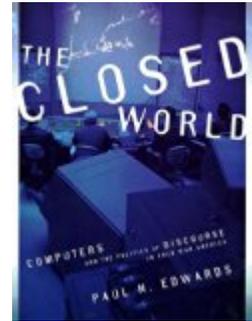


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Paul N. Edwards. *The Closed World: Computers and the Politics of Discourse in Cold War America*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996. xx + 440 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-262-05051-7; \$36.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-262-55028-4.

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## Computers and America: Whither We Goeth?

Paul Edwards undertakes a very daunting task in this work. He attempts to explore American twentieth-century international relations, to detail the history and use of computers, to show their utilization as tools and metaphors, and to explain how computers have created a “closed world.” He makes some progress in each of these areas, but it still is an ambitious agenda, resulting in difficulties in a 440-page work.

Edwards begins with a long look at how computers have been used in the Cold War. He also argues that computers have created a “closed world,” which he defines as “a radically bounded scene of conflict, an inescapably self-referential space where every thought, word, and action is ultimately directed back towards a central struggle. It is a world radically divided against itself. Turned inexorably inward, without frontiers or escape, a closed world threatens to annihilate itself, to implode” (p. 12). Throughout the work, Edwards presents many examples of closed worlds, including the Cold War and computers. After looking at how computers have changed the military, and giving many interesting case studies there, he turns to examinations of subjectivity, psychology, politics, artificial intelligence, and communication. Throughout he interweaves many different philosophers, looking at what Michel Foucault and Thomas Kuhn, among others, say about these issues, and focuses, for the most part, on the pre-1970s. He closes with a very interesting look at several movies, examining how they portray computers. All in all, he attempts to cover all areas that these machines have affected.

One of the book’s primary strengths is the breadth of coverage, as Edwards presents many different areas and discusses how they have been changed by the computer. In addition, the author demonstrates a grasp of many subjects. Finally, the treatise is well presented, with many pictures, charts, and graphs.

However, this overview also has a number of disturbing aspects. First, the bewildering range of coverage makes the work very difficult to understand at points unless one is well versed in each of the fields and has an in-depth knowledge of both philosophy and computer terminology. Second, in general his footnotes are underdeveloped, leaning at points toward being inadequate. In his chapter on the films that have depicted computers, he neglects to use many important sources, and, I would argue, this kind of lacuna weakens the book. He writes, “I am painfully aware that there is a large body of critical literature that covers these texts and films and explores, I am sure, many of the themes I address here. For various reasons, though, I have chosen not to consult this literature” (p. 425). So much for scholarship!

Overall, this work is an interesting look at how computers have reshaped America, focusing on the military and academic areas. However, the book is often so technical as to hamper the reader, and it would have benefited from a more sophisticated use of the literature.

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