally chose. The paper had to be thick enough to withstand full patches of black without transparency. Once we had decided on the number of pages and paper, Delcourt's fabrication department produced two mock-ups of the box set, with variations, as well as a bound book in blank pages. This allowed us to validate our choices by handling the object. I wanted it to be warm in its material form and typography, in contrast to the hybrid dimension of a digital interface. [...] As much as possible, I like to go to the printer to validate the colorimetric settings. I am also involved in the graphic layout, in dialogue with the graphic designers at Trait pour trait, the structure working for Delcourt.²⁴

This meticulous presentation shows Dytar's interest in both the materiality of printed paper and the virtuality of digital communication

practices.²⁵ His narrative offers a compelling method of visualizing contemporary history, by intertwining the past with the present and vice versa. In so doing, Dytar engages with what historian François Hartog has called “regimes of historicity”;²⁶ crafting a narrative where the past and present continuously inform each other. In his book, Dytar incorporates a wide range of subjective filters, merging multiple viewpoints to build his story – though notably excluding Alfred Dreyfus's own perspective, which is shaped through the opinions of others.²⁷ Through this approach, Dytar examines the relation between truth and narrative at the core of the Dreyfus Affair, where French justice and public opinion were deeply influenced by antisemitic prejudice, and allows for a reflection on how today's authors and historians can produce narratives as close as possible to historical “truth” or plausibility.

23 Ian Hague, *Comics and the Senses: A Multisensory Approach to Comics and Graphic Novels* (London: Routledge, 2014); Bounthavy Suvilay & Sylvain Lesage, “Introduction thématique: pour un tournant matériel des études sur la bande dessinée,” *Comicalités*, online, 2019. <http://journals.openedition.org/comicalites/3692>

24 Emails exchanged in March 2024. Translated by the author.

25 Dytar and Delcourt also added a layer to this work on virtuality and materiality: Delcourt developed an augmented reality app that the reader could download and use on Dytar's book. Readers can therefore hover their phone over certain pages of the book (indicated by a typographical motif) and access the digitized version of the original article or book quoted by Dytar. For example, scanning the excerpt from Zola's article *J'accuse...!* in Dytar's story sends readers to the original article digitized by the Bibliothèque nationale de France on its Gallica website. Thus, this app makes the most of the extensive documentation work carried out by the author and extends the hybridization of this “book-computer-journal.”

26 François Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time*, trans. Saskia Brown (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

27 Alfred Dreyfus was a discreet man. Philippe Oriol, historian specialized in the Dreyfus Affair, has edited his personal writings: Dreyfus, Alfred, *Carnets, 1899–1907 (Après le procès de Rennes)*. Critical edition by Philippe Oriol. Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1998. Dreyfus also exchanged dozens of passionate letters with his wife, Lucie Dreyfus, published as well: Alfred and Lucie Dreyfus, *Écris-moi souvent, écris-moi longuement... : correspondance de l'île du Diable*. Edition by Vincent Duclert, foreword by Michelle Perrot (Paris: Mille et une nuits, 2005).

Building a Graphic Theory of the Historical Event

All the subjectivities patchworked in Dytar's narrative weave together the "monster event" that was the Dreyfus Affair, a notion described by historian Pierre Nora in his seminal article *L'événement monstre*. Nora has shown that "the mass media now have a monopoly on history [...]. In our contemporary societies, it is through them and them alone that the event strikes us. [They are] the very condition of [history's] existence," because "for there to be an event, it must be known".²⁸ Even though this article was written in 1972 and was inspired by the May 1968 events in France, it is more relevant than ever: media shape our sense of history, both as a process that turns the present into a moment whose importance endures once passed, and as a narrative of the past whose surviving sources bear witness to. Nora had foreseen how social networks act as a sounding board, supposedly connecting people and facilitating communications, but also amplifying emotions and entrenching moral and political positions. Dytar demonstrates how this phenomenon was already present with the rise of the new mass media regime of the late nineteenth century, as well as the widespread antisemitic discourse that remains active today.

