

Books Interview - The fame game.

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3,028 words

21 August 2003

Financial Times (FT.Com)

English

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So much for the promise of a discreet table. La Colombe d'Or, the fashionable auberge in the fire-ravaged hills above Nice, cannot resist the chance to flaunt a megastar such as **Bernard-Henri Levy**. The man so famous in France that he is known just by his initials - BHL - clearly outranks the rock stars in the eyes of the maitre d'. Noel Gallagher of Oasis and his noisy blonde friends have been pushed into a corner in the shade of a tree. Low-wattage French celebrities have been relegated to the terrace. Levy, France's most famous man of letters and noble causes, is to take centre stage.

The weapons of the intellectual engage - laptop, mobile phone and his freshly typed column for Le Point, a leading centre-right French weekly - are strewn across the table. But the great man, who once rented a suite in this legendary hotel before moving a few yards up the hill into Saint-Paul-de-Vence, is nowhere to be seen. A few minutes later, faxed article in hand, he appears framed in the doorway, his handsome features bathed in the last of the evening sunlight. His trademark white shirt is open pretty much to the waist and would be revealing a muscular, tanned chest were it not at that moment being tenderly fondled by a slender, younger woman, the talented actress and singer, Arielle Dombasle.

BHL and Dombasle are France's most glamorous couple, a modern-day Arthur Miller and Marilyn Monroe. Exchanging smouldering glances, they disentangle themselves from their public display of unrestrainable lust, looking as if spontaneous applause might not be out of the question. With a waist said to be the thinnest in Paris, a pronounced pout and the self-confident look of someone Paris Match described as one of the 10 most beautiful women in the world, Dombasle turns every head in the restaurant as she skips over to a nearby table of friends, leaving her husband to have dinner with me.

For more than 25 years, **Bernard-Henri Levy** has been an unavoidable figure in the Parisian literary and media world. With the imminent English-language publication of his latest book, *Who Killed Daniel Pearl?*, an investigation into the murder of The Wall Street Journal reporter, the BHL phenomenon will soon go global. For years a favourite of Paris Match, Levy is now in the sights of the powerful American glossies. Vanity Fair devoted eight pages of its January issue to a breathless article comparing him to Charles Baudelaire, Emile Zola, Victor Hugo, Andre Malraux, T.E. Lawrence and King David. It also told the story of how the first time Dombasle saw a photograph of him, she mistook him for Jesus Christ.

Born into a wealthy family of lumber merchants in French Algeria in 1948, Levy grew up in Paris where he studied under Louis Althusser, the Marxist theoretician, at the elite *ecole Normale Superieure*. But his own flirtation with Maoism and the far left did not survive for long after the failure of the 1968 student rebellion. Aged 28, Levy used his insider's knowledge of the publishing industry, gained as a precocious editor at the Grasset publishing house, to launch the *nouveaux philosophes*, a group of writers determined to break the stranglehold of Marxism over French life. Levy's contribution was *La Barbarie a Visage Humain*, a book that denounced communism as an excuse for totalitarian savagery.

Loathed by the left, it started with a phrase that became a slogan for a generation: "I am the illegitimate child of a diabolical couple called fascism and Stalinism." But it found a receptive audience among intellectuals still reeling from Solzhenitsyn's Gulag Archipelago. As the French left's monopoly of political debate crumbled with every new revelation of communist atrocities, Levy's youth, wit and good looks offered an attractive alternative to a Marxism that suddenly appeared demode. He cultivated an image of a libertine, cruising around Paris in flashy cars and styling himself as a connoisseur of women. He would joke that Sartre viewed him as a CIA

agent, but his career as a media-friendly philosopher, thinker and all-round stud was made.

In the intervening years, BHL has enjoyed a gilded existence that is really only possible in France as one of those brilliantly plumed peacocks known as intellectuels. In a country whose elite is formed through education rather than birth or wealth, intellectuels, especially the 40 "immortals" who can sign their guest op-eds with the words "of the Academie Francaise", are top of the pile. It explains why philosophy, training in which is the hallmark of the civilised man, is still the first exam sat every summer by candidates for the baccalaureat; why book programmes command near -prime time slots on French television; and why the French state's expenditure on education as a proportion of gross domestic product remains, at seven per cent, considerably higher than the OECD average.

But intellectuels are also emissaries of French culture, moral guides and unofficial diplomats. Like his friend Bernard Kouchner, founder of Medecins sans Frontieres, Levy is one of a number of non-government agents who help France battle for hearts and minds across the world and, occasionally, outmanoeuvre the more conventionally armed American "hyperpuissance". He has spent the past 20 years fighting fascism, Marxism, anti-Semitism, totalitarianism, terrorism and fundamentalism from Bosnia to Bangladesh. While averaging a book a year, he has found the energy to put his ferocious intelligence to work in many other forms. He made acclaimed films, such as *Bosna!*, in defence of Bosnia's Muslims, and *A Day in the Death of Sarajevo*. He has also been an important institution-builder, helping to set up Radio Free Kabul and co-founding the anti-racism group SOS Racisme.

