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Yasco Horsman

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# What was *Charlie Hebdo*? Blasphemy, laughter, politics

YASCO HORSMAN

**ABSTRACT** Horsman's essay revisits discussions about the allegedly blasphemous nature of *Charlie Hebdo*'s cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad by tracing the history of the journal in the French tradition of comics rather than of political cartoons. By distinguishing the cartoon figure (the *petit bonhomme*) of the comics from caricatures and portraits, he aims to outline the precise nature of the journal's sense of humour and its implicit critique of religion.

**KEYWORDS** *bande dessinée*, blasphemy, caricature, cartoon, *Charlie Hebdo*, *Charlie Mensuel*, comics, *Hara-Kiri*, laughter

Although the attack on the offices of the French satirical journal *Charlie Hebdo* and the murder of twelve people associated with the magazine took place a mere five years ago (7 January 2015), the event already seems to lie in a distant past. Perhaps this sense is the result of the public responses to the incident, which was speedily appropriated for political purposes. The homemade 'je suis *Charlie*' signs that appeared spontaneously everywhere in the first days after the attack, initially to signal solidarity or a feeling of shared vulnerability, soon became part of well-coordinated 'Republican marches' that called for the defence of the nation and its values (*laïcité*, democracy, freedom of the press and so on), which in turn provided the ideal backdrop for politicians of different persuasions to engage in photo opportunities. As the sociologist Emmanuel Todd suggested in his cynical pamphlet *Qui est Charlie?*, it became evident in retrospect that behind the *Charlie* mask lay a white, slightly xenophobic, middle-class face that wanted to defend France against globalization.<sup>1</sup> Looking back, the '*Charlie Hebdo* case' and its theatrical display of public mourning seems to illustrate a conclusion that Judith Butler drew after 9/11: behind every spectacle of public commemoration lies a decision about which bodies are considered 'grievable', and which are not.<sup>2</sup>

- 1 Emmanuel Todd, *Qui est Charlie? Sociologie d'une crise religieuse* (Paris: Seuil 2015). For the English translation, see Emmanuel Todd, *Who Is Charlie? Xenophobia and the New Middle Class*, trans. from the French by Andrew Brown (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity 2015).
- 2 Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London and New York: Verso 2004), 20ff. See also Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London and New York: Verso 2010).

As a result, the name 'Charlie' now seems to be shorthand for debates about the political nature of mourning and the processes of exclusion it relies upon.<sup>3</sup>

These debates are, I feel, important, timely and entirely justified. But, in the attempts to outline what 'Charlie' — the journal as well as the political demonstrations organized in its name — stands for, the journal itself, its specific sensibility and its scandalous, often blasphemous sense of humour, tends to be overlooked. This becomes evident when we try to return to the second week of January 2015, and tune in to the hesitating voices of the journal's surviving cartoonists and former editors. At press conferences and in interviews they did not speak of 'western values', or of 'freedom of expression', 'the republic' or 'secularism'. Instead, they used an entirely different lexicon to describe the journal. For example, former editor Philippe Val evoked, on the very day of the attacks, the joy (*bonheur*) and pleasure (*plaisir*) that had been lost with the deaths of Wolinski, Charb, Tignous, Cabu and Honore.<sup>4</sup> And cartoonist Luz, at the public presentation of the 'survivors issue' of *Charlie Hebdo*, which came out a week after the attacks and three days after the Republican marches (on 14 January), explicitly stated that he needed to draw new cartoons in order to *counter* the political meanings that had now been given to the journal.<sup>5</sup> Holding in front of him the famous green 'Tout Est Pardonné' cover with his depiction of a weeping Muhammad, Luz said that he had to make a drawing that would have made his now-departed fellow *Charlies* laugh, in order to help him remember whom *they* had been as a group of people sharing a certain sensibility. Returning to the drawing table in the aftermath of the attacks was not first and foremost a political statement, he insisted. He had not attempted, in his drawing of the Prophet, to heroically defend abstract political values. Publishing a new issue was an attempt to juxtapose *his Charlie* (and that of his dead friends) to the thousands of *Charlies* that had been marching the streets of Paris, Toulouse, Lyon, London and Amsterdam, who were commemorating the journal and speaking in its name, often so loudly that *Charlie's* own voice had become barely audible.

And yet, Luz continued, drawing the cover was not *only* an attempt to re-establish a connection with his dead friends. It also meant a return to the very figure who had made the magazine the target of the attacks in the first place: the big-nosed drawing of Muhammad, which first appeared in the

3 See, for example, Johanna Sumiala, "'Je suis Charlie' and the digital mediascape: the politics of death in the *Charlie Hebdo* mourning rituals', *Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2017, 116–26; and Edward Welch and John Perivolaris, 'The place of the Republic: space, territory and identity around and after *Charlie Hebdo*', *French Cultural Studies*, vol. 27, no. 3, 2016, 279–92.

4 Audrey Kucinkas, 'VIDÉO DU JOUR "Charlie Hebdo": Philippe Val en larmes sur France Inter', *L'Obs*, 8 January 2015, available at <http://leplus.nouvelobs.com/contribution/1303544-video-du-jour-charlie-hebdo-philippe-val-en-larmes-sur-france-inter-dechirant.html> (viewed 28 February 2020).

