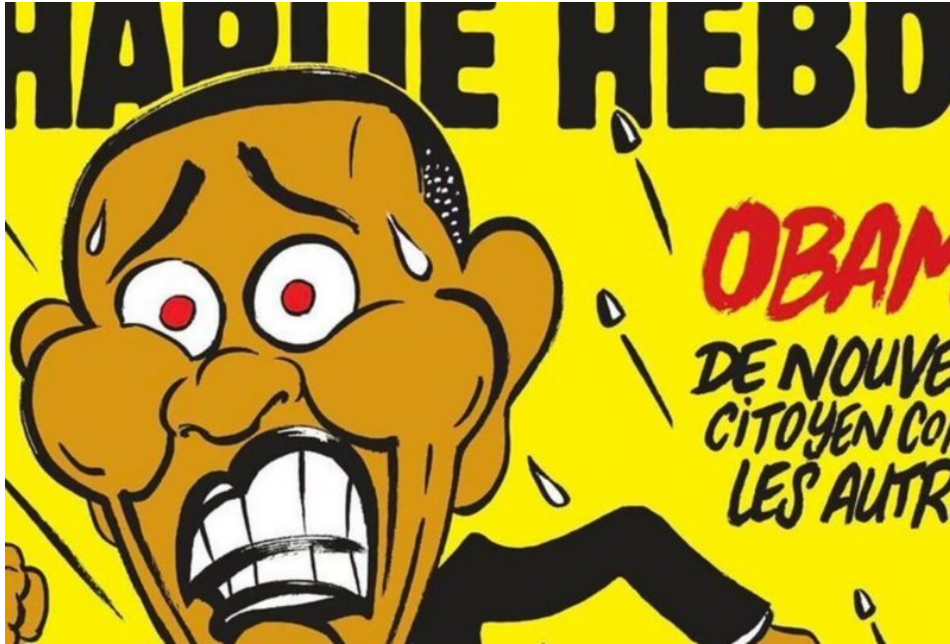


INSIDE CHARLIE HEBDO, TWO YEARS LATER



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On a winter's morning, in a street of Paris like many others, I am standing in front of a door. I press the buzzer and say the password I was sent a few days before, hoping to pronounce it correctly. Luckily, I hear the sound of the door unlocking. As I step in, the door shuts behind me. Now I am in the lobby, and I have a gate in front of me.

The speaker's metallic voice asks me to come forward. Three men appear at the gate, whose kindness is proportional to their enormous size. They greet me smiling and they call me by my first name: clearly, they have read the email as well, which I had sent the previous week, and had all my personal details.

They perform a security check that would be ordinary business at an airport. Then I proceed straight on, following the direction towards which the gun of one of the three men, not too well hidden in the inside pocket, is pointing at.

It follows more security doors, some stairs, machine guns and pistols, a flood of details that I cannot reveal. In the end, I find myself in another lobby, only much more claustrophobic. Between two armored doors, in the silence, time moves slowly.

SLANG!

A woman appears in front of me, it seems that time has stopped for her, she has black hair, she is French from head to toe, and straight away I imagine her on the barricades along with Robespierre throwing stones on the Ancien Régime.

<<Bienvenue à Charlie Hebdo >>

She is Marika Bret, Head of Human Resources for the newspaper that two years ago became unwillingly famous all over the world. And what I have in front of me is the newsroom, no longer that newsroom but a new one, also known as the best kept secret in Paris. If I were to reveal to someone its exact location, the publisher would immediately report me. Marika leads the way through the corridors, where on the walls the best covers in the recent history of the newspaper since the reopening after the attacks, look back at me. The other ones, the historical ones, are not there.

<< Too painful to watch >> says Marika.

We enter the largest of the rooms, that of the cartoonists, and I suddenly realized what will be the main reaction of the day: the surprise of seeing me there.

<< Ma mère>> she says. <<My mother >>. People smile at me. They understand that I am the Italian guy that wrote an article on the Internet explaining the Charlie Hebdo cartoon on the earthquake, which three months before that, in Italy, had provoked an unprecedented wave of outrage.

It's Monday, the issue is two days away and work for the cover is ongoing. Cartoonists draw Merkel making out hard, with a Donald Trump with a vagina. It all comes down to this, then. And it's this, just this and nothing else, this gesture that in today's Western world needs an unprecedented military force deployment to be guaranteed.

