

... RITER: *French Thinkers*

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aimed at explaining why, as he sees it, cultural standards have shrunk into insignificance as cultural figures have been transformed from elites of taste and discrimination into creatures of the mass media marketplace.

"The boundary line between culture and entertainment has become blurry," Mr. Finkelkraut writes. "Today it is common to designate as culture activities in which thought plays no role at all."

A similar point, although expressed differently, is getting most of the attention in Mr. Lévy's book. It is his charge that a group of popular stars have, in the country of Montaigne and Voltaire, Zola and Camus, replaced serious thinkers as the most conspicuous trend-setters, commentators and spiritual guides of France.

Mr. Lévy specifically mentions a popular singer of satirical songs named Renaud, who was invited some time ago to appear on France's highest-brow literary program. Among the others is Bernard Tapie, a wealthy businessman and the star of a television program called "Ambition," who has made free enterprise into a glitzy sort of media campaign.

These are "appealing figures," Mr. Lévy writes. But in the context of French intellectual history, they mark a decline. They are basically too simple and monotonous to be valid as spiritual guides.

Yet, Mr. Lévy concludes, their prominence signals a real political danger, because, as he puts it, intellectual "clarity," an appreciation of complexity, and the ability to make learned distinctions are among the fundamental conditions of democratic life.

Referring to past figures like Sartre, Camus and Mauriac, Mr. Lévy said: "Because they wrote novels, and because their talent was recognized, they were authorized and required to intervene in the issues of the day and to say, rightly or wrongly, what was true and good. This profile is very French."