5 Isabelle Hanne, 'Luz à propos de la une de "Charlie Hebdo": "C'était mon dernier jus"', *Liberation*, 13 January 2015, available at [www.liberation.fr/ecrans/2015/01/13/luz-a-propos-de-la-une-c-etait-mon-dernier-jus\\_1179788](http://www.liberation.fr/ecrans/2015/01/13/luz-a-propos-de-la-une-c-etait-mon-dernier-jus_1179788) (viewed 28 February 2020).

special issue devoted to radical Islam (the *Charia Hebdo* issue, published in 2011), and which had, after all, set in motion the response that culminated in the attack. In an interview given shortly before the press conference, Luz confessed that, for him, coming to terms with events meant first and foremost facing *his character* once again.<sup>6</sup> After a series of failed attempts to draw a cover that depicted images of his murdered friends or the terrorists, he realized that he had to draw Muhammad (whom he refers to as *mon personnage*), and he sets out on a drawing session that he describes as cathartic, and that culminates in the drawing of the small figure of Muhammad wearing a *Je suis Charlie* shirt. In the interview, Luz recalls looking at the figure, bursting into laughter and thinking ‘... tout est pardonné, mon vieux Mahomet’.<sup>7</sup> To which he added, in an interview with the journal *Les Inrockuptibles*, a few days later:

Today it may seem as if *Charlie Hebdo* has died for the freedom of the press. But to us, it’s our friends who have been killed. ... Yet we will continue to draw. It is our duty, as cartoonists, to show the smallness of human beings, the idea that we’re all just little people, and that that’s it. It’s cartoons. Those who died drew little figures (*petits bonhommes*).<sup>8</sup>

Luz points here to what was almost universally overlooked in the attempts to articulate what the journal stood for: namely, the surprising and obvious fact that the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks were provoked by the drawing of a little figure—a *petit bonhomme*—and not by a political statement. A similar suggestion was made by American cartoonist Garry Trudeau, whose tribute comic emphasizes that the artists killed (Wolinski, Tignous, Cabu, Honore and Charb) were neither pamphleteers nor intellectuals. They were loved and reviled for the characters they created. In *Charlie’s* hands existing people (such as Hollande, Chirac or the Pope) turned into imaginary figures who seemed to have lives independent of their creators. As Trudeau suggests, the scandal that the journal provoked was caused by its depiction of the Prophet Muhammad as exactly such a figure, and who, on the comic’s last panel, joins the other figures created by *Charlie*.

To underline Trudeau’s and Luz’s points: the cartoons that had provoked the attacks were not *portraits* of the Prophet, or expressions of *opinions* or statements about him, or *caricatures* in the traditional, satirical sense of the word. They were cartoon characters: *petits bonhommes*. But, as Luz explains in an

6 ‘Avec cette une, on voulait montrer ça: qu’à un moment donné, on a le droit ... d’utiliser nos personnages comme on veut. Mahomet, *c’est devenu un personnage ...*’ (ibid., emphasis added).

7 ‘Alors j’ai dessiné, un tout petit dessin, et puis j’ai vu sa gueule, je l’ai regardé, et il m’a fait marrer. ... Évidemment tout est pardonné, mon vieux Mahomet’ (ibid.).

8 Anne Laffeter, ‘Luz: “Tous le monde nous regardé, on est devenu les symboles”’, *Les Inrockuptibles*, 10 January 2015, available at [www.lesinrocks.com/2015/01/10/actualite/actualite/luz-tout-le-monde-nous-regarde-est-devenu-des-symboles](http://www.lesinrocks.com/2015/01/10/actualite/actualite/luz-tout-le-monde-nous-regarde-est-devenu-des-symboles) (viewed 28 February 2020). Translations from the French, unless otherwise stated, are by the author.

interview, as a result of the attacks the figures themselves had now acquired new symbolic significance:

When I started to draw I always thought we were safe, as we were drawing pseudo Mickey Mouse-like figures. 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. ... A huge symbolic weight, *that doesn't exist in our cartoons* and is somewhat beyond us, has been put on our shoulders.<sup>9</sup>

The pressure of this symbolic weight is painful for Luz, since it goes against the ethos of the cartoons themselves, which, in fact, had attempted to undermine the very logic of symbolic gestures. Luz continues: 'In the end, the symbolic weight is exactly what *Charlie* has always worked against: destroying symbols, breaking down taboos, bursting bubbles of fantasy. It is wonderful that people are giving us their support but it's going against *Charlie's* cartoons.'<sup>10</sup>