Through his depiction of the Affair, Dytar develops a diachronic graphic theory of media and the "event," seeing it as a mediatic lens that shapes our perception of reality and the contours of society. In so doing, he follows in the footsteps of media theorist Marshall McLuhan, who asserted that "the medium is the message": while a medium conveys a message, the frame of the medium itself also carries a discourse, with each medium having unique effects on its audience.²⁹

28 Pierre Nora, "L'événement monstre," *Communications*, n. 18, 1972, 162–172, here 162. Translated by the author.

29 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 7.

Information is not received in the same way across different media. Furthermore, McLuhan argues that the *content* of any medium is always another medium. As we have seen, Dytar combines (audio)visual media and discourses of the nineteenth and the twenty-first centuries, hybridizing them graphically through the comics form and its codes. Consequently, the author creates a new media ecosystem that is both content and message, using a visual language that also reflects on his own drawing practice and on the possibilities of comics as an ontologically polymorphic and intermedial language capable of expressing its own theory. Therefore, three levels of discourse operate in Dytar's narrative: one at the diegetic level (the story of Alfred Dreyfus), and two at the metadiegetic level, framing the diegesis (both the implicit discourses about media and public opinion, and about the language of comics itself). As a result, Dytar uses a specific popular medium to reflect on mass media in general. McLuhan, along with comics theorists like Thierry Groensteen and Thierry Smolderen³⁰ included comics in the modern media ecosystem that shapes our sense of reality and belonging. Dytar's book is an expression of this analysis: he participates in this ecosystem but simultaneously distances himself from it to better understand its characteristics, influence, and evolutions.

Building On the Past: Drawing from Visual Sources of a Historical Event

Dytar's approach to visual sources plays a significant role in his reflection on media, time, and intermediality. The sheer number of images he

30 Thierry Groensteen, *Système de la bande dessinée* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1999); Thierry Groensteen, *La bande dessinée en France à la Belle Époque, 1880–1914* (Bruxelles: Les Impressions Nouvelles, 2022); Thierry Smolderen, *Origins of Comics: From William Hogarth to Winsor McCay*, trans. Bart Beaty & Nick Nguyen (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2014).

referenced made sourcing each one individually a difficult task, as he did with his written material. On his personal website, he explains that he employed various “modes of appropriation [of images], from copying to free inspiration, from transcribing photographic or video images into ink hatchings, sometimes with preparatory phases of photomontages mixing past and contemporary images, and finally interpreted with an ink drawing.”³¹ These modes of appropriation include: the *Oubapian* constraints of using only black and white, translating forms and shadows into hatchings, and dividing pages into four equal panels.³² For example, the page depicting Dreyfus’s trial in Rennes is a montage of four photographs taken before the trial,³³ which have been redrawn, reframed, and sometimes altered in perspective to enrich the narrative’s spatial composition, harmonizing differences of colors, light, and grain through Dytar’s drawing process.³⁴ This process reflects his view of visual sources as time machines, and as such

as a framework for expressing and reflecting on time and history, transforming these images into “semiophores,” as defined by Krzysztof Pomian³⁵ A philosopher and historian, and a specialist of museum history, Pomian developed the notion of semiophores to analyze the act of collecting artworks in the modern era. According to his conceptualization, the collector’s activity is a semantic operation: by collecting an object, the collector imbues it with a new meaning, turning it into a signifier and a visual representative of the past, removed from its original context and functions. Furthermore, by adding the object to a collection, the collector also transforms the latter into a meaningful structure. In assembling images, Dytar similarly adds new meanings to images (and texts) by transforming them into semiophores – visual markers of history. The notion of semiophore can also be applied to less obvious features, such as the colors in the comic book’s narrative: Dytar’s choice of black and white – the (non-)colors of the printed press and many period photographs – also serves as a signal of the past. By structuring his narrative around this palette, he adds a historical depth and meaning that would not have been achieved without referencing original photographs. This process of color semantization can also be seen in other history comics with aims similar to Dytar’s, such as *Révolution* by Florent Grouazel and Younn Locard (Actes Sud, 2019), which focuses on the French Revolution of 1789. The authors of *Révolution* deliberately avoided the “blue-white-red” color code associated with the French flag – a color palette consubstantial to the imaginary of the Revolution and potentially expected by the readers as a specific historical signal or filter — to create a fresh narrative of these events.³⁶

