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# FUSION

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**I HAVE A THEORY** about my friend Jean Claude Biver, the irrepressible boss of Hublot, the rubber-strapped superwatch that has become, in just a few short years, the vital accessory of the high-octane, high-goal, high life. When I first met him he had re-founded Blancpain and his message was the right one for the time: namely that the brand had never made a quartz watch and never would. His timing was also spot on a few years later at Omega when he launched the “My Omega” campaign using celebrity testimonials to boost the brand profile. Now he has distilled the message he wants to convey to one word: Fusion. Each time his message is more honed and more direct. Admittedly it is two syllables, rather than one, but I am sure that one day he will get around to expressing the horological zeitgeist in a single syllable, perhaps even a solitary letter.

In the meantime we have Fusion and it has opened up a new direction in high watchmaking, where traditional materials (gold, steel, brass, leather) are mixed with newer materials, most commonly titanium, carbon and ceramic, but also rubber, magnesium and pretty much anything else on the Mendeleev’s periodic table of the elements that is stable enough to work with.

It seems that the man who fired the starting gun on this new genre of watchmaking was Richard Mille. I remember being introduced to Mille over 10 years ago at the Basel Fair and being shown his tonneau shaped tourbillon. This was before he was even a brand; he was just a man with a watch...but what a watch. It has since become a signature but at the time it was just amazing. I felt the same way about it as I had felt about the Royal Oak Offshore when it was launched in the early 1990s. What impressed me most was the series of tiny, star-headed

titanium screws around the bezel. These screws, Mille told me, could withstand immense torque when being tightened, but they did not come cheap. I seem to recall a price of 25 million Swiss Francs for a kilo being bruited about as the price.

The real value of these screws lay not in their torque-withstanding attributes, but in their ability to capture my imagination. I had never thought of screws with a high torque threshold as being sexy, but suddenly there I was telling everybody how amazing they were. Looking back I reckon that their appeal was their unexpectedness. The same can be said for the use of titanium cases for deep-deep-deep diving watches, such as Girard Perregaux’s Sea Hawk II Pro; a watch of similar resistance in steel would weigh a great deal more, but the likelihood of anyone needing to make full use of a watch capable of surviving 3,000 metres beneath the waves is, to say the least, remote.

Materials are all about context and while today, thanks to the pioneering, proselytizing work of Biver and Mille, we have an entire genre of watchmaking predicated on new materials, it has to be remembered that there have always been new materials both inside the case and out. As long ago as 1938, Vacheron Constantin made a series of aluminium watches. And before we go congratulating ourselves on the chic of our PVD, DLC or otherwise blackened timepieces, we should at least acknowledge that there was a vogue for black watches towards the end of the 19th century, when an anthracite-coloured, silver-based alloy called niello was le dernier cri in pocket watches. More recently, IWC made black watches with Porsche Design in the late seventies, and went on to release its popular Da Vinci model in a black ceramic case. Ceramic

is, of course, another ‘new’ material.

My view is that it is not so much the novelty – or otherwise – of the material that counts, but what you do with it. If you can forge a new aesthetic that is diverting, different and above all entertaining then that is to be applauded. That these new materials are useful in improving the performance of a watch by making a case that is unusually scratch-resistant or components that are less susceptible to changes in temperature is, of course, a benefit.

The thing is, when you have embarked down the road of Fusion, you have to commit yourself to it. Just cobbling together a watch that combines a few contemporary design cues is not the same thing. The Fusion watchmaker needs to be more than a watchmaker, he needs to be an alchemist and an inventor unafraid to innovate. At this level no one needs a new watch, but happily that does not stop them from wanting one.

This much was brought home to me when I visited the headquarters of Hublot recently. I strayed into one of the laboratories supervised by Matthias Buttet, who after the closure of his specialist movement making business heads up what is, in effect, a specialist R&D division of Hublot. He warned me not to stick my hands in any of the various baths of liquids that he was working with, as he was involved in trying to come up with a gold that is both phosphorescent and fluorescent. Now I have no idea what a watch made of phosphorescent and fluorescent gold would be like and, if I am being honest, I would have to consult my learned friends at Wikipedia to be able to tell the difference between phosphorescing and fluorescing. However I am sure of one thing, even before I see one I know I want one, and I can think of no better tribute to Fusion watchmaking.