Spring Essay, *Freedom of speech, or cultural racism? Discuss the targets and the power of caricature in relation to the events of the Danish cartoon war and/or the drama of the Charlie Hebdo journalists*

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The purpose of caricature continues to be one of continuous debate. Whereas some insist that it is merely a means to make light of serious matters,[1] others believe it is a way to rebel against authorities,[2] holding the potential for serious political consequences. In the case of *Charlie Hebdo*, the left-wing French satirical newspaper, their mission was '… to break taboos and shatter symbols and every possible type of fanaticism',[3] which, following the fatal attacks on twelve of their staff in their Paris office in January 2015, continues to be an issue of heated debate. By considering the tradition of French political caricature, I will analyse the ways in which Charlie Hebdo has been positioned as both the antagonist and the victim following the attacks, and why this suggests an evolution of caricature as a tool within an increasingly connected world.

Before considering the case of *Charlie Hebdo*, it is necessary to consider the historical context from which it emerged. French caricature as we recognise it today began with the emergence of the satirical journal, *Le Caricature*, in 1830. As we see with *Charlie Hebdo*, *Le Caricature* relied on the double-layer understanding, or double-entendre, that assumes the knowledge of its targeted audience, who were often domestic and would therefore understand the nuanced references. In 1831, Charles Philipon published an image of a plasterer in *Le Caricature (Fig 1)*. This figure happened to resemble the current king Louis Philippe, whom, despite his promises, had imposed strict censorship law on publications. Having declared that the image was a satire of the government and not specifically of the king, Philipon then produced a series of images *(Fig 2)* before the court, transforming the king into a pear and arguing that if any image that resembled the king would be illegal, then so would a drawing of a pear. Although Philipon lost the court case, *La Poire* became what would now be considered a meme, being relentlessly caricatured and chalked onto walls around the city.

Certain characteristics seen within contemporary French caricature refer directly to its own legacy, such as persistent sexual and scatological humour, the symbolic meaning of writing tools

[1] E. H. Gombrich, *Magic, Myth and Metaphor: Reflections on Pictorial Satire* (London: Phaidon, 1999) pg 209.

[2] Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1991)

[3] VICE News *, Exclusive Interview with 'Charlie Hebdo' Cartoonist Luz (2015)* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ebL1oCy6tgY> [accessed 20 February 2019].

like a pen or quill,[4] and the double-layered context required for understanding and engagement. According to Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius, 'cartoons are considered transparent, trivial and entertaining precisely because of their opacity, because of their multiple intertextual references and semiotic density, as well as their close interaction with desires and anxieties that are repressed in the unconscious'.[5] This semiotic density reenforces the viewer's contextual understanding, allowing them to correctly read and decode the image and, therefore, have their place in society reiterated back to them and confirmed.

As a left-wing publication, we can be confident in saying that *Charlie Hebdo* acts as a sermon that preaches to the converted,[6] which would consist of other predominantly white, left-wing French people. Although the publication is designed to appeal to one particular political stance, perhaps its mistake is in assuming they are against only one opposing view, which is a somewhat archaic notion when considering the history and waves of immigration in France since the 19th century. For those that remain as part of society, yet excluded from the existing binary narrative, such as the large population of French Muslims who live predominantly in the banlieues of major cities, it is easy to miss those social or political clues, exposing the caricature to indifference or misinterpretation and a potentially defensive reaction.

The inherent reliance on the audience's understanding of a domestic context and its nuances aids in constructing a notion of Us and Them. When religious or racial messages are embedded in this image it isolates communities in ways which, regardless of the journal's original intentions, are detrimental to the minority community as it further segregates them from the rest. Any double-layer meaning that lampoons absurd, right-wing stances surrounding race or religion is undermined by the very act of reconstructing an Other which is contradictory to the journal's leftist stance.

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[4] State of the Arts Podcast, *Charlie Hebdo and the Tradition of French Political Satire (2015)* <https://itunes.apple.com/id/podcast/state-of-the-arts/id941313219?mt=2> [accessed 20 February 2019].

[5] Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius, *The Jyllands-Posten Muhammad Cartoons Controversy: racism and 'cartoon work' in the age of the World Wide Web,* in Racism Postcolonialism Europe (Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2009) pg 151.

[6] Gombrich: pg 195.

Caricature always has a target, although perhaps the target audience is more important to the publishers than the subject matter. While creating an Other, caricatures allow the target audience to strengthen the bonds within their own community, whether through their political stance, economic status or, in the case of *Charlie Hebdo*, with their race and religion. What complicates the *Charlie Hebdo* case is that the journalists, who were predominantly white and male and, therefore, in a dominant societal position, targeted a minority community who were already suffering from high tensions within Europe due to the refugee crisis and ongoing Islamaphobia projected by the media. *La Poire*, like the majority of French caricature, targeted the authority and appealed to the perspective of the working and lower classes who, although a majority, lacked power.

