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Charlie-Hebdo

# Luz : "All eyes are on us, we've become a symbol"

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**A collective execution wiped out Charlie Hebdo's editorial board. Faced with such horror, the slogan Je suis Charlie has become the flag of liberty and resistance brandished against obscurantism. Luz, emblematic cartoonist for the weekly newspaper, speaks, for the first time, since the deaths of his friends and on the eve of Sunday's massive rally.**

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*Luz has been a cartoonist at Charlie Hebdo for twenty years. He is alive today because January 7th marks his birthday and he was running late for the satirical paper's weekly editorial meeting. Along with the other "survivors", he is now planning the next issue of Charlie Hebdo to be published on January 14th. Exceptionally, one million copies will be printed. For the next few days, he will go to work at the premises of Libération, currently housing the editorial team, to discuss angles, subjects and its cover. He, and other cartoonists, will recount in cartoons the massive Republican rally on Sunday. The day after the terrorist attack which killed his friends, mentors, his family, Luz tells us of his doubts, his fears and his anger. Grief-stricken, he wonders if he will be able to draw again after the awful events of January 7th 2015. He provides a testimony which goes against official lines.*

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**The publishing of Charlie Hebdo next Wednesday is fuelled with national and political stakes. What is it like to have this responsibility in such terrible conditions?**

**Luz** - When I started drawing, I always thought we were safe, as we were drawing pseudo Mickey Mouse. Now, after the deaths, the shoot outs, the violence, everything has changed. All eyes are on us, we've become a symbol, just like our cartoons. Humanité headlined "Liberty has been assassinated" above the cover I did on Houellebecq that, even if there's some substance there, is a quip at Houellebecq. A huge symbolic weight, that doesn't exist in our cartoons and is somewhat beyond us, has been put on our shoulders. I'm one amongst many who's finding that difficult.

**What do you mean by "symbolic weight"?**

In 2007, when the caricatures of Muhammad were published in the Danish paper Jyllands-Posten, we were considered as either troublemakers or white knights, defending the freedom of the press. In 2011, when our offices

were burnt down, we were yet again, white knights. In 2012, a completely idiotic film about Muslims was released (Innocence of Muslims), we had cartoons of Muhammad in Charlie, as usual. We were once again dangerous troublemakers whose cartoons resulted in the closing of embassies and spread terror amongst French citizens abroad. The media made a mountain out of our cartoons, when on a worldwide scale, we are merely a damn teenage fanzine. This fanzine has become a national and international symbol, but it was people that were assassinated, not the freedom of speech! People who sat in an office and drew cartoons.

### **Do you mean the nature of cartoons has changed ?**

Since the cartoons of Muhammad, the irresponsible nature of cartoons has gradually disappeared. Since 2007, our cartoons are read literally. People or cartoonists, like Plantu, believe we shouldn't do drawings on Muhammad because they go viral on the Internet. Therefore we have to be careful what we do in France as someone may react in Kuala Lumpur or somewhere else. It's unbearable.

### **Why ?**

Since 2007, Charlie has been scrutinized and made to carry responsibility. Each cartoon may possibly be read as having political stakes or expressing internal politics. Those stakes are laid on our shoulders. But we're simply a newspaper that is bought, opened then closed. If people post our cartoons on Internet, if the media highlight certain of our cartoons, that's their responsibility. Not ours.

### **Except that it's the exact opposite that's happening.**

We are being made to carry a symbolic responsibility that doesn't figure in Charlie's cartoons. Unlike the Anglo-Saxons or Plantu, Charlie fights against symbolism. Doves of peace and other metaphors of a world at war aren't our cup of tea. We work on details, specific points in correlation with French humour and our way of analyzing things à la française.

### **Cartoons that can sometimes be crass or punk...**

Sometimes goofy, other times crass, punk for sure. Sometimes it doesn't work, other times it's simply beautiful. Charlie is the combination of a group of very different people, who all draw cartoons. The nature of the cartoon changed depending on which cartoonist was working on it, using his or her style, drawing on previous political or artistic influences. But this modesty and diversity of expression no longer exists. Each cartoon is seen to having been done by all of us. In the end, the symbolic weight is exactly what Charlie has always worked against: destroying symbols, breaking down taboos, bursting bubbles of fantasy. It's wonderful that people are giving us their support but it's going against Charlie's cartoons.

### **You have become the flag bearers of national unity.**

This unanimity is useful to Holland in helping strengthen the nation. It's useful to Marine Le Pen to ask to reinstate the death penalty. Symbolism in every sense can be used by everyone to do whatever they like. Even Poutine could welcome doves of peace open heartedly. That's precisely the difference with Charlie's cartoons, as you couldn't do whatever you fancied. When we mock, in detail, obscurantisms, when we ridicule political attitudes, we are not becoming a symbol. Charb, whom I consider as the Jean-Marc Reiser of the late 20th/ early 21st Century, made comment on society. He drew what was under the gloss, slightly ugly people with big noses. Right now we're covered in gloss and I'm going to find that difficult.