31 <https://www.jeandytar.com/jaccuse/sources-les-images/> Translated by the author. This website explains the creative process and comments on specific aspects of the books (sometimes in an approach akin to ekphrasis) and is thus conceived as an extension of the author’s work.

32 The OuBaPo (“Ouvroir de bande dessinée potentielle”) is the equivalent of the OuLiPo (“Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle”), a literary movement founded in 1960 by poet Raymond Queneau and chemist and mathematician François Le Lionnais. Queneau defined Oulipians as “rats who have to build the labyrinth from which they propose to escape,” practicing writing under constraint with the aim of finding new forms of expression. Dytar does not belong to the OuBaPo nor to the OuLiPo but sometimes uses their modes of writing.

33 Most of them can be found on the website of the Musée d’Art et d’Histoire du Judaïsme in Paris, for example this photograph that Dytar used, representing militaries turning their back to Dreyfus on his way to his trial: <https://www.mahj.org/fr/decouvrir-collections-betsalel/la-haie-du-deshonneur-alfred-dreyfus-sortant-du-tribunal-4639>

34 In some ways, his graphic process is similar to David Vandermeulen’s on the graphic novel Fritz Haber, studied by Adrien Genoudet, *Dessiner l’histoire. Pour une histoire visuelle*, foreword by Pascal Ory (Paris: Éditions Le Manuscrit, Graphein, 2015), 123–140.

35 Krzysztof Pomian, *Collectors and Curiosities: Paris and Venice, 1500–1800*, trans. Elizabeth Wiles-Portier (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990.) I thank Laurent Gerbier for bringing this concept to my attention.