What caused *Charlie Hebdo* to evoke such a strong reaction in January 2015 was their depiction of the Prophet Muhammad. Although, not according to the Quran but rather the Hadiths - supplemental teachings of the life of Muhammad after his death - visual depictions of the Prophet are prohibited, considered haram. *Charlie Hebdo* not-only visually portrayed Muhammad, it made a mockery of him. The bold, simplistic form of the caricature emphasises the figure's eyes, nose and clothing, which some take to be a racist depiction of Muslims,[7] draw on similar stereotypical depictions of Jews as depicted by the German Nazi Party in the 1930/40s *(Fig 3).* In one drawing, the figure is depicted saying '100 lashes if you don't die from laughter' at the rebranded 'Charia Hebdo' issue, a seemingly direct reference to the Islamic ritual of flagellation, and perhaps the case of Saudi blogger, Raif Badawi, who was condemned to 1000 lashes and 10 years in prison for critiquing powerful clerics online towards the at the end of 2014.[8]

Following the attacks, the world saw the emergence of 'Je suis Charlie', in which 3.7 million people took to the streets, both the public and governments alike, choosing to stand in solidarity with the journalists who lost their lives *(Fig 4),* but also to solidify *Charlie Hebdo* as a symbol of standing in favour of freedom of speech despite threats. Caricatures, by their very

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[7] *Fisher, Max, What everyone gets wrong about Charlie Hebdo and racism (2015) <https://www.vox.com/2015/1/12/7518349/charlie-hebdo-racist> [accessed 20 February 2019].*

[8] BBC News, *Saudi blogger Raif Badawi gets 10 year jail sentence (2014)* <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-27318400> [accessed 20 February 2019].

nature, rely on offensive and taboo topics and humour to communicate to their audience in a way which mainstream media and art overlooks. According to caricaturist Rénauld 'Luz' Luzier, *Charlie Hebdo* has '…always navigated between being the role of agitators and the white knights defending free speech',[9] which, although true, could be argued as the case for all caricaturists as they decide whether to use caricature as a 'formidable weapon' or to preach to the converted,[10]

The march which took place on the 11th January 2015 signified the 'massive superego spectacle in which everyone is called upon to identify as a particular kind of moral subject',[11] defending the multiple factors of freedom that are 'integral to Western liberal democracy and its egalitarian grounds'. Such factors are markers of a sense of identity which, in the case of *Charlie Hebdo*, categorises not only the French people but also the western world, making clear the value of 'freedom of speech…civilisation, rationality, progress and truth',[12] and emphasising the distance between themselves and those who are depicted as having contrasting values. For those who resisted 'Je Suis Charlie' and instead identified as 'Je ne suis pas Charlie' or 'Je suis Ahmed' - the Muslim policeman who died in the attack - critiquing the magazine became unfavourable, being interpreted as being against the before mentioned western values rather than the unsavoury humour the magazine presented. Jacob Canfield, writing for *The Hooded Utalitarian*, maintained that '…free speech does not mean freedom from criticism. Criticism *is* speech - to honour 'free speech martyrs' by shouting down any criticism of their work is both ironic and depressing.'[13]

Although largely unknown outside of France prior to the attacks, *Charlie Hebdo* has since adopted the status of a symbol within the western world. By 'elevating them to the status of signifiers (if not fetishes) of freedom and enlightened secularism',[14] the publication has morphed into everything it was fighting to abolish. It further separates the liberal white audience it appeals

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[9] VICE News.

[10] Gombrich, pg 195.

[11] Jacob Hjortsberg in Alessandro Zagato, *The Event of Charlie Hebdo: Imaginaries of Freedom and Control* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015), pg 8.

[12] Zagato pg 30.

[13] Zagato pg 68.

[14] Murawska-Muthesius, pg 158.

to from the targeted Muslim minority, despite their desire to be open to those with other beliefs, backgrounds and status.

The role of religion, especially in France, remains prevalent, especially considering France's relationship to secularism since the French Third Republic. According to Caroline Fourest, '…the right to commit blasphemy is a cornerstone of our struggle, our most sacred asset' in the struggle for a secular democracy.[15] For this reason, she notes that the *Charlie Hebdo* attackers were attempting to turn back the clock on centuries of developments in France and the west, further emphasising the symbolic significance of *Charlie Hebdo* as representation of western ideals. As the title of her book implies, defending the ability to blaspheme, or offend, is necessary in a democratic society and vital for progression and necessary conversations.