I follow Marika to her office. At Charlie since 1992 - except for a brief period - she is the public face of the French satirical magazine, one of the few people allowed to speak with the press. On her desk, she keeps a photo of herself along with the former director Charb killed the day of the attack. Laughing, young, perhaps still unaware of the true extent of their work.

How has your life changed after the attack?

<< I had to get used to a completely different kind of life where nothing can happen spontaneously. Everything has to be prepared and planned in advance. If, for example, I wanted to run to buy a baguette now, I would not be able to (a significant number of Charlie's employees have bodyguards) >>

Houellebecq argues that the Western man doesn't know what to do with his freedom. Do you agree?

<< It is hard to understand what freedom really is, because it is not possible to see freedom until it is lost. When Charlie was attacked, each and every one of us represented a target. Unfortunately, some people, including most of international politics, have not yet understood it, they have not really realized that one morning, in the heart of Paris, a newspaper was attacked and its journalists exterminated >>.

Who is responsible for the events of January 7th, 2015?

<< The international press, French politicians, left wing intellectuals are the major causes of what happened on January 7th. Charlie Hebdo was left alone, despite a few years before the newsroom being put on fire. But even then politicians said that we were looking for trouble. We were trying to play victim, and we were "just" some cartoonists after all. How much can a cartoonist matter? it was said. The lack of support from institutions at that time gave the message that we really were responsible for something. January 7th was a settling of an unpaid bill that we all knew was coming >>.

What are your memories of that day?

<< By an incredible coincidence during the attack I was not in the newsroom. I was at the bank and my phone was off. When I turned it back on, it was flooded by so many messages that I understood. It was still unknown whether there had been casualties, but I I was sure there were. We had it sworn on us in those years, namely since 2007.

Everything that happened after that, now that time has passed, is still a confused memory but I know that at the police station, while one of the detectives was explaining the situation, I asked why no one had protected Charb, who had been explicitly threatened. He said he had no idea, especially since, according to information at their disposal, for months the question was not "whether" there would be an attack, but "when" >>.

Marine Le Pen has shown on several occasions to support Charlie with no ifs and no buts, far cry from the continuous distancing of French liberal intellectuals but also European ones - I am thinking of some highly critical articles of the Guardian.

<< Marine Le Pen exploits Charlie Hebdo to direct the hatred of the French toward specific communities. We do not promote hatred for anyone. But I have to admit that we have received much support from many journalists and intellectuals of the Left of Le Figaro . This is the indicator of a profound movement: the left, not only French, is refusing to take a clear position in defense of freedom of expression because of fear >>.

Afraid of what?

<< Of breaking the inviolable dogma of the “politically correct.” And of seeing the privileges that they have won over the years questioned. Those who in the 70s challenged the bourgeoisie are now themselves the bourgeoisie. They turned their backs to the kids they were and were not replaced by anyone. Young people - struggling with a monstrous crisis - are too busy in their many individual battles to be able to form a class consciousness. This creates a new social dialectic, where this strange bourgeoisie, often liberal only in words, is not questioned by anyone >>

Has the support that you received after January 7 surprised you?

<< It moved us but it also made us feel in a difficult situation, as we knew that many of those people, starting with the politicians, did not know what Charlie was and, therefore, we knew there would have been misunderstandings in the future.

The most striking example was when Obama invited us to the White House, but only on condition that none of us would ask him a question. We refused. >>

Isn't there, now, the risk of becoming yourself some kind of Authority for the Freedom of Expression, in the same manner as the Ayatollah?

<< Yes, and in fact we always like to reiterate that we are just a newspaper, not the Holy Text of Freedom. We strongly reject the status of "symbols," of "monuments." We are people whose profession is to be journalists. You may not agree with what we publish, but you cannot force us to cease to exist >>.

Let's talk about the cartoon on the Italian earthquake. Why do you think 34,000 messages of insults and threats have crossed the Alps to fall down on Paris?

<< As always, the issue is the representation of the bodies. As for the Syrian child cartoon, people do not forgive us for the representation of the martyred body of the victims. But what it is crucial to state and to reiterate is that the representation is just a mean, never an end. Believe me, we know exactly what the respect for the victims is>>.

Did you imagine such a reaction?

<< Since we never mean to offend just for the sake of it, every time it's a surprise. Having been working for Charlie since 1992, I can say that in the 90s many far more controversial cartoons did not arouse the reactions we see almost daily at present. Cartoons of that kind would not even be proposed today, as it is long since the Western world has entered an era in which censorship has turned into its most terrible form: self-censorship. >>

We make a break and enter the coffee room. It looks like that of a normal office, there's also a pinball and bulletproof windows.