36 Color-code, for instance, widely used during the celebrations of the Bicentenary of the Revolution in 1989.

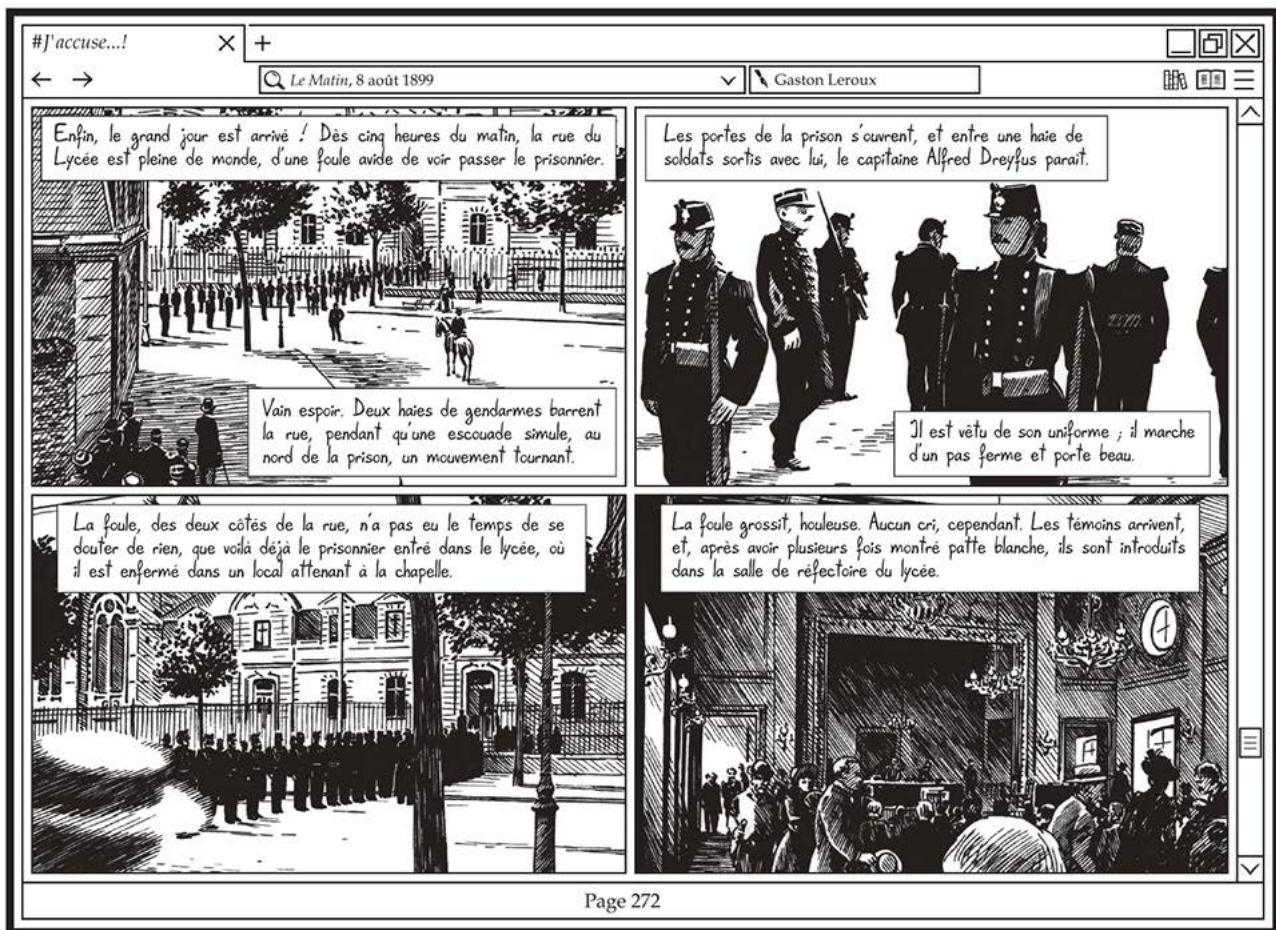


Image 5. A page from Jean Dytar's book *#J'Accuse...!*. Paris: Éditions Delcourt, coll. Mirages, 2021, 272. Image: Éditions Delcourt, 2021 – Dytar, all rights reserved.

Dytar also seeks to restore the original emotional intensity of the images produced during the Dreyfus Affair, an intensity diminished over time as the cultural context faded. Through the process of collecting and graphically reworking these images, he resemantizes them. For instance, he does so in the panels depicting Dreyfus's expulsion from the army – a deeply distressing ordeal for Dreyfus.³⁷ Throughout the story, Dytar consistently portrays Dreyfus with a fixed, almost anesthetized expression, conveying emotional restraint and the crushing weight of events. This approach recalls art historian Aby Warburg's concept of *pathosformel*, where medial transmission reactivates historical postures of

the body, transforming affective energy – e.g., emotional restraint and fixity are transformed into expressions of horror. Warburg's theory is particularly apt here: as Giovanni Careri notes, for Warburg "Pathosformel is the shaping of an existential situation that measures up to the limits of the human condition as conceived in the West. It presents the artistic, textual, or performative figuration of an *ordeal*, and proposes a way of understanding 'destiny', which the Greeks called *pathei matos*: a kind of mourning process extended to the intelligibility of the world."³⁸ The reference to the pathosformel as presented by

37 Dytar, *#J'Accuse...!*, 28–29.

38 Giovanni Careri, "Aby Warburg: Rituel, *Pathosformel* et Forme Intermédiaire," *L'Homme*, no. 165 (2003): 41–76, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25157044>



Image 6. Nineteenth-century photographs used by Jean Dytar. Image: Jean Dytar's personal website, all rights reserved. <https://www.jeandytar.com/jaccuse/sources-les-images/>

Warburg in his *Atlas Mnemosyne* resonates in Dytar's development of a detailed repertoire of gestures, not only as expressions of emotions but also of spoken discourses. Dytar's characters are constantly depicted in dialogue or engaging the reader-viewer, creating several key body patterns animated by micro-variations within the repetition.³⁹