"I am someone who thinks he can influence things," he says. "France, as Karl Marx said, is the country of politics, of the revolution and of universalism. It's these factors that maximise the role of the intellectual and which maybe explain why there is such a large place given to these bizarre personages, intellectuals, who proclaim 'le vrai, le juste et le bien', and who see a great nobility in political causes. It contrasts with the empiricism, pragmatism and intellectual modesty of the Anglo-Saxon world, where there's a caution when it comes to the universal. There is no mythology about politics as there is in France. In England, politics is not a noble calling. It's a normal social activity - perhaps it's better like this."

In February 2002, his diplomatic role was made official when President Jacques Chirac and Lionel Jospin, his socialist prime minister, agreed - itself a rare enough event - to appoint him their special envoy in Afghanistan with a brief to advise them on the role French culture could play in a future aid programme. The idea of France sending a philosopher to a war zone was greeted with amusement internationally. At a time when the US was deploying combat aircraft, missiles and special forces to eradicate Taliban forces sheltering al Qaeda terrorists, Levy's arrival in Kabul captured the very essence of all the deep and longstanding differences in the way the world is viewed in Washington and in Paris.

But on Paris's Left Bank, where Levy and Dombasle maintain one of their sumptuous residences, his recommendations were received in deadly earnest. *Le Monde*, the pre-eminent newspaper of the French establishment, devoted more than 3,000 words to extracts from the 100-page report, which Levy submitted to the president and the prime minister in early April 2002. Its somewhat surreal proposals included training Afghan army officers at Saint-Cyr, the French military academy; the creation of an "Afghan école Nationale d'Administration" to imbue the civil service with Cartesian rationality ("We did it in Algeria, why not in Kabul?"); the establishment of a French cultural centre in Kabul; and the formation of a crack team of "hussars to spread the values of 1789" through the Afghan towns and villages.

Levy, of course, does not receive only respectful attention, even in France. He is regular fodder for the satirists of *Les Guignols*, France's Spitting Image. When the BHL puppet speaks, it is pounded into silence by cream pies. This is a reference to the fact that Levy has been entarted by Noel Godin, the Belgian pie-thrower (and author of *Cream and Punishment*), on a record half a dozen occasions. Godin says the type of person who will admit to feeling ecstatic at the discovery of a new shade of grey is a constant provocation. The reaction of his victims, who range from Jean-Luc Godard to Bill Gates, is revealing. Levy, it seems, does not see the funny side. At one flanning, the apostle of tolerance delivered a flawless uppercut. Footage of Levy shouting at Godin, "Get up, or I'll kick your head in," was repeatedly broadcast on French television. The Belgian has promised to end hostilities only when Levy and Dombasle sing the Maurice Chevalier ditty, "Avez -Vous Vu le Nouveau Chapeau de Zozo?", in a public duet.

More importantly, Levy's place in the pantheon of French thinkers is far from assured. His diletantism riled professional academics early on in his career. The *New York Review of Books* set the tone for much subsequent criticism in 1980 when it slated his third book, *Le Testament de Dieu*. "Little can be said about Levy's position precisely because so little of it is ever argued," wrote Professor Thomas Sheehan, Stanford's Heidegger

specialist. "He makes his points by rhetorical tropes, wide-ranging historical references ('Consider the Middle Ages,' he advises, or the span of history 'from Epictetus to Malraux'), or by citations from books that he evidently hasn't read or has poorly digested (a reference to a work by Stalin in the Russian, which Levy does not read, a reference to all of Clement of Alexandria's mammoth *Protrepticus*, which he has not studied, and so on)."

A quarter of a century on, received academic opinion seems to have changed surprisingly little. Will the BHL oeuvre speak across the ages? "I would think not," says Professor Gary Gutting, author of *French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century*. "The emerging consensus is that the work of Levy and the other *nouveaux philosophes* is mostly journalistic and does not engage with the big philosophical issues. It was an interesting development, but I don't think it produced serious philosophy. He wrote a great biography of Sartre, he's a very smart guy and, as a celebrity type, makes a great story, but he's not a great philosopher."

His latest book, *Qui a Tue Daniel Pearl?*, which comes out in the US next month, pushes the philosophy to one side altogether. Levy was in the office of Afghan president Hamid Karzai when he heard of Pearl's death and decided to write a book about the journalist he never met. He says he felt that Pearl's murder was a seminal moment, "one of three events, along with the assassination of Massoud and September 11th, that ushered in the 21st century", whose defining feature will be the battle with Islamic fundamentalism.

It seems clear that Levy also saw himself reflected in Pearl, whom he calls his "posthumous friend" and to whom he attributes many of his own characteristics:

"A Jew of the left, a progressive... a friend of the uncounted, the universal orphan, the disinherited", as well a firm believer in the possibility of a moderate Islam.

He immediately phoned his editor at Grasset but received a depressing warning: "Great. Bravo," he said. "Do it if you want, but I warn you that by the time yours comes out, there will already be dozens that have appeared in America." The editor was wrong. Levy was fast. The 530-page book (400 pages in English) took a little over a year to write.