In what follows I will reflect on the implications of Luz's remarks, which seem, at first blush, marked by a stunning naiveté. Of course, we cannot understand Luz's 'Mickey Mouse-like' figures isolated from the political context in which they were drawn, or the journal's provocative decision to reprint the Danish Muhammad cartoons in *Jyllands-Posten* in 2006. Furthermore, the attacks on *Charlie Hebdo* took place when the publication of Charb's political pamphlet, *Lettre aux escrocs de l'islamophobie*, was imminent.<sup>11</sup> In this publication, the cartoonist explicitly outlines the political intentions behind his cartoons. In the next section, I will briefly evoke this history, after which I will return to some of the questions raised by Luz in the quotations above. What does it mean that the *Charlie Hebdo* events were provoked by the drawing of a cartoon character? Indeed, how does a 'Mickey Mouse-like figure' differ from other forms of representation, such as caricatures and portraits? How do we understand the particular affective relationship that people feel towards these figures? How do we understand the blasphemous joy they provoke, and wherein lies their power to scandalize? In short, how do we understand *Charlie's petits bonhommes* and specifically the figure of Muhammad as drawn in a few strokes by Luz, with its big nose, large turban and two popping eyes? Who *was* this figure, which Luz would say four months later (in May) he had stopped drawing because he was now finally 'done' with it,<sup>12</sup> but which had still been very much alive in the second week of January, having survived a series of Kalashnikov salvos to return to the public sphere with the stubborn persistence that we expect of

9 Ibid., emphasis added.

10 Ibid.

11 Charb, *Lettre aux escrocs de l'islamophobie qui font le jeu des racistes* (Paris: Les Échappés 2015).

12 'Charlie Hebdo's Luz quits Muhammad cartoons', *BBC News*, 29 April 2015, available at [www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-32520563](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-32520563) (viewed 28 February 2020).

cartoon characters, who can, after all, survive their own deaths? And how does the drawing of this figure itself embody a 'critique of religion', without making a 'statement' about religion?

### **Charlie's politics**

To understand *Charlie's* figures and their 'blasphemous joy', we have to look briefly at the history of the journal and the tension between its politics and its peculiarly irreverent sense of humour. *Charlie Hebdo* was founded in 1970 in response to the ostentatious, public display of grief that swept France after the death of Charles de Gaulle, titan of the Resistance and the founding father of the Fifth Republic.<sup>13</sup> The pious tone in which these commemorations were conducted was mocked on the cover of the final issue of *Charlie's* predecessor, the satirical journal *Hara-Kiri* (1960–70), which read 'Tragedy in Colombey: 1 Dead'.<sup>14</sup> This phrase comically combined two of that week's news events: De Gaulle's death in his hometown of Colombey-les-Deux-Églises, and a fire in a discotheque in Saint-Laurent-du-Pont that had killed 146 people. The former event had attracted so much media attention that it completely eclipsed the deaths of the ordinary citizens in the nightclub fire. The *Hara-Kiri* cover, then, sought to draw attention to the sanctimonious nature of these public rituals of grieving, and perhaps to the way that displays of reverence for national symbols tend to cause blindness towards 'ordinary' losses of life. Whatever it may have been, the *Hara-Kiri* cover was held to be such an unacceptable breach of decorum, indeed a sacrilegious attack on the figure who had come to symbolize the nation itself, that the interior minister Raymond Marcellin forbade its publication, using the pretext that the journal had printed pornographic images.<sup>15</sup> As a result, the journal ceased publication although, a week later, in the same format, under the same editorship and with contributions by the same cartoonists, it was reborn as *Charlie Hebdo*, perhaps to indicate that the provocative refusal to accept the sanctity of a deceased father figure had now become the programmatic banner under which the journal would be published.

This *Charlie 1* (as I will call it to distinguish it from its later incarnation) was in spirit very much the successor of *Hara-Kiri*: it published irreverent, anti-authoritarian jokes. In spirit, it leaned to the left, but it had no clear political

13 For a history of the journal, see Jane Weston's invaluable essays, 'Bête et méchant: politics, editorial cartoons and *bande dessinée* in the French satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo*', *European Comic Art*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2009, 109–29; Jane Weston Vauclair, 'Local laughter, global polemics: understanding *Charlie Hebdo*', *European Comic Art*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2015, 6–14; and Jane Weston, 'Charlie Hebdo and joyful resistance', in John Parkin and John Phillips (eds), *Laughter and Power* (Bern: Peter Lang 2006), 209–42.

14 'Bal tragique a Colombey. 1 mort', cover of *Hara-Kiri*, no. 94, 16 November 1970, available at [www.paris-bd.com/revue-84723-Hara-Kiri-hebdo-3-Hara-Kiri-hebdo-n°94-%3A-Bal-tragique-à-Colombey-1-mort](http://www.paris-bd.com/revue-84723-Hara-Kiri-hebdo-3-Hara-Kiri-hebdo-n°94-%3A-Bal-tragique-à-Colombey-1-mort) (viewed 8 April 2020).

15 Weston, 'Charlie Hebdo and joyful resistance', 215.

affiliation or programme. Like most products of the 1960s counterculture, it withered away towards the end of the 1970s. Discontinued in 1981, it was unexpectedly revived in 1992 when the editors of another satirical weekly, *La Grosse Bertha*, had a conflict with their publisher. Its editors, some of whom were *Charlie* veterans (Gebe, Cabu, Wolinski, Reiser, Sine and Willem), decided to continue under the old name of *Charlie Hebdo*. This new *Charlie* (*Charlie 2*) published the work of the old *Charlie* artists as well as that of a younger generation (Riss, Charb, Tignous and Luz) who were working in the *Charlie/Hara-Kiri* tradition.

