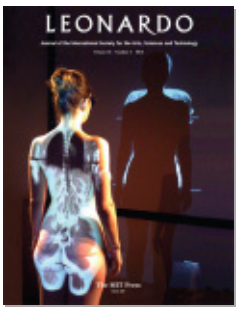
The Invention of Heterosexual Culture by Louis-Georges Tin (review)



Jan Baetens

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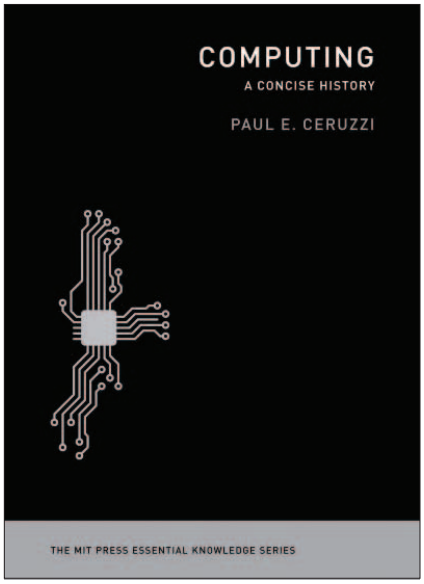


roughly the last 70 years—a lifetime!—of computation. The title is "Computing: A Concise History." But on page xvi of the introduction, the book is defined as "a summary of the development of the digital information age." Is the history of computing the development of the digital information age, or vice versa? It's not at all certain. One is content, the other context. Technological determinism haunts such questions.

The words we use in a history of computing are a minefield of uncertainty. The author asserts that the terms "analog" (U.S. English) and "digital" were unknown before the late 1930s, but the former word's use, even only in its American spelling, in the English corpus from 1900 to 1910 was more frequent than at any point until nearly 1945; the latter was in use to indicate a number under 10 by about 1450, and interestingly, as a noun, to refer to discrete keys on a piano by 1878. Of course the author means their use in the context of his subject, but a history, even such a concise one, perhaps needs to be a little more open to what might be important semantic underpinnings.

Why would anyone want a history of computing? To what problem or question is this book, largely written in laypersons' terms, a solution? Well, I doubt many people directly involved in computing will read it, apart perhaps from a few students, but for many of us the book will provide an interesting and timely overview of the historical context in which changes, and particularly today's changes, have occurred. Interesting, because of the coverage of the uses to which computers have been put across the ages. Today they are seen as data storage and routing machines but in the early 1980s they were creative tools, whether for business, education or the arts. Timely because there will be very few more histories of computing: Almost everyone thinks that computing means the social uses of computation and would think the very word "computation" bizarre in the context of Facebook.

There are occasional errors and typos—a particularly comical one on page 4 where a "not" should surely be a "now"—but on the whole this is a useful little book, let down by a suicidally dour design and an absence of that *sine qua non* of computer texts, jokes. There is little too about MIT: I remember Nicholas Negroponte coming to the Royal College of Art in 1970s London with a huge Laserdisc under his arm, showing interactive bicycle mending (of course it was really militarily funded: missiles, not bicycles)—there might have been room for the work of his Architecture Machine Group and later the Media Lab at MIT. Joseph Weizenbaum too is absent. Still, at least Ted Nelson gets a line or two.

Finally, it is rather ironic that MIT, whose Press is the publisher of this book, is currently at the center of a row about a possible role in the suicide of Aaron Swartz, who was investigated for allegedly trying to access academic papers. The Internet, in its initial form as the Arpanet, as this book shows, was never remotely intended to have anything to do with freedom of information. A history of computing is a history of the embodiments of our dreams and our limitations.

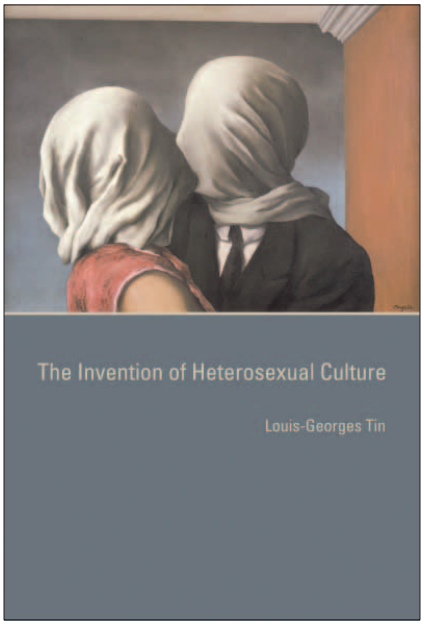
The Invention of Heterosexual Culture

by Louis-Georges Tin. The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, U.S.A., 2012. 208 pp. Trade. ISBN: 978-0-262-01770-1.

Reviewed by Jan Baetens, Belgium. E-mail: <jan.baetens@arts.kuleuven.be>.

The translation of a French study published in 2008, this book is an original and highly stimulating contribution to the broader field of LGBT studies. As the title of the book makes clear from the very start, Tin's subject is not heterosexuality but heterosexual culture, and the distinction between human nature (in which heterosexuality is a given) and human culture (in which it only seems "natural," at least today) is one of the fundamental building blocks of this new approach to human sexuality. The ambition of the book is to highlight that the gap between nature and culture can only be explained if one accepts to study it in historical *longue durée* terms, which shed a very different light on the past as well as the present and the future of heterosexual cultural practices and the organization of Western societies around a mythical conception of heterosexual love.