Analyzing Dytar's drawing process from sources, it is important to note that unlike most of his fellow authors, Dytar's overall ambition has not

been to develop a distinctive style that readers or even collectors (as the comics art market continues to expand) could identify as easily as, say, Hergé or Enki Bilal.⁴⁰ It seems relevant to quote him extensively on this subject:

I am often told of the "chameleon" aspect of my work, of the metamorphosis, the "reinvention" from one book to the next. Also, sometimes, I am called modest, because I put my own style second to the graphic styles I choose to interact with. As if style equals ego. On the contrary, I sometimes find myself presumptuous at the idea of daring to rub my comics language with graphic forms that I admire so much, such

39 For an exploration of how Warburg's approaches in *Atlas Mnemosyne* can be applied to understanding comics, see Ahmed 2023. Maaheen Ahmed is one of the few scholars to use methods and references of art history in her academic work; see *Monstruous Imaginaries: The Legacy of Romanticism in Comics* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi), 2020.

40 Jacques Dürrenmatt & Benoît Berthou, eds., *Style(s) de (la) bande dessinée* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, Perspectives Comparatistes, no. 84, 2019).

as Persian miniatures or Italian Renaissance painting, or at the idea of venturing into certain major subjects... I think there is a kind of masks game at play, which would make an identifiable style elusive [...]. And yet I have noticed that my books do have continuities which could constitute a style, and that readers seem to identify them. It must lie in the rhythm of my cutting, my narration, in the framing or gestures, but above all, I think, in a certain approach to creation, in the articulation between graphic and narrative choices, the choice of subject, the historical context I place my subjects in, the way I delve into and digest documentation. In short, for me, it would be the overall approach, its coherence perhaps, that would be like a signature. It is worth noting that the only graphic element common to all my books, apart from my signature, is my typography (a digitized handwriting). [...] I sometimes feel like I am playing with the weapons of pastiche, but not so much to make people laugh as for the reflexive depth elicited by the game with reference.⁴¹

Another aspect completes Dytar's own description of his style (in choice and approach of subject, handling of historical documentation, and sequential rhythm): his deep ties with art history. This connection is evident in *Le sourire des marionnettes* (Delcourt, 2009), his first comic book, which draws from Persian medieval miniatures and addresses medieval Islam not as an exotic background but as a subject of its own right – a choice rare enough to merit attention.⁴² It is also present in *La Vision de Bacchus* (Delcourt, 2014), centred on the life and oeuvre of Antonello da Messina in Renaissance Italy, and

Florida (Delcourt, 2018), inspired by the drawings and maps made during the first French settlers' expedition to America's east coast in 1642.

Dytar's perspective on visual productions, from printed materials to paintings, stylistic trends, and cultural contexts, forms the foundation of his stories, both in terms of subjects and graphic approach. His books reflect on the status of images through his appropriation of visual resources, in a graphic process the comics scholar Thierry Smolderen calls polygraphy, which "compound[s] different systems of representation."⁴³ This concept is particularly appropriate for analyzing the case of *#J'Accuse...!* since polygraphy is a practice that "embrace[s] the whole spectrum of line-drawing illustrations; it drew on all graphic sources, old and new."⁴⁴ As Maaheen Ahmed and Benoît Crucifix observe, "Polygraphy is in many ways the life force of comics since it allows the medium to reinvigorate its visual vocabulary by reconfiguring other forms of representation in a playful manner that comics excel at."⁴⁵ Among many comics authors, Jean Dytar stands out as a dedicated practitioner of polygraphy, even making it the core of his work.