Charlie Hebdo was not the first journal to evoke such a strong reaction within the Muslim community. In 2005, Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*, published a controversial depiction of Muhammad with a bomb labelled 'Peace' in place of his turban *(Fig 6)*, creating a visual pun of the bulbous shape of the turban typically associated with Islam and other eastern religions, igniting violent protests around the world.[16] Flemming Rose, foreign affairs and culture editor of the *Jyllands-Posten*, has since become a figure advocating freedom of speech, standing against the 'tyranny of silence',[17] and stating that Islam is 'incompatible with contemporary democracy and freedom of speech, where you must be ready to put up with insults, mockery and ridicule'.

Such arguments support the idea that political correctness is not satire, and if they were to try not to offend anyone, they would end up with the 'Journale Responsable' *(Fig 6).* The notion that the likes of *Charlie Hebdo* and *Jyllands-Posten* use freedom of speech to simultaneously hyperbolise the position of the right wing and the fanaticism of the Islamic terrorists is perhaps a noble intention, but fails to recognise the position of the millions of civil, peaceful Muslims around

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[15] Caroline Fourest, *In praise of blasphemy: Why Charlie Hebdo is not "islamophobic"* (Paris: Grasset, 2015), pg 3.

[16] Marion G. Müller and Esra Özcan *The political iconography of Muhammad cartoons: Understanding cultural conflict and political action.* PS: Political Science & Politics (2007) pg 287-291.

[17] BBC Free Thinking, *Slavoj Zizek, Camille Paglia, Flemming Rose* (2019) <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0000hd7> [accessed 20 February 2019].

the world. On the Danish caricatures, Murawska-Muthesius states that 'they were acting as a projection of the terror inflicted by the west, and suggesting more generally that any image or indeed any representation is likely to tell us more about the representing subject than the object it represents.'[18] Regardless of their motive, their position of privilege and power cannot be ignored, especially within the tense political climate from 2001 onwards.

As mentioned, the reliance on stereotypes to depict certain nationalities further suggests that *Charlie Hebdo's* intentions are less so about addressing taboos and more about perpetuating racist ideas. Adorning caricatures with large noses or lips to indicate ethnicity are not necessary for the jokes to work,[19] suggesting a racist undertone. However, given the nature of caricature and the role of double-layered meaning, it could be argued that the use of racist imagery actually satirises racist portrayals rather than endorses them.[20]

Presented with the severity of the attacks on the *Charlie Hebdo* journalists and the provocative notion of freedom of speech, it is necessary to consider the role of power and how that affects the impact of a caricature and its effect on society. Similarly to Philipon's Pear, it could be argued that *Charlie Hebdo* targeted the powerful figures within religions, such as priests, imams and rabbis, rather than the followers of those religions. If that is the case, which their caricatures indicate, they were in fact aiming for those more powerful than themselves, rather than any disenfranchised minorities. Whether it would be interpreted as such is another issue, but perhaps the intent is more wholesome than it might first appear to be. Flemming Rose stated that 'power is not static',[21] arguing that the dominant power shifts throughout the creation, publication and reaction to a caricature. Perhaps the actual publication of such caricatures is with the journalists in power, but the threats and protests that followed the *Jyllands-Posten* release and the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks were felt by Muslims around the world, therefore outnumbering the journalists and, again, shifting power relations.

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[18] Murawska-Muthesius, pg 159.

[19] Fisher

[20] Fisher

[21] BBC Free Thinking.

The attacks on the *Charlie Hebdo* caricaturists raised the question whether anyone has the right, especially illustrators, to target any particular collective with such force. Perhaps such kind of provocations cause more harm than good, further segregating minorities and creating disillusion between communities. The attacks on *Charlie Hebdo* have ignited a range of opinions, with many arguing that the attack was not motivated by religion but rather through post-colonial influence and economic disparity,[22] which happens to target French Muslims who face profound discrimination in the workplace and in society.[23] Others, like Slavoj Žižek,[24] feel that is a failure of liberals to ignore the religious sentiment of the attacks and that it is necessary to focus on the cause, not the symptom. In this case, the works of *Charlie Hebdo* do exactly that by addressing those issues directly, forcing the audience into an uncomfortable situation in which they are confronted with an ugly reality. In the same way the print shop window acted as a mirror for the Victorian public, caricature, albeit aggressive in its technique, can bring taboo discussions into the foreground to encourage productive discussions, hopefully in an attempt to draw attention to underlying pressures rather than ignoring them.

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[22] Gilles Kepel, *Terror in France: The Rise of Jihad in the West* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2017) pg 37.

[23] Marie-Anne Valfort, '*Religious discrimination in access to employment: a reality* ', Institut Montaigne, (2015).

[24] BBC Free Thinking.