### **What do you mean ?**

Is the moment right to be publishing Charlie in such an emotional state? Is it appropriate to do it quickly in response to the symbolism of the attack? I wonder. Replying to symbolism with symbolism, that's not what Charlie does. Last night, I came up with an idea for a cartoon that I'll probably never do: stains on the floor representing where the victims lay, with a pair of glasses strewn in a corner and a bubble saying "hahaha", on a black background. It's not a great idea, because it's an idea imposed by symbolism.

### **So your question is "how can you go on drawing after that ?"**

Yes. And also, how can I draw within that context. Within this fantasized Charlie that we're being plunged into.

### **How will Charlie Hebdo continue ?**

It's going to be complicated. For all the reasons I've just mentioned and because we will have to work without our graphic, political, ethical, militant personalities: Charb, Tignous, Honoré and all the others. During the difficult moments, when caught up in the fantasy of irresponsibility, we shared the weight. Today, there's only Catherine, Willem, Coco and myself (and Riss who is wounded). How will we manage to go beyond this symbolic injunction with only four styles? (Jul, who had left Charlie, has come to lend a hand on the next issue). People are volunteering cartoons. But will they capture the spirit of Charlie ? Our spirit has been around for 22 years. This paper exists because of all of its members.

### **Have you always felt it necessary to caricature the Prophet or have there been times when you thought you were being caught in a trap ?**

The funny thing is that we continued caricaturing Muhammad after 2007. After the triple controversy 2007, 2011, 2012, Charb and Zineb El-Rhazoui went as far as publishing The life of Muhammad in two volumes. It didn't cause a stir. We won. Charb wanted to go all the way with this project, standing tall in his hiking boots (laughter) and his ugly military pants he loved so much. Charb believed we could continue to overcome taboos and symbols. But today, we are the symbol. How can you destroy a symbol when it is yourself?

### **I don't know.**

Neither do I. I won't find the answer this week and I'm not sure I ever will. We will publish Charlie. I'm going to force myself. I'm going to think about my dead friends, knowing they didn't fall for France! Today, it seems that Charlie fell for the freedom of speech. The simple fact is that our friends died. The friends we loved and whose talent we admired so very much.

### **On BFMTV, a visibly distraught, Jeannette Bougrab, Charb's companion, said they merit to be buried in the Panthéon.**

Charlie stands for everything opposed to that. And being buried in the Panthéon didn't change anything for Marie Curie!

### **It would make for a beautiful ceremony...**

## **Luz : "All eyes are on us, we've become a symbol"**

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I didn't go to the spontaneous rally on January 7th. People sang the national anthem. We're talking about Charb, Tignous, Cabus, Honoré, Wolinski: they would've scorned this kind of attitude. People express themselves however they like but the Republic mustn't turn into a hysterical mourner. That would be a shame.

### **I imagine that would be a reason you'd like to record, in drawing, tomorrow's rally ?**

I have no idea what it'll be like. We don't head out with that kind of a priori, we take it in and work with what's offered up. There'll no doubt be beautiful images, tears, joy and maybe some absurdity. At the same time, it will show the changing nature of Charlie: the people who are supporting us now that we are dead, who didn't always read us, didn't always follow. I'm not angry at them. Our aim was never to convince the entire population.

### **Last November, Charb launched an appeal for people to subscribe to save Charlie. They were lonely times...**

We'd been alone for quite some time, since the third Muhammad affair. These affairs had created so much fantasy around the danger of Charlie's atheism, its Islamophobia. We were simply joyful unbelievers. All of those that died were joyful unbelievers. And now, they're nowhere. Just like everyone else.

### **What do you think of Manuel Valls not inviting Marine Le Pen to tomorrow's "Republican rally"?**

I don't give a shit.

### **Do you feel that there's an attempt to save Charlie ?**

Honestly, what is there to save? Now, there's momentum. And in a year, what will remain of this rather progressive momentum for the freedom of speech? Will financial help be offered to private press? Will people oppose the closure of newspapers? Newspaper stands? Will people buy newspapers? Will anything remain of this momentum? Maybe. Maybe not.

### **How will you work ?**

We'll continue drawing our merry little men. Our job, as cartoonists, is to create a cartoon around these merry little men, to transpose the idea that we are all merry little men and that we endeavour to make things work as best we can. That's what cartoons are about. Those killed were simply people who drew merry little men. And merry little women.

### **So it's too much to ask you merry little men to save the Republic ?**

Exactly.

**Interview by Anne Laffeter**

**Translation by Nick Haughton**

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