As a result, Dytar also builds a graphic theory on the functions and effects of the visual on our perceptual frameworks. Art and literature historian W. J. T. Mitchell, a founding figure of visual studies in the United States, has examined this process in his book *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*.⁴⁶ Mitchell's aim was to understand the ontology and effects of images (what they are and what they do), and to examine the relationship between the visual and the verbal in a society dominated by images, where the "visual turn" or "iconic turn"

41 Comments exchanged by email in March 2024. Translated by the author.

42 On the topic, see *Le sourire des marionnettes*; Maboux, Carole, "Être djinn à la place du calife: l'Islam médiéval en bande dessinée. L'exemple du *Sourire des Marionnettes* de Jean Dytar" in *Le Moyen Âge en bande dessinée*, ed. Tristan Martin (Paris: Karthala, 2016), 275–299.

43 Smolderen, *Origins of Comics*, 67.

44 Ibid. 98.

45 Ahmed & Crucifix, *Comics Memory*, 6.

46 Mitchell, W. J. T., *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 35–82.

has prevailed.⁴⁷ He elaborated the concepts of *metapicture* and *hypericon* to describe self-referential images – pictures that refer to and contemplate their own condition of existence.⁴⁸ To illustrate his elaboration, Mitchell uses ambiguous or “bistable” images, like the famous duck-rabbit, an engraving published in the satirical journal *Fliegende Blätter* (1892),⁴⁹ and the illustration “My wife and my mother-in-law” by W. E. Hill (1915).⁵⁰ These are twofold images, both of which are difficult to interpret and resistant to single readings. For Mitchell, these images are continually questioning their own nature, action, and meanings. Originally conceived for amusement and entertainment, these images are also able to “move across the boundaries of popular and professional discourses [...]. The metapicture is a piece of moveable cultural apparatus, one which may serve a marginal role as illustrative device or a central role as a kind of summary image, what I have called a ‘hypericon,’ that encapsulates an entire episteme, a theory of knowledge.”⁵¹ In light of the previous analysis of Dytar’s work on images and media, *#J’Accuse...!* qualifies both as metapicture and hypericon, and even extends these concepts by creating a “hypericonotext,” a verbal and visual assemblage that simultaneously reflects on its own creation, conditions of existence, and on other images and iconotexts.⁵²

47 Bernd Stiegler, “‘Iconic Turn’ et réflexion sociétale: Introduction.” *Trivium*, No. 1 (2008): 5–11. <http://journals.openedition.org/trivium/308>

48 In doing so, Mitchell emancipates from traditional art history to posit the ability of images to theorize, therefore, to act as a political and potentially subversive force. Stiegler, “Iconic Turn,” 6.

49 Anonymous, *Zeitschrift Fliegende Blätter*, n. 2465, 1892, p. 145. The journal has been digitized by the Universitätsbibliothek of Heidelberg: <https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/fb97/0147/image.info>

50 W. E. Hill, *My wife and my mother-in-law. They are both in this picture – find them / W.E.H. 15*, 6 Nov. 1915. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington.

51 Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 49.

52 Alain Montandon, ed., *Iconotextes* (Paris: Ophrys, 1990).

Conclusion

Jean Dytar’s comics narrative allows for telling, exposing, and discussing the Dreyfus Affair as a historical moment emblematic of the rise of mass media and political culture in France. Through a complex framework, it engages with the reader’s own references, historical knowledge, and abilities to read comics – this “highly participatory form” that demands strong intellectual and emotional engagement from the reader.⁵³ Analyzing comics always calls for interdisciplinary approaches, even at the margins, as comic art is a particularly hybrid, complex and even “unruly” visual medium.⁵⁴ In this respect, *#J’Accuse...!* is especially demanding. Drawing from art history, visual, and media studies provides a better understanding of the visual economy of such an original comic narrative and the graphic theories it elaborates, especially as the book does not overtly present itself as such (unlike the almost singular example of a drawn theory of comics, *Understanding comics* by Scott McCloud).⁵⁵ Instead, it presents itself as a historical narrative that indirectly constitutes a theory of media, events, and images.

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53 McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 165.

54 Bukatman, *Poetics of Slumberland*, 4.

55 McCloud, Scott, *Understanding comics: The Invisible Art* (Northampton, MA: Tundra), 1993.

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