The tone of the editorials in *Charlie 2*, however, was markedly different from that of *Charlie 1*. The journal still used the old moniker ‘un journal bête et méchant’ to describe itself, but now engaged itself with particular causes, such as the environment, racism and the rise of the Front National. This new political line was introduced by Philippe Val, the journal’s new editor (who served from 1992 to 2009), who brought a new generation of writers to the journal that largely belonged to the New Left, such as the economist Bernard Maris and post-feminist Caroline Fourest.<sup>16</sup> In addition, the journal started to become interested in international politics. 9/11 marked a major turning point, after which Val became preoccupied with the rise of politicized Islam. He wrote editorials that positioned the journal as a staunch defender of freedom of expression against the forces of fundamentalism. In February 2006 Val’s focus on Islamist terrorism led him to reprint the Muhammad cartoons that the Danish newspaper *Jyllands Posten* had published in 2005 in an act of defiance after the murder of the Dutch filmmaker and provocateur Theo van Gogh by an Islamist assailant.<sup>17</sup> The cartoons were accompanied by a rather pompous pamphlet signed by Val and twelve other writers (among them Bernard-Henri Levi, Salman Rushdie and Ayaan Hirsi Ali) that warned the world against Islamist terrorism, as well as a series of new Muhammad cartoons drawn by *Charlie*’s own cartoonists, among them Charb, Wolinski and Cabu.<sup>18</sup> The cover was adorned by Cabu’s drawing of the prophet ‘surrounded by fundamentalists’, who held his face in his hands in despair because, as the caption reads, he found it difficult to be loved by idiots (‘c’est dur d’être aimé par des cons’).

The publication of this issue catapulted the journal into the public eye. The provocative publication of the Danish cartoons drew much press coverage and led to a highly publicized trial of the journal under new French

16 Weston, ‘*Charlie Hebdo* and joyful resistance’, 221ff.; Weston ‘*Bête et méchant*’, 110ff.

17 For an extensive discussion of the history of the *Jylland Posten* cartoons, see Jytte Klausen, *The Cartoons That Shook the World* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press 2009).

18 ‘Writers issue cartoon row warning’, *BBC News*, 1 March 2006, available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4763520.stm>; ‘Writers’ statement on cartoons’, *BBC News*, 1 March 2006, available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4764730.stm> (both viewed 3 March 2020).

laws against hate speech for its 'abuse of a group on the grounds of their religion'. The trial, which the journal eventually won, made *Charlie Hebdo* the subject of national headlines and even of a feature-length documentary that premiered at Cannes in 2008.<sup>19</sup> Once merely a fringe journal, a leftover from the 1960s, the magazine now came to be seen as a key player in the new culture wars. And, in his media appearances, Val started to employ a republican language of rights and freedom of expression to defend the journal's irreverent tone.<sup>20</sup> Even though *Charlie 2* still called itself 'un journal irresponsable' and printed the sort of anarchistic jokes it had always done, its display of 'irresponsibility' was now presented to the outside world as a political act, delivered in the name of familiar republican values.

Hence, whereas *Charlie 2*'s cartoons were very similar in tone, attitude and style to those of *Charlie 1* and *Hara-Kiri*, they were 'framed' by an editorial policy and a series of ostentatious, self-conscious declarations offered to the public as 'statements' or 'interventions' in topical debates. Under Val's leadership, the journal became slightly theatrical, as if seeking to 'demonstrate' certain things to its readers. It gave the impression that it saw publication as a performance in an arena that lay outside the journal itself, in the public sphere of the media and the courtroom. This ostentatious republicanism still determines how the journal is perceived both by those who now put *Charlie Hebdo* on a pedestal and by others, such as Emmanuel Todd and Alain Badiou, who are critical of its invocation of republican values and regard it as representative of a conservative turn also taken by other intellectuals who had come of age in the 1970s. Badiou writes:

A child of the rebellious leftism of the 1970s, *Charlie Hebdo* became ... a both ironic and feverish defender of Democracy, the Republic, *Laïcité*, freedom of expression, free enterprise, sexual freedom, the free state ... in short the established political and moral order. ... More of a novelty is the patient construction of a domestic enemy of a new kind—the Muslim.<sup>21</sup>

19 *C'est dur d'être aimé par des cons*, dir. Daniel Leconte, France, 2008.

20 In an op-ed in *Le Monde* of 26 March 2000, Val already declared that the journal was faithful to 'laïcité, à la défense de l'écologie, aux principes démocratique, aux idéaux des Lumières, aux droits de l'Homme ...' (Val, quoted in Weston, 'Charlie Hebdo and joyful resistance', 216).