Tin's story begins in the 12th century, a period characterized by the emergence of what has become so totally self-evident today that we tend to consider it essential and transhistorical: heterosexuality as an ideal of interpersonal and social relationships. As convincingly demonstrated by Tin, this heterosexuality meant a revolutionary shift in a culture that until then was strongly dominated by paradigms of homosociality, in which issues of heterosexuality and family were kept at the margins of the strong bonds that defined relationships between men in a chivalric or monastic environment. Tin admits that there is still no conclusive explanation of why this homosocial structure was put into question, but its historical reality can, of course, not be denied. From that point on, Tin proposes a real grand narrative ranging the whole second millennium A.D. and studying mainly the conflict between heterosexuality and the three major forces that have attempted to counter or block it: the chivalric world-order, which saw heterosexuality as a danger for its ideals of masculinity; the religious world-order, which rejected



it as a danger for its ideals of spiritual love; and the medical world-order, which linked it with various kinds of problematic, i.e. unhealthy, behavior (in the beginning of the 20th century, heterosexuality, the newer form of lovesickness, was esteemed as dangerous as homosexuality). Relying on a corpus constituted by literary sources, Tin scrutinizes these resistances to heterosexuality, often very long (as already said, these phenomena have to do with *longue durée* historiography) but always, despite frequent moments of success, profoundly reactionary and rearguard. A second layer in the book is the discussion of the notion of sexual and social normalcy, and the progressive criminalization of what is the flipside of the rise of heterosexuality: homosexuality. A third one has to do with the social and sexual treatment of women, which Tin clearly distinguishes from the changing views on heterosexuality.

Tin proposes an appealing interpretation of heterosexuality in Western culture, with a good mix of broad general tendencies and a fine sense of detail and close reading. The choice to focus on literary sources, rather than unpublished archival material or legal documents as might have been expected from an author who has read carefully the work by Foucault, has a double advantage. First, it allows for a creative rereading of the French literary canon, from the *Chanson de Roland* to Paul Claudel over Montaigne, Corneille and many others. This rereading is refreshing. It shows, moreover, how the literary canon has been misread or even misused in the past. Second, the emphasis on literature helps bring into focus the importance of education and of the social framing of sexual matters. As an aspect of culture, not of nature, heterosexuality is something that cannot be separated from education, and Tin has many clever analyses of the way in which the literary and school system (for many centuries, both were almost inseparable) promoted forms of writing while manipulating, withdrawing or censoring other ones in order to impose a certain idea of human sexuality. Logically, the last chapter of the book is then an appeal toward the "end" of heterosexual culture (not of heterosexuality) and a plea for a new revolution that replaces the age-old "natural" domination of heterosexual behavior and practices by creating a more diverse sexual culture.

INTERACTING: ART, RESEARCH AND THE CREATIVE PRACTITIONER

edited by Linda Candy and Ernest Edmonds. Libri Publishing, Oxford, U.K., 2011. 360 pp., illus. Paper. ISBN: 978-1-907471-48-3.

Reviewed by Flutur Troshani, University of Shkoder, Albania.

Were we seeking a term that conveys some of the significant transformations in contemporary art, research and creative practice over the past decades, "interacting" would be among the first to come to mind. Its appeal is easy to understand given the increasing audience engagement with the artwork, its undeniable malleability and the transformation of the museum into "interactive space." Candy and Edmonds, the editors of this study, acknowledge its significance and indicate that practice-based research in interactive art appropriates and transforms contemporary discourse, the unstable contours of which suggest the critical depth of the epistemic questions that can be raised if creative practices and research methodologies are brought together. Deep down, the collective voice of these essays problematizes the demarcations between research methodologies and creative practices to the point that they come to be entangled into and to reconfigure each other's domains. In doing so, step by step, these essays trace a heuristic methodology, which lays claims upon how research can be brought into creative practice, what is transformed during that process and how the interactive art practitioner mediates and refracts relations both within and between them.

These essays stretch back to the work of art, intended here as a complex where creative and research practices conflate, but they also stretch forward to the contemporary context, the epistemic and aesthetic protocols of which insist that the inherent nature of the artwork has been transformed both in terms of "conceptual models" and "procedural tropes." The point is that interactive artworks have set before the artists, researchers and academics a new model that moves beyond methodologies and frameworks imported from existing discourses and practices. From there, the value of interacting turns out to be central to practice-based research. To visit it within the tripartite relationships between/among "artworks and audience," "creative practitioners from different disciplines" and "practitioners and the norms of research" is to develop a particular discourse, the constituents of which are not only conceptual and aesthetic but also collaborative, reflective and networked. Inevitably, this leads to apprehending how this discourse, however convoluted its dispositions may be, is to be interrogated and systematized. The challenge, in other words, is to put practice-based research into our conceptual mapping and into the agendas of contemporary art projects. As their response, Candy and Edmonds have brought together contributions that come from different disciplines, the collective voice of which is generally well-orchestrated, although occasionally, given their inter-, trans- and multidisciplinary and skewed approaches, it turns out to be dissonant and repetitive.

The structural designation of the essays falls into five distinct sections prefaced by brief introductions. These make sure that the essays do not veer away, invested as they are in idiosyncratic disruptions by their multidisciplinary drive. The methodical association of art and research provided by the first section, "Interactive Art and Research," brings into sharp focus the working concepts and, more notably, (re)configures them into ways that are crucial to maintain the theoretical coherence required to bring together the voices of the contributors. This also ensures that the proceeding essays keep abreast of the main argument and that the logical progression from one essay