Coco is there too. The life of Charlie's employees might have lost its spontaneity, but they have certainly not lost their vitality. Coco frantically asks questions, she's curious of everything, watches you from outside trying to guess your inner contradictions and then represent them on paper. The incredible part is that her guesses are always right.

How does your creative process?

<< In my opinion, satire has to do with research. Sometimes it takes 5 minutes, sometimes hours, but when you finally find the idea it is amazing because it always strikes you as a surprise. What I try to do is to create a counterpoint, in order to create a completely new shade on the specific piece of reality that I am observing. That nuance, that new way, this is satire >>.

What is the main quality to be a cartoonist?

<< To be a cartoonist you have to use not only your hands but also your eyes. You need to look a little further than others and draw what you see to show the world this new horizon. Sometimes, what I am seeing is very funny, sometimes it's very dark. Exactly like human thoughts. The quest of the famous "ha-ha-ha" is not what the satirical author seeks. >>

Do you deliberately choose to provoke a strong reaction?

<< It's inevitable. Drawing means to look further, to remove the mask of social superficiality and moral hypocrisy. Behind the mask, there is always something shocking, in a way or another; otherwise no mask would be needed. >>

In your opinion, why this shock becomes blind rage so often?

<< On social media, we are read with the same vocabulary used to understand traditional medias, but we talk a completely different language. In order to understand us, you need to study this language and even then some people would not understand, because sense of humor is like bravery, nobody can teach you how to have it.

So I understand people who just don't get us, who got angry or even those who insult us. What I don't understand are people who want our death. We've never hurt anybody.>>

Marika nods, inhales some smoke from her cigarette.

<< Many people are tolerant only when it's about somebody else's values. >>

Your family, the people who love you, don't they ask you to stop?

(*Marika answers*) << They are concerned, of course, but they've never asked me to stop because they know what this job means to me.

If I stop tomorrow, I would certainly regain some of my liberties but I would have to renounce to another kind of liberty that is, in my opinion, much more important. Paradoxically, it is with the loss of certain daily liberties that I contribute in the defense of a bigger liberty, which I think is essential for this world. That's why I resist, waiting for the day when all this will end. >>

Do you really think it's going to end one day?

<< Oh no! Of course not. (*she laughs*) >>

Every single media in the world told what happened to Coco on the 7th of January 2015, and I find useless to ask again for details, risking to fall in cheap sensationalism. I only ask her if having a very young daughter at the time helped her to overcome the tragedy.

<< In the days after the attack, I had two reasons to be worried: As a human being, obviously, and as a mother. I didn't want my daughter to see, not even a second, that I was afraid. Months after yes, it was also thank to her if I was able to go back to a normal life, with some limitations, as you can see (the agent of security constantly stays one step away from her). But it's not only about her, there are also all the people that I lost that day, they were among the most important people in my life. Keeping drawing is the only way to keep their spirits alive. And it's also the only way I found to live in peace with myself. >>

Coco goes back to her drawing, I go back with Marika to her desk. The image I have in front of me at this moment is pretty damn powerful: on the left, a bullet proof vest. On the right, on her desk, the threats of death received during the day. Behind her, a weak December sunlight pierces the window - impossible to break, impossible to open.

I imagine that you don't receive many visitors in your office.

<< Nobody knows our location, except for a handful of journalists, less than ten. We know that soon or later the secret will be revealed and we will have to move, like we did before. >>

How can you be funny in such atmosphere?

<< You have to force yourself to forget where you are and focus on your work.

The state of emergency is not finished. France is still under threat of attack, you can't step in a shop without having your bag searched. >>

Considering all of the heat you have received over the last couple of year, are you sure the world still wants Charlie?

<< For each person that hates us, there's one that support us, that understands what we do, even if she doesn't agree with us sometimes. But we want to exist not for those who like us, but for those who dislike us: we want to keep giving them the possibility of hating us. We want to keep giving them the choice. >>

Do you think that we are about to definitely end the Age of Enlightenment, based on the supremacy absolute of freedom of speech?

<< These are dark times, no doubts about that. But I see a light at the end of the tunnel. One thing that hits me after the massacre is how children handled it. Kids love freedom, that's why they love to draw since it's such a strong and instinctive way to enjoy freedom.

On January 7th, 2015 many children all around the world understood that some people died because of a drawing. And yet those children keep drawing. >>