21 Alain Badiou, 'The Red Flag and the Tricolore', trans. from the French by David Broder, *Versoblog*, 3 February 2015, available at [www.versobooks.com/blogs/1833-the-red-flag-and-the-tricolore-by-alain-badiou](http://www.versobooks.com/blogs/1833-the-red-flag-and-the-tricolore-by-alain-badiou). A similar critique of Charlie's Islamophobic jokes had already been voiced by Olivier Cyran, "'Charlie Hebdo", pas raciste? Si vous le dites ...', *Article11*, 5 December 2013, available at [www.article11.info/?Charlie-Hebdo-pas-raciste-Si-vous](http://www.article11.info/?Charlie-Hebdo-pas-raciste-Si-vous) (both viewed 3 March 2020). See also Weston, 'Local laughter, global polemics', 11ff. for a discussion of the recurring accusation that the journal engages in 'punching down on minorities, especially Muslims' (11).



## Charlie's laughter

Yet this is not the full story about *Charlie*. Its sense of humour, the laughter it provokes and the scandalous joy it brings cannot completely be reduced to the political points it seeks to make. Its wild energy cannot fully be contained by the framework of its editorial policies. To understand its comic sensibility, we need to look beyond the content of its editorials. We need to supplement the story of its politics with a genealogy of its sense of humour. To understand *this* story of the journal, we need to turn to *Charlie's* other predecessor. *Charlie Hebdo* emerged not only out of the ashes of *Hara-Kiri*; there was another older sibling, the monthly *Charlie Mensuel*, to which nearly all of *Charlie Hebdo's* cartoonists contributed.<sup>22</sup> *Charlie Mensuel*, founded in 1969, was modelled after the revolutionary Italian comics magazine *Linus* (founded four years earlier by Giovanni Gandini). *Linus* and *Charlie*, both named after characters from Charles Schulz's *Peanuts*, published new experimental European comics aimed at an adult audience (by Crepax, Pichard and Forest) as well as new translations of American newspaper comic strips—the 'funnies' such as *Krazy Kat*, *Li'l Abner*, *Pogo*, *Peanuts* and *BA*—all printed on high-quality paper and in a minimalist house style inspired by Pop Art, which set it apart from other comics publications of its time.<sup>23</sup> As Erwin Dejasse explains, the rise of both journals coincided with the emergence of a new subculture of 'bedephilia' (comics fandom). Across France, societies of 'friends of the comics' were founded, networks of collectors were established, exhibitions were organized and journals devoted to comic criticism, such as *Giff Wiff* (1962–7) and most notably *Les Cahiers de la bande dessinée*, were published. The latter journal, founded in the same year as *Charlie Mensuel*, modelled itself after its cinephilic big sister *Les Cahiers du Cinema* and introduced a new form of auteur criticism to the study of American comics. And, not unlike the way that *Les Cahiers du Cinema* gave birth to a generation of film directors, Truffaut, Chabrol and Godard among them, who appropriated and reused the conventions of American genre cinema for their own films, the comic modernists of *Charlie Mensuel* and *Linus* began to use the conventions of the newspaper funnies: its simplified style, two-dimensionality, repetitive storylines and, most crucially, the iconography of its central figure, the cartoon character, drawn in a few lines, often with a big nose and a flat psychology,

22 For a concise history of *Charlie Mensuel*, see Erwin Dejasse, 'Wolinski: "Je fais Charlie avec ce que j'estime être le meilleur au monde", *neuvième art* 2.0, no. 12, January 2006, available at <http://neuviemeart.citebd.org/spip.php?article407> (viewed 3 March 2020).

23 For a history of *Linus*, see Paolo Interdonato, *Linus: Storia di una rivoluzione nata per gioco* (Milan: Rizzoli Lizard 2015).

inhabiting a 'protoplasmatic' body that was able to stretch and morph in all directions and shapes.<sup>24</sup>

By the late 1960s the cartoonists of *Charlie Mensuel* (such as Mandryka, Wolinski and Reiser) had started, very much like the American underground artists of the period (such as Crumb or Shelton), to explore the underlying sexuality and the curious anatomy of the funnies' infantile, animal-like homunculi.<sup>25</sup> In France no one went further along these lines than Georges Wolinski. In a series of cartoons that often refer directly to well-known motifs from the funnies, and working in a style that recalls that of Schulz or Hart, Wolinski presents his reader with big-nosed characters who are possessed by a monomaniacal drive. They can only think of one thing, namely 'it', or (in French) 'ça', as it is called on the cover of a 1967 collection of comics.<sup>26</sup> His characters are completely obsessed with what the French call 'le cul' (the arse): see, for example, the little bishop (on the cover of a *Charlie Hebdo* issue with the headline 'Les évêques obsédés par le cul') who sticks his nose under the dress of a woman who responds by calling out: 'But what about my soul?'.<sup>27</sup>

The unsublimated, uninhibited nature of the sexual drive of Wolinski's figures is slightly infantile and very cartoonlike. His characters, like Road Runner, Krazy Kat or Tom & Jerry, are driven by a single desire. No sense of shame seems to hinder the enthusiasm with which they pursue their goals. In one of his early cartoons, a boy responds to the question, 'What do you want to be when you grow up?', with the happy reply: 'Sexually obsessed, miss!'.<sup>28</sup> In the near-innocence in which they devote themselves to their obsessions, Wolinski's figures inhabit a world that seems almost prelapsarian in its absence of feelings of guilt. They share this with the figures in the funnies who, as Adam Gopnik wrote in a brilliant essay on George Herriman's *Krazy Kat*, live in 'an Edenic space, in which sin and death do not exist'.<sup>29</sup> As Slavoj

24 For the term 'protoplasmatic', used by Sergei Eisenstein to describe the bodies of cartoon characters, see Jay Leda (ed.), *Eisenstein on Disney*, trans. from the Russian by Alan Upchurch (Calcutta: Seagull Books 1986). For a discussion of the emergence of the cartoon character in animation, see Yasco Horsman, 'Steamboat Willie: towards a Mickey Mouse version of apparatus theory', *Empedocles: European Journal for the Philosophy of Communication*, vol. 5, no. 1/2, 2015, 75–80; and Norman M. Klein, 'Animation and animorphs: a brief disappearing act', in Vivian Sobchack (ed.), *Meta Morphing: Transformation and the Culture of Quick-Change* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press 2000), 21–40.

25 For a discussion of the American underground's sexualization of the funnies, see Yasco Horsman, 'Infancy of art: comics, childhood and picture books', *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, vol. 5, no. 3, 2014, 323–35.

26 Georges Wolinski, *Ils ne pensent qu'a ça* (Paris: Denoël 1967).

27 Wolinski's cartoon appeared on the cover of *Charlie Hebdo*, no. 441, 26 April 1979, available on *Pinterest* at [www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/480759328965414161](http://www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/480759328965414161) (viewed 8 April 2020).

28 Wolinski's 1977 cartoon is available on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/iznogoodgood/status/553698770358403072?lang=hu> (viewed 8 April 2020).

29 Adam Gopnik, 'The genius of George Herriman', *New York Review of Books*, no. 33, 18 December 1986, 190–28.

Žižek has repeatedly pointed out, cartoon characters seem to dwell in a world without moral laws or superego commandments, freely giving in to sadistic and oral impulses, possessing bodies that are polymorphously perverse, not yet 'mapped' by the symbolic.<sup>30</sup> Cartoon bodies seem immortal, Žižek writes, but the 'comic' understanding of cartoon's immortality should be opposed to a tragic conception of immortality. Comedy is about a life force that persists, whereas tragic immortality stresses the afterlife of one's symbolic identity:

... both comedy and tragedy involve kinds of immortality, albeit opposed. In the tragic predicament, the hero forfeits his earthly life for the Thing, so that his very defeat is the triumph, conferring sublime dignity on him, while comedy is the triumph of indestructible life—not sublime life, but opportunistic, common, vulgar earthly life itself.<sup>31</sup>

Tragedy, Žižek holds, involves the immortality of the Martyr, the Hero, the Great Politician, the Prophet or the Patriarch who have given their lives for a cause, and who become immortal because their names will be preserved in history books, inscribed on monuments or commemorated in public rituals. Tragic immortality is the product of symbolization. Comic immortality is its opposite. It points to the indestructible vitality of a life force that resists all symbolization. Žižek continues by quoting Lacan, who claims that

what makes us laugh [in comedy as well as in cartoons, YH] is not so much the triumph of life, as its flight, the fact that life slides away, steals away, flees, escapes all those barriers that oppose it, and precisely those that are most essential, those that are constituted by the agency of the signifier. The phallus is ... the signifier of this flight. ... Life goes by, triumphs all the same, whatever happens. When the comic hero trips up and falls in the soup, the little fellow still survives.<sup>32</sup>

Comedy, according to Lacan, is precisely the momentary eruption of a life force that cannot be contained by the symbolic. It lights up, perhaps, in the figure of the cartoon character with its protoplasmic body. By citing the style of the newspaper funnies, then, Wolinski, Charb, Reiser, Luz and their colleagues tap into a source of enjoyment that infuses their images with a wild energy that sometimes contrasts with the pious solemnity of the journal's editorials. As Luz put it in the week after the attacks and the Republican marches, even though the world now understands the journal to be a symbol of free

30 Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*, 2nd edn (New York and London: Routledge 2001), 1ff; Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London and New York: Verso 2000), 389ff.

31 Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism? Five Interventions in the (Mis)use of a Notion* (London and New York: Verso 2001), 81–2.

32 Quoted in *ibid.*, 82–3.

speech, bestowing on the cartoonists the dignity possessed by those defenders of values that hold the nation together (rights, secularism, freedom), the laughter provoked by the cartoons is directed precisely against such acts of symbolization.