It is to Levy's credit that it bears few traces of being a rush job, even if, like many French books, it suffers from a lack of an index and occasionally loses a bit of credibility because of poor copy-editing. On one page, early on in the book, for example, Richard Reid, the shoe bomber on the Paris-Miami flight, is called Charles Reid, while Anthony Giddens, the director of the London School of Economics, is rechristened Christopher.

Otherwise, it's a copper-bottomed investigation, which has been a well-deserved hit, selling nearly 200,000 copies in France. Levy travelled to Los Angeles to talk to Pearl's family about his final, videotaped words; to London and Bosnia on the trail of the plot's LSE-educated mastermind, Omar Sheikh; to Dubai, on the terrorist's money trail; to the hotel in the Karachi suburbs where Pearl was held and murdered nine days after his kidnapping. He approached the subject "as a writer, philosopher and journalist" and has ended up producing what he called a "romanquete", a cross between a roman (novel) and an enquete (investigation). As far as this type of non-fiction novel goes, it is on a par with Oswald's Tale, Norman Mailer's attempt to unravel the assassination of JFK, but not as grittily realistic and controlled as *In Cold Blood*, the product of Truman Capote's six-year investigation into the unexplained murder of a family of four in rural Kansas.

"There's a long tradition of writers much greater than me - Malaparte, Sartre, Foucault, Hemingway - turning their hands to journalism without abandoning their identity as writers," Levy says. "But the word romanquete is mine. The genre enables one to go further, to make the bridge between the facts, to discover more things." The boundaries can sometimes be unclear. Levy says he has only allowed himself artistic licence under strict conditions, the most important of which is that he must feel confident that he fully understands his characters. "I think I am among those people on this planet who know Omar Sheikh well," he says. "Having studied Daniel Pearl so closely, I think that I know him as well as it is possible for a foreigner who never met him... When you really know someone from the inside, when you extrapolate from the facts available, then you have a good source."

Levy believes the reporter's kidnapping and murder was essentially a "crime of state" that implicates parts of the Pakistani government and, in particular, its Inter-Services Intelligence agency (ISI). That conclusion is not particularly original. Tariq Ali said much the same thing in his analysis of the Pearl murder in *The Guardian*. The author of *The Clash of Fundamentalisms* argued that hardline Islamic groups such as Jaish-e-Mohammed and Harkatul Ansar, who claim responsibility for acts of terrorism in Pakistan, are probably just shell organisations controlled by the ISI. Sections of the ISI who patronised, funded and manipulated these organisations were livid

at Musharraf's "betrayal of the Taliban" and at being forced to unravel the only victory they had ever scored - the Taliban takeover in Kabul.

What is new in Qui a Tue Daniel Pearl? is the idea that the journalist was murdered because he "knew too much". Levy claims that Pearl was on to al Qaeda plans to gain access to Pakistan's nuclear technology. In other words, that Pearl was not killed because he was American and Jewish, as his last videotaped messages, released to media organisations by his kidnappers, would seem to suggest. It is an interesting thesis, but one which Levy does not succeed in nailing down entirely satisfactorily. It is particularly frustrating that Levy has failed to persuade The Wall Street Journal to talk to him (although that is not made clear at any point in the French version of the book). If anyone knew what leads Pearl was pursuing during his days in Pakistan, it would have been the American newspaper. However, for reasons unknown to Levy, Pearl's employer refused to co-operate with his investigation.

In fact, The Wall Street Journal has since gone one step further by undermining the entire thrust of Levy's thesis. In an e-mailed response to the FT's questions on the subject, the newspaper said: "We have published everything we know on this topic. We have no reason to believe Danny Pearl was pursuing any article focused on a conspiracy among Pakistan, North Korea and al Qaeda such as that suggested in **Bernard-Henri Levy's** book. The Wall Street Journal was not involved in any way in the preparation of this book. However, we urge all the authorities involved in the investigation to review the book to see whether it provides any useful information which could help in the effort to bring Danny's killers to justice."

Levy is a compulsive worker: his self-discipline as a writer is legendary. In addition to turning out his widely read weekly column for Le Point, over the past three years he has published the seventh in his series of Questions de Principe, a 400-page book entitled Reflexions sur la Guerre et le Mal et la Fin de l'Histoire, the 100-page report for President Jacques Chirac on Afghanistan and now the book on Pearl. At 55 years old, BHL is probably in his prime. "How can we tell?" he asks. "We will only know retrospectively. I am working very hard but then I have worked enormously hard for 25 years because that's what I feel I must do."

Jo Johnson is a FT correspondent in Paris, and the co-author, with Martine Orange, of "The Man Who Tried to Buy the World: Jean-Marie Messier and Vivendi Universal"

ENGLISH-LANGUAGE WORKS BY BHL

Who Killed Daniel Pearl? is published on September 1 by Melville House Publishing at \$25.95

BHL's acclaimed biography of Jean-Paul Sartre, Sartre: The Philosopher of the Twentieth Century, translated by Andrew Brown, is published in English this month (Polity Press GBP25).

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