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Fig 1: *Le Replâtrage*. by Charles Philipon / Auguste, La Caricature, 1831

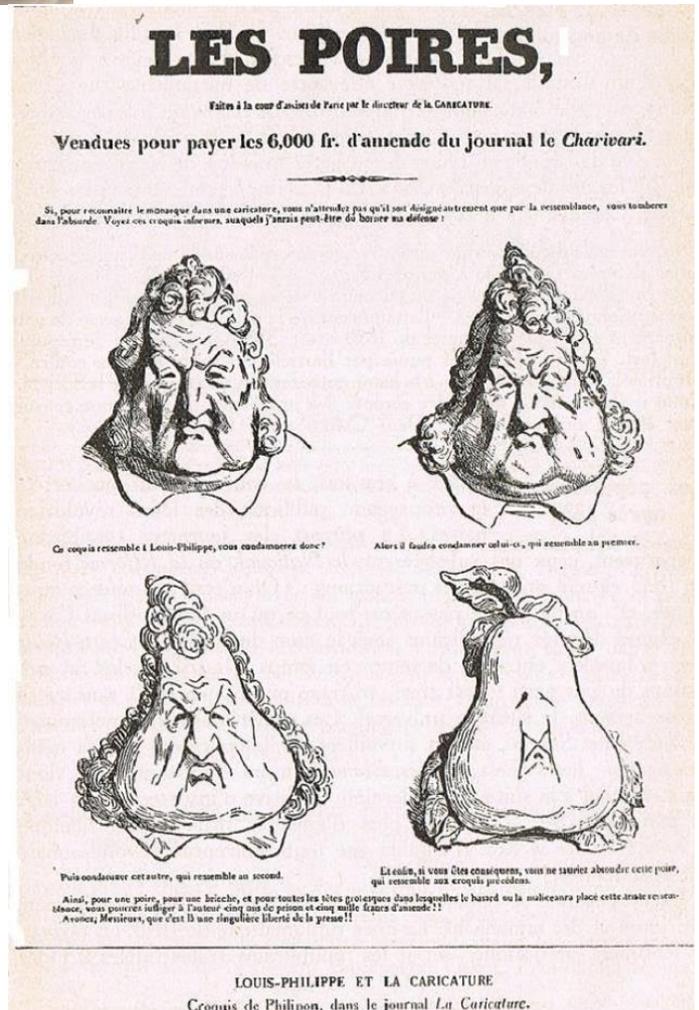Fig 2: *Les Poires*, by Honoré Daumier (1831)

Fig 3: Poster for *The Eternal Jew,* directed by

Fritz Hippler 1940

Fig 5: Charlie Hebdo march, 11th January 2015. Image accessible at: https://

www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2905307/One-million-people-prepare-march-Paris-terror-
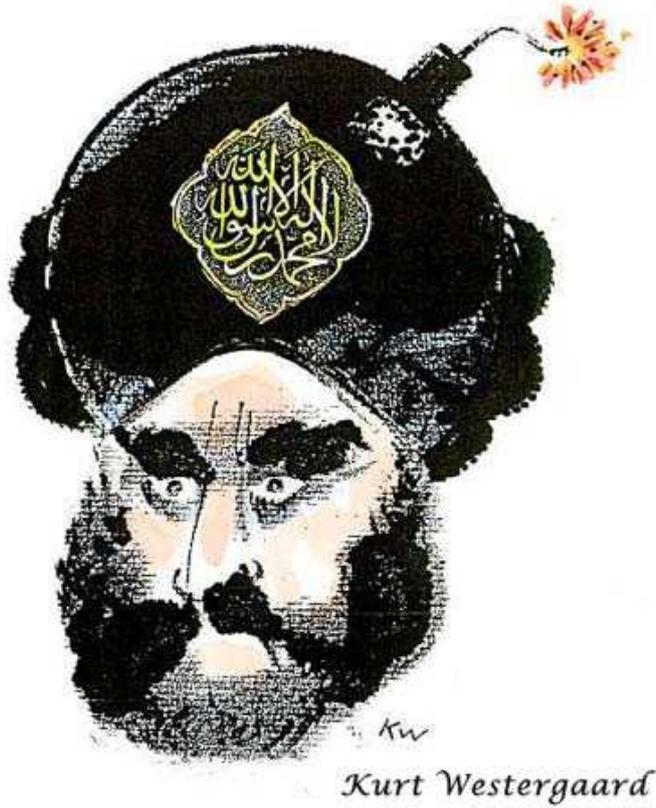
attacks.html

Fig 6: Muhammed, by Kurt Westergaard for Jyllands-Posten

Fig 7: *Journale Responsable*, by Charlie Hebdo, 2015