The key to *Charlie Hebdo's* implicit critique of religion, then, seems to lie in the style it employs to depict figures whose dignity relies on the symbolic: De Gaulle, father of the Republic, who is demoted to Charlie, and Muhammad, prophet and lawgiver, who is rendered as a Mickey Mouse-like figure whose eyes pop with an uncontrollable joy. Unlike the Danish cartoons—such as the notorious depiction of Muhammad with a bomb in his turban drawn by Kurt Westergaard,<sup>33</sup> who works in a style that is more illustrative—Luz evokes in his depiction of Muhammad the tradition of the newspaper funnies, for example in the drawing he made for the infamous *Charia Hebdo* issue of 2011 in which a big-nosed Muhammad threatens to lash the reader if she doesn't erupt into laughter.<sup>34</sup> Luz's Muhammad is neither a portrait nor a caricature of the prophet, but a *petit bonhomme* possessed by an obscene and uncontrollable enjoyment. In what seems like an unwitting confirmation of Žižek's suggestion that a cartoon character is an embodiment of a libidinal force, some online blogs suggested after the publication of *Charlie's* survivor issue that the face of Luz's Muhammad, when turned upside down, bore an uncanny resemblance to a penis, with two testicles for a turban.<sup>35</sup> This interpretation is perhaps less far-fetched than it seems since a comparison of heads of states to penises has been a recurring topos in the journal.<sup>36</sup> The comment was spoofed by Luz in a three-panel comic strip in which he draws himself confronted by an angry fundamentalist who cries out 'Blasphemy, you have drawn the prophet's portrait!' 'No,' he answers, 'c'est son bite!' (it's his penis!).<sup>37</sup>

33 Kurt Westergaard, 'Muhammad', published in *Jyllands Posten*, 30 September 2005, available at <http://photos1.blogger.com/blogger/4159/384/1600/JJP-011005-Muhammed-Westerga.jpg> (viewed 8 April 2020).

34 Luz, '100 coups de fouet ...', on the cover of *Charlie Hebdo*, no. 1011, 2 November 2011, available on *Wikipedia* at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charlie\\_Hebdo\\_issue\\_No.\\_1011](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charlie_Hebdo_issue_No._1011) (viewed 15 April 2020).

35 Luz, 'Tous est pardonné', appeared on the cover of *Charlie Hebdo*, no. 1178, 14 January 2015. Luz's cartoon and the blogger's upside-down version are available in 'Phallus cachés sur la couverture du dernier *Charlie Hebdo*', 24 January 2015, at <http://lesmalheursdisidore.blogspot.com/archive/2015/week04/index.html> (viewed 30 March 2020).

36 See 'Tête de noeud Président', on the cover of *Charlie Hebdo*, no. 184, 27 May 1974, available on *Pinterest* at [www.pinterest.com/pin/418694096582641470](http://www.pinterest.com/pin/418694096582641470); and Reiser, 'Chirac, C'est une bite a lunettes', on the cover of *Charlie Hebdo*, no. 316, 2 December 1976, available at <https://bibliotheques-specialisees.paris.fr/ark:/73873/pf0001761016/v0001.simple.selectedTab=record> (both viewed 8 April 2020).

37 Luz panel, published in *Charlie Hebdo*, no. 1178, 14 January 2015, available at [www.zombietime.com/mohammed\\_image\\_archive/charlie\\_hebdo/charlie1011bite\\_full.jpg](http://www.zombietime.com/mohammed_image_archive/charlie_hebdo/charlie1011bite_full.jpg) (viewed 8 April 2020)

## Conclusion: figures, portraits, caricatures

To understand *Charlie's* sense of humour, we need to distinguish its cartoons from other forms of representation, such as portraits and caricatures. Portraits of politicians, leaders and prophets typically depict a sitter's public persona, showing the person surrounded by insignia of power in order to point to the dignity lent to him or her by a given symbolic role. A caricature typically does the opposite. It seeks to unmask public figures by exposing their hypocrisy. Caricatures exaggerate physical features in order to show how the pathological desires and appetites of the body undermine the dignity these depicted figures are meant to possess on the basis of the symbolic position they occupy. *Charlie's* cartoons do something different. To be sure, the journal has published 'traditional' caricatures but *Charlie's* distinctive sense of humour derives from the fact that it combines caricature with the particular humour and iconography of yet another form of representation: that of the newspaper funnies. This explains the specific nature of the political affect that seems to drive the journal. Political caricatures have traditionally been driven by feelings of moral outrage about the corruption of individuals who do not live up to the dignity of the symbolic role they inhabit. Their aim is, therefore, ultimately to defend the symbolic against undignified usurpers. *Charlie's* drawings are driven by a laughter that erupts once we are confronted with a certain vitality that escapes symbolization, that cannot be smothered by rules, regulations, customs or laws, and that continually breaks out at the most inappropriate moment. It doesn't seek to defend the symbolic. Rather, the humour seeks to undermine the very logic of symbolization. The laughter it provokes has a political dimension. At least this is what Luz suggests when he confessed that he started to draw cartoons when he realized that feelings of joy are a stronger driving force behind political change than feelings of anger.<sup>38</sup> This is, however, a politics—if we choose to use this term—that cannot be articulated in statements, opinions, ideas or articulations of principles. As Charb wrote in one of his columns: there was no principle behind *Charlie's* sense of humour, not even the principle that we should be able to laugh at everything. That statement makes no sense, Charb writes: 'Je n'ai pas besoin de ta bénédiction pour rire de ce dont j'ai envie de rire, mais en plus, je n'ai forcément pas envie de rire de tout. Je ris de ce que je veux, quand je veux.'<sup>39</sup>

So what *was Charlie*? I mean both the journal, and the series of events in 2015 for which the name 'Charlie' has come to stand? On the one hand, 'Charlie',

38 See Anne Laffeter, 'Luz: "J'avais un bout de cerveau qui cognait contre les murs"', *Les Inrockuptibles*, no. 101, 28 April 2015, available at [www.lesinrocks.com/2015/04/28/actualite/actualite/luz-javais-un-bout-de-cerveau-qui-cognait-contre-les-murs](http://www.lesinrocks.com/2015/04/28/actualite/actualite/luz-javais-un-bout-de-cerveau-qui-cognait-contre-les-murs) (viewed 4 March 2020).

39 'I don't need your blessing to laugh at what I want to laugh at. But what's more, I don't necessarily want to laugh at everything. I laugh at what I want, when I want.' Charb, *Petite traité d'intolérance: les fatwas de Charb* (Paris: Libro 2012), 2.

the name of the journal, refers to a forty-eight-year-old joke that compares the body of a deceased leader to that of Charlie Brown. *Charlie's* inaugural joke, then, compares the sublime body of the leader to the immortal bodies of the funnies. This joke has a political dimension, although it does not have a political content. Comparing De Gaulle to Charlie Brown does not express an opinion about the former president's ideas, policies and ideologies, just like Luz's big-nosed Muhammad doesn't offer a genuine critique of the religion of Islam. Yet the laughter both drawings provoke embodies an ethical and political attitude. In mocking the piousness of public scenes of commemoration and rituals in which the name of the prophet is honoured, the journal expresses a crucial idea: namely that the symbol—the name, the soul, the public persona—is never more important than life itself.

It is ironic that the history of *Charlie Hebdo*, which started with a joke about public mourning, ended with a public spectacle in which the journal itself was commemorated and elevated to the level of a symbol. In the aftermath of the attacks, it was even suggested that Charb, Wolinski, Honore, Cabu and Tignous be included in the Pantheon as heroes of the nation.<sup>40</sup> Fortunately these attempts to turn the cartoonists into martyrs and the journal into a symbol of republicanism only partly succeeded. The artists were, after all, not buried in the Pantheon. The Republican marches were not only blatant displays of nationalism. And the slogan 'Je suis Charlie' on signs and online hashtags did not only signify a desire to appropriate the journal for political purposes. As the ambiguity of the expression indicates, 'Je suis Charlie' also expresses a desire to follow *Charlie*, to walk in its footsteps, and perhaps to remain faithful to the laughter it has provoked. It can even be taken as a declaration of intent: I will keep following *Charlie*, believing that *Charlie's* project will always remain to be continued (*à suivre*).

When *Charlie Hebdo* was relaunched after a month of silence, its cover bore the image of a dog holding the journal in its mouth, chased by other dogs. We recognize, among the canines in pursuit, Marine Le Pen, Sarkozy, a bishop and a terrorist. The journal had thought to accompany it with the text 'life goes on', but opted at the last moment for 'C'est reparti!': Here we go again!<sup>41</sup> As Luz, who had drawn the cover, said, the dog is of course *Charlie*, on the run from the religious, social and political forces that try to contain it. But it doesn't only run to escape, Luz insists. It also runs because it enjoys running. It is a 'truc joyeux'—something jolly—since enjoyment itself is what enables us to continue with life. Perhaps the cover illustrates what Georges Wolinski revealed

40 This was suggested by a group of writers who signed the petition by Yann Moix, 'Le panthéon pour Charlie', *La Regle du Jeu*, 9 January 2015, available at <https://laregledujeu.org/2015/01/09/18656/le-pantheon-pour-charlie> (viewed 4 March 2020).

41 Luz, '... C'est reparti!', appeared on the cover of *Charlie Hebdo*, no. 1179, 25 February 2015. For a reproduction, see "'Charlie" redevient hebdo!', *Le Point*, 23 February 2015, available at [www.lepoint.fr/societe/charlie-hebdo-c-est-reparti-23-02-2015-1907298\\_23.php](http://www.lepoint.fr/societe/charlie-hebdo-c-est-reparti-23-02-2015-1907298_23.php) (viewed 30 March 2020).

to be his life-motto, when asked by *L'Express* in 2001: 'il faut durer, mais il ne faut pas s'éterniser': one has to persist, but without dragging on.<sup>42</sup>

**Yasco Horsman** is University Lecturer in Comparative Literature and Film Studies at Leiden University. He is the author of *Theaters of Justice: Staging, Judging and Working Through in Arendt, Brecht and Delbo* (Stanford University Press 2010), essays on Coetzee, Freud, Kafka, Spiegelman and Mickey Mouse, and co-editor (with Frans-Willem Korsten) of a special issue of *Law and Literature* on 'Legal Bodies' (2016). He is co-editor (with Pepita Hesselberth) of the book series 'Media | Art | Politics' at Leiden University Press. Email: y.horsman@hum.leidenuniv.nl

42 Roland Mihaïl and Antoine Silber, 'Questionnaire de Proust: Georges Wolinski', *L'Express*, 19 July 2001, available at [www.lexpress.fr/culture/livre/questionnaire-de-proust-georges-wolinski\\_817573.html](http://www.lexpress.fr/culture/livre/questionnaire-de-proust-georges-wolinski_817573.html) (viewed 